

The Way to the 1930s' Shanghai Female Stardom
From the Pioneering Actresses of the Late Qing to the
Popular Female Film Stars of the 1920s and 1930s

Yuan Zhou



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Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages

University of Oslo

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Abstract

Shanghai's film industry of the Republican era (1912-49) saw the emergence of female stardom, which reached its zenith in the 1930s. This thesis explores the dramatic transformations from the illegitimate use of women in female roles in the late-Qing theatre to the overwhelming star status some actresses achieved in the 1930s Shanghai cinema. Compared to the art of female impersonation that was treasured in the traditional theatre in both China and Japan, women's capacity – rooted in their physical bodies – to present female roles more realistically and naturally significantly contributed to the legitimization of their acting in the realism-oriented modern theatre and cinema. When female stardom rose in the imported foreign medium, film, the content of star images, centred on figures of virtuous women, swordswomen of the 1920s, and genuine, innocent girls of the 1930s, was largely shaped and manipulated by prevailing ideologies embedded in films. Sexualized images of actresses, on one hand, were always a significant part of their appeal to the audience, but on the other hand, constantly invited various forms of sexual exploitation. The historical connection between performing and prostitution even brought certain legitimacy (in a psychological sense) to such exploitation, and brought more scepticism about women engaged in performing. A group of female film stars rising in the 1930s and recognized as genuine artists eventually could shake off such scepticism and won a positive public opinion.

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Introduction

The profession of performing and performers as well were historically treated with no respect in China. The ambiguous boundaries between entertainment and sex work caused even more discrimination against performers in general. The situation changed dramatically as film stardom emerged. Shanghai served as a base for the development of early Chinese cinema in the Republican era (1912-49). The city's film industry dominated film productions and also commanded much of Chinese cinema's star power. Shanghai's female film stars appeared as the most visible group of women in a society where the vast majority of women were invisible and silent, even isolated. These stars earned not just respect, but also glory, fortune, and exclusive privileges. The 1930s, remembered as the "golden age" of the Republican Chinese cinema, saw the most brilliant, impressive, popular female stars, who became national celebrities. What is fascinating behind this unprecedented, full-fledged female film stardom, which truly overshadowed male film stardom, is that women as performers were back into the public view only for less than a half century; and even more striking, female actors were legitimate for female roles for just about one decade.

One focus of my exploration of these puzzling transformations is on the paradoxes of female impersonation. Male actors used to "monopolize" female roles. Indeed, they loved impersonation. They, and many theatergoers alike, insisted that female impersonation was more valuable than female roles played by women themselves. In terms of female actors, a central appeal of them was their sexual attractiveness, but that was dangerous and might cause chaos. Another focus is on the inherent perspective of seeing female actors (also women in general) as "objects". Especially when they started the journey back to public performances, female actors struggled against sexual exploitation, on and off stage. When they attained overwhelming stardom on the silver screen, they were more than sexual icons, or, they became sexual icons endowed with political meanings, which often appeared as hidden implications, though. Since female stars were the most desirable for the audience, they were the perfect mouthpieces serving different ideological forces. Even the most successful and prestigious stars were subject to either traditional patriarchal

order, or in the new era of revolution, subject to a new form of discipline designed by the male discourse.

1. The art of impersonation: the most serious obstacle on the way of legitimizing female actors

Pioneering female actors fought, ironically, not just against the official ban on their stage activities (those edicts from the Qing court and local authorities in fact had limited affect), but more against a glorious theatrical legacy, impersonation. Qing rulers' continuous ban on female actors led to their absence for more than two centuries. As a substitute, *dan* (female impersonator) started to play female roles on stage, and over decades, developed an elaborate system of impersonation art. Good looks and physique were the primary requirements for *dan*. A gift for changing to a female (or what some felt was neutral) voice was also needed. They had to undergo prolonged and comprehensive training to transform the gift into artistry, that is, to be able to sing and speak full of smoothness and tender, to move full of feminine grace and delicacy. With the help of heavy make-up, lavish costumes, and elaborate adornments, *dan* did attain a feminine glamour, beautiful, enchanting, and impressive. Among various genres of traditional opera thriving towards the late Qing, *jingju* (京劇 Beijing opera) in particular gained extreme popularity.¹ The success of the greatest *jingju dan* of all time, Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳 1894-1961), who acquired enormous prestige in the early 1910s,² and the emergence of the "Four Great Dan" (四大名旦) with both a collective popularity and personal characteristics in singing, acting style,³

¹ Beijing opera arose in the late eighteenth century. A number of theatre troupes from Anhui province (the most famous four of them known as "the Four Great Anhui Companies") came to Beijing in 1790 to take part in celebrations for the Qianlong emperor's eightieth birthday. The year 1790 is generally regarded as the birth of the Beijing opera. Beijing opera absorbed nourishment from several regional forms of dramas and underwent fast development under the imperial patron. It became the most widespread of the regional styles, and today is still the most important form of the traditional Chinese theatre.

² Hatano Ken'ichi (波多野乾一), trans. 鹿原學人, *A Two-Hundred-Year History of Chinese Opera* (京劇二百年曆史 hereafter referred to as Ken'ichi, *Opera*), p. 218, Shanghai: Dabaoguan, 1926.

³ In 1927, an influential newspaper of northern China invited its readers to elect the best *dan* actors of the time. Mei Lanfang received the most votes. Mei and three other *dan* stars have been dubbed the "Four Great Dan" since. In fact, these four *dan* actors had risen to stardom before the 1927 poll. They became famous during the 1910s and 1920s. Laikwan Pang, *The distorting mirror:*

marked the peak of impersonation and the immense public enthusiasm for such an art.

Xinju (新劇 literally, new drama), or often called “early *huaaju*” (*huaaju* 話劇 literally, “spoken drama”) in recent scholarly works, began to flourish at around 1910. *Wenmingxi* (文明戲) was a term for the localized form of *xinju* and commonly used in the 1910s while its practice climaxed in Shanghai.⁴ The literal meaning of *wenmingxi* as “civilized drama”, to some extent symbolized the general trend of drama reformists’ approach and their aspiration to civilize (read “westernize”) theatre, thus the whole nation. But they did not “civilize/westernize” the old tradition of female impersonation. Modern intellectuals were ardent fans of *dan* as well as *onnagata* from Japanese *shinpa* play that had great impact on *xinju* formation. They naturally and instinctively inherited this legacy, and immersed themselves in impersonation on the *xinju* stage while they claimed the pursuit of westernized, realistic drama.

However, the commercial potential in casting women on stage was sensed by astute and quick-minded troupe managers, who risked violating official bans and challenging the mainstream theatrical circles, organized a few women to play *jingju* in the late Qing. The newly-formed Republican administration lifted the ban on female actors, yet the social legitimization of their acting had a long way to go. Compared to the old school (*jingju* and *kabuki*), *xinju*, and its Japanese model, *shinpa*, generally applied contemporary themes and more realistic stage setting to convey an impression that the texture of daily life was more or less woven into the stories. Accordingly, actors were expected to develop relatively realistic acting outside the classical, highly stylized patterns. Some critics had seen certain advantages of female actors in *xinju/shinpa* acting and acknowledged that women were more natural and thus more suitable for female roles than men, while some firmly believed that male actors artistically qualified, and were historically, culturally legitimate for female roles.

visual modernity in China, p. 225, note 70, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007. There were similar elections of other types of Beijing opera actors, though, the “Four Great Dan” were always the most prestigious. Throughout the Republican period, they had dominated the *jingju* world, which was de facto quite much the entire theatrical world.

⁴ For more details about the use of these terms: *huaaju*, early *huaaju*, *xinju*, *wenmingxi*, see note 70 in the part I.4.

Opponents argued that women automatically lost their legitimacy and competence on stage due to their physical, intellectual, and psychological inferiority to men. Such debates were going on both in China and Japan as the new theatrical genre was prevailing. The fundamental disagreement is noted by Ayako Kano: those in favour of female actors valued woman's natural expression over man's artificial one, whereas those against valued man's superior art over woman's inferior nature – either woman's advantage or disadvantage was supposed to be rooted in her body, by nature.⁵

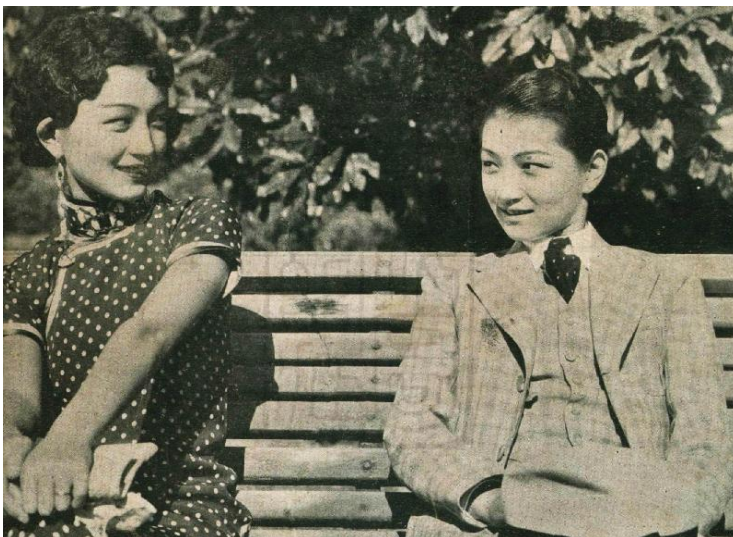
The significant strengthening of realism and of an overall loyalty to Western theatre from *xinju* to *huaju* (developed after the May Fourth Movement), and from *shinpa* to *shingeki* (*huaju*'s Japanese parallel) too, convincingly demonstrated the essential presence of real woman on stage, and the intrinsic value of her irreplaceable, authentic female body. As the guideline of realism brought a trend towards the display of female body and progressive exposure of its sexuality, a female impersonator was indeed no longer able to “act” out such an utmost, “real” woman, or, to put it another way, the play must have a woman to “be” that character. A new definition of gender began to crystallize: gender is now basis of acting grounded in the visible body rather than art achievable by either sex.⁶ It also means that once her physical body declared the essentiality of woman on the stage, she was reduced to nothing else but her body.

When the foreign medium, film, was introduced into China, female impersonation did survive at its very earliest stages, since the first short productions, most comedies, were made by those from the *xinju* circles where impersonation still maintained its dominance. The success of experiments on serious long feature greatly expanded the film market and laid foundation of the institutionalization of cinema. Rising largely on its ultimate mechanism of realism, this new institution accentuated a realistic acting style (perhaps still quite much posturing in today's eyes, though). It needed real woman to smile, cry, flirt, kiss, and hug on screen – albeit the story was fictional, people felt that it was real. For male spectators, the woman in film was meant to be

⁵ Ayako Kano, “Visuality and Gender in Modern Japanese Theater: Looking at Salome,” *Japan Forum* (1999) Vol.11, No.1: pp. 43-55.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the heroine of their dreams, i.e. a dream lover. Seeing film as dream or fantasy is often suggested in film theory. Feminist film criticism has revealed that, a sense of separation helps to develop among the audience a voyeuristic fantasy, in which, viewing female bodies is a very important source of visual pleasure for male spectators.⁷ Even if an impersonator was able to act out a woman's spirit, he would never be able to give this very pleasure in the film era (as far as heterosexuals are concerned). Intriguingly, the film *Girl in Disguise* (化身姑娘 1936) brought impersonation back to screen, with its heroine assuming double gender identities. Rather than attempting a revival of the traditional impersonation, its producers deployed cross-dressing, gender-blending, and same-sex intimacy to simply formulate a comedy. As a modern, tricky device, impersonation proved to be commercially successful, but at the same time, once again confirmed its obsolescence in cinema as a convention.⁸



⁷ Laura Mulvey's theory on the "male gaze" and the objectification of the female body has formed a central part of the feminist reading of cinema. See her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* (Autumn 1975) Vol.16, No.3: pp. 6-18. According to Mulvey, the "separation" is created by both the filmic narrative as a "hermetically sealed world", and the theatre's seating arrangement, of which the darkness not only isolates the auditorium from the screen but also separates the spectators from one another.

⁸ Although leftists found the film filled with low-taste, meaningless gags and viewed it as an attempt to divert the attention of the audience when the nation was facing an imminent Japanese aggression, the film was so popular that the studio shot three sequels. Cheng Jihua (程季華) ed., *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* (中國電影發展史), Vol. 1 (hereafter referred to as Cheng, *History*), pp. 495-497, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1998. Despite its obvious ideological biases, this book is considered to date the most comprehensive survey of Chinese cinema up until 1949.

Fig. 1: *Girl in Disguise* (化身姑娘 1936), featuring Yuan Meiyun (袁美雲 1917-99), a leading female actor.⁹ Yuan played two roles in the film, the girl on the left side of the picture, and the girl on the right posing as a boy, both charming and attractive.¹⁰

We may see cross-gender casting from another angle, as is noted by some Chinese critics and Western experts on *jingju*. The fundamental aesthetic aim of traditional theatre was derived from that of traditional Chinese painting, an art form favoured and practiced by the literati in a long history. It is to “write (i.e. draw/paint) the meaning” (*xieyi* 寫意),” in contrast to the aesthetics of Western figurative painting seen and studied by the Chinese during the modern era, i.e. to “write realistically” (*xieshi* 寫實).¹¹ In the traditional school of theatre, *xieyi* is embodied in its minimized staging – very few stage props, even no special lighting or no scenery. It is very common that there are merely a table and two chairs on a spacious stage. Hence, the use of the very limited props and furniture has to be symbolic (for instance, a chair can “be” a horse according to plot).¹² In the same way, impersonation is symbolic too – being symbolic is exactly the reason why impersonation (which, in various regional genres, can be male impersonating female, or in reverse, female impersonating male) is possible. As

⁹ The pictures of film stars and films used in this thesis are all from Shanghai Library’s online database of Republican cinema, “Memories of Cinema” (電影記憶), which is accessible to all: http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/dy_index.htm.

¹⁰ Filmmakers seemed to have seen a certain advantage of Yuan Meiyun in male impersonation. In *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 1944), a film adapted from one of the most famous classical novels, with a star-studded cast, Yuan Meiyun impersonated Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉), the male protagonist. Yet, in general, impersonation as a special device was not often used in filmmaking.

¹¹ Instead of “reflecting” reality like a mirror, or like modern photography, the traditional school of Chinese painting strives to depict the spirit of nature, a nature in the painter’s heart, mentality, rather than in his/her eyes. It has developed a unique language and patterns, abstract, rather than figurative. For instance, the layout of the painting, either landscape, human figure, or small objects, has nothing to do with Western perspective techniques. The painters might have thought about light, but did not paint shadow. They even did not use colour often. The brush is very versatile, which allows the magic of “brushwork and ink” (筆墨). Analogous to Chinese calligraphy, the simple form of black and white, as well as line rhythm, were enough for the painters to draw their fancy and mood of a particular moment. All these approaches are called *xieyi*.

¹² The “painted-face makeup” (*lianpu* 臉譜) is another best example to illustrate the highly advanced, elaborate symbolic system of *jingju*. *Lianpu* does not look like a real person’s face, at all. Having a certain resemblance to caricature, *lianpu* exaggerates and thus highlights the essential characters of a role type. Again, it does not demonstrate the real directly, but indicates the real.

is noted in Zhou Huiling's study, gender is defined by how a culture regulates gender differences.¹³ Take *dan*, for example. By wearing make-up and costume, adjusting voice and gestures, *dan* imitate woman according to the social consensus on what a women should look like, sound like and move like, how she expresses herself and reacts in a specific scenario. *Dan* re-constitute the presence and the spirit of woman, symbolically, so that the audience will instantly know it is a female character, regardless of the biological sex of the actor. When modern theatre and cinema were imported with a distinctive obsession with *xieshi*, the impersonation art born with *xieyi* was doomed to give ground to the restoration of gender-appropriate casting.

The "Four Great Dan" lived into the Communist regime, and three of them continued to perform on stage. However, theatrical schools under the new regime stopped training male *dan*,¹⁴ which, in addition to the devastating ruin of traditional theatre during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), led to the eventual obsolescence of female impersonation. Despite a very few outstanding male *dan* active nowadays, mainly in *jingju*, the tiny group of male *dan* are very much marginalized compared to the vast majority of female *dan*. Debates over preservation and legitimacy of male *dan* have been going on since the beginning of the 1980s when *jingju* started to restore its glory. Amazingly, the logic sounds exactly like that in the debates over female actors around the turn of the twentieth century. Women are seen as related to

¹³ Zhou Huiling, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," (hereafter referred to as Zhou, "Striking"), *TDR*, (Summer, 1997) Vol. 41, No.2: pp. 130-152.

¹⁴ Coming from the fixed role system of *jingju*, the term *dan* refers to all female roles in general. Further classifications of *dan* roles are given in the part II.2. *Dan* also refers to a person who plays *dan* roles. In this sense, *dan* were all male (so were all types of *jingju* actors), since no women played *jingju* before the late Qing. After women returned to stage performing, people needed to differentiate female actors in *dan* roles from male actors who impersonated *dan* roles. The former was then termed *kundan* (坤旦) and the latter *qiandan* (乾旦), or *nandan* (男旦 literally, male *dan*, more often used today). *Qian* (乾) is a specific term assigned to men and *kun* (坤) to women. Conforming to the patriarchal order, the meaning of *qian* (it has a broad meaning, of which "men related" is just a part) has a cultural implication of superiority, albeit not highlighted, to that of *kun* (it also has a broad meaning, of which "women related" is just a part). Female actors were generally called *kunling* (坤伶) and their troupes *kunban* (坤班). As a few *kunling* became popular, recognized with individual personality and artistic style, they were differentiated from the general *kunling* and even became pillar in the troupe challenging male *dan*.

nature and men - to art. Compared to female *dan*, those who favour male *dan* believe that males have the advantage of broader-ranging and powerful voice, more energy, longer career life, and most essentially, the art of impersonation, which is very hard to acquire, but once acquired, is the most magnificent art. Arguments against male *dan* date from the New Culture Movement of from the mid 1910s to 1920s, during which the most famous writers and radical intellectuals (such as Lu Xun) associated the institution of male *dan* (including the top *dan* stars like Mei Lanfang) with disordered humanity and sexuality, in short, viewing this as an abnormal product of an abnormal society. Culturally, male *dan* were very essential to traditional theatre, especially *jingju*, but they can be cast aside by a simple logic. They rose because women were not allowed to perform. Since women have been restored in female roles, where should male *dan* go? The question remains unsolved. Interestingly, all the controversies over male *dan* did not occurred to *kunsheng* (坤生 female actor who impersonates *sheng* 生, a role category of young males).¹⁵ Besides *dan*'s extensive involvement in gay prostitution in the Qing period, another reason for the public's psychological discrimination against male *dan* is suggested – the deep-rooted, conventional perspective of male chauvinism that is still present in today's society. Hence, albeit unconsciously and very implicitly, people may see women who impersonate men as “climbing up (to the upper stratum)”, and men who impersonate women as “going down (to be the low-born)”.¹⁶ The preservation of female impersonator works out in Japan, where the practice of *onnagata* remains in *kabuki*.

2. Woman as object: discovering their passivity, inferiority, and subordination

In male-dominated discourses on femininity in modern Chinese history, women often appeared as not being able to stand on their own feet. It was the male elite who made women aware of that they were terribly deprived. Women needed and waited for the male elite to remove their physical torments (e.g. eradication of foot binding),

¹⁵ *Kunsheng* are very common in some regional genres, for instance, Yue opera (*yueju* 越劇), which rarely uses male actors because its singing and acting style is especially soft and feminine.

¹⁶ Huang Ke (黃柯), “On Male Dan, part 2 (論男旦 下)”, *Beijing Opera of China* (中國京劇) (2004) Issue 12: p. 30.

enlighten their mentalities (e.g. education of the illiterate), and elevate their social standing (e.g. promotion of equal rights).¹⁷ In the theatrical world, men also played the role of the “liberators”. In 1912, Women legally gained the right to perform *jingju* because a male *jingju* artist had appealed to the new Republican government to lift the ban on female actors. Given this overall impression one received from the society, and more fundamentally, due to women’s immutable inferiority and subordination to men regulated by the patriarchy,¹⁸ female actors had to constantly suffer gender bias, discrimination, exploitation, and omnipresent oppression.

Both female and male actors went through sexual exploitation, on and off stage. Since the first time a *dan* (in the sense of female impersonator) fascinated the Beijing audience in the Qing period,¹⁹ erotic plays had been the very site of this exploitation

¹⁷ Reform-minded intellectuals of the late Qing, represented by Kang Youwei (康有為 1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873-1929), campaigned against foot binding and for women’s education. These campaigns were primarily aimed at, on one hand, creation of “good mothers” who should be physically healthy and mentally enlightened, which served to the strengthening of the race, and on the other hand, restoration of women’s economically productive roles, which served to enrich the nation. It was until the May Fourth New Culture Movement, that a new discourse accentuating western individualism was addressed, and reframed the liberation of women in the context of treating women as dignified individuals.

¹⁸ Through a wide-angled review of Chinese economic history, Hill Gates gives insightful views of the commoditization of women as a significant part of their subordination. He argues that, from the Song dynasty (960-1276) forward, the petty capitalist mode of production, which resembled in many ways but also differed markedly from the European capitalist mode of production, made households increasingly treat women as commodities, not only in the labour market, where men were treated similarly, but within the sphere of kinship as well. The contribution of gender inequality to accumulation in the petty capitalist mode of production was legitimized and promoted by Song Neo-Confucian writers, who drew the blueprint for the patriarchal gender hierarchy that had been consistently, rigorously enforced from the tenth to the end of the nineteenth century. See Hill Gates, “The Commoditization of Chinese Women,” *Signs* (1989) Vol. 14, No. 4: pp. 799-832.

¹⁹ A *dan* actor named Wei Changsheng (魏長生) travelled a long way from Sichuan to Beijing, and performed there from 1779 to 1785. *Jingju* had not been formed yet. Wei performed Sichuan regional style. His plays, mostly erotic, offered an option for a “low/vulgar taste” outside the *kunqu* (昆曲), which was known for implicitness, restraint, elegance, aestheticism, and favoured by the literati. These erotic plays catered to the diverse audience – even some from the lowest social strata with little or no education became theatregoers while commercial performances and professional troupes (rather than troupes kept by bureaucrats and wealthy merchants as private property) were prospering. The theatrical world, literally, a men’s world – from actors to the audience at that time, there was no single woman – was completely captured by the erotic tide that

on stage, and *dan* (in the sense of female role, played by either men or women) had been an erotic icon, central in plays based on lascivious scenarios, or, after women appeared on stage, the spectacles of female figures. The erotic climate made an actor's *se* (色 physical beauty) easily outweigh his/her *yi* (藝 artistic expertise). The greedy pursuit of *se*, which might be more aesthetics-related for the literati (at least they claimed so), dominated the theatrical patronage, and extensively, often not explicitly though, involved off-stage sexual exploitation of actors, namely prostitution. Romantic liaisons in patronage relations were tacitly accepted in social life of the time. The form of *dan* prostitution (male *dan* actors prostituted themselves) was even institutionalized in the late Qing. Its establishments were very similar to that of the late-Qing courtesans. Meanwhile, when a few women appeared on stage to perform opera and attracted patrons, the patronage relations between them were characterized by a strong possessiveness of the patrons. The beauty and art of these earliest actresses invited the most powerful men of the time, who not just exploited, but possessed their bodies, literally, as concubines. In addition, considering that prostitution and performing were historically and inextricably intertwined into each other, it is not surprising to see in the late Qing, actresses who came from or ended in prostitution, and courtesans who used their talented performance as an essential appeal to the clientele, sometimes overlapped.

In debates on the legitimacy of female actors, besides their ability and prospect compared to male actors, the fear of female sexuality and its potential to threaten, even subvert social order was another main focus. Not to be too radical, actresses first appeared as all-female casting troupes. The mixed-sex pattern of acting, seen after the fall of the imperial regime, posed a greater challenge to the public tolerance. When dramatic social transformations and the flow of new thoughts and radical ideas had already caused chaos, mixed-sex acting appeared as another warning signal of degeneration of the society's value system. For the elite class living in the new-born Republican China governed by warlords, moral decadence was a central aspect of

Wei had brought. See Yao Shuyi (幺書儀), "Female Impersonators in Theatre of the Ming and Qing (明清劇壇上的男旦)", *Literary Heritage* (文學遺產) (1999) Issue 2: pp. 83-87.

their lament for the demise of time-honoured tradition, and of their nostalgia for an idealized past. For centuries, women's presence, first and foremost their physical bodies, had been fenced within household and segregated from male strangers. However, the rules were now broken. The fear of the breakdown of gender boundary and over exposure of the female body, felt by the male elite, lay deeply in a fundamental fear that the patriarchy was likely to lose the control of women, once they were set free and their dangerous sexuality overflowed.

In cinema, this fear was not noticeable any more. Instead, we see effective manipulation of female body for either fortifying the old patriarchy or disseminating new ideology. Richard Dyer's suggestion that we need to situate star charisma in the specificities of the ideological configurations to which it belongs,²⁰ is a useful starting point for us to understand the phenomenon of early Chinese stardom, which was affected by historical and ideological forces in a unique way. In the early twenties, when filmmaking pioneers were looking for suitable subjects for the serious long feature (instead of the previous slapstick comedy), they chose "Butterfly" literature (鴛鴦蝴蝶文學), which featured sentimental romances and was in its heyday at that time. Its extreme popularity with urban readers made early filmmakers believe that, the "Butterfly" scenario and its narrative style would be marketable in film production too. In addition, they found themselves sharing an ideological affinity with "Butterfly" writers, rather than the May Fourth radicals. This strategy proved to be successful. "Butterfly" fiction was then transplanted into film production on a massive scale, which to a large degree fuelled the boom in film output of the mid-twenties. As was claimed by the filmmakers, besides commercial interests, the social function of film to set moral models for the public was also their motivation. "Butterfly"-influenced films usually featured an attractive and virtuous woman, who epitomized the Confucian female virtues of filial piety, chastity, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Rey Chow's reading of the "Butterfly" literature reveals that its weariless celebration of the virtuous heroines was indeed part of the mechanisms of women's subordination

²⁰ Richard Dyer, "Charisma," in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, p. 59, London: Routledge, 1991.

and oppressiveness. The newest medium, film, was aspiring to give tangible, visual representation of these fictional heroines. Thereby, early film productions reinforced the traditional, patriarchal values, and in particular, women's images of sacrifice and their conformity with the oppressive situations they found themselves in.

The leftist film campaign of the early- to mid-thirties brought new subjects and new female images to the screen. Yingjin Zhang's careful examination and gender-specific reading reveal problematic and unexpected implications of the heroines created in leftist films. Although leftist films were celebrating the newly-attained freedom of love (or other kinds of freedom related to modern discourses) as a liberation from patriarchy, women did not automatically qualify for being a new subject acting on their own will. Instead, they became a new object of knowledge requiring constant policing and discipline. The leftist filmic discourse was eager to give its definition of the "new woman". The new women on screen are educated, capable, independent, and surely beautiful, striving to shake off the shackles of the conventional patriarchal order. Yet some fail. The leftist discourse ascribed the failure to their indulgence in love, private sentiment, and "petit bourgeois" belief in individual values – all these needed to be eradicated or re-oriented to a full awareness of revolution and national salvation. Yingjin Zhang's revelations are even more striking when we read the leftist definition of "new woman" as an urgent demand that women should renounce their "femininity" to prepare themselves for participating as a "militant" in the revolutionary movement – a militant is "asexual". Here, the "femininity" in the female and the "effeminacy" in the male alike have a political connotation of feminized discourses in general, of which the most common subjects are love, emotion, art, "bourgeois" or "petit-bourgeois" ideology, and individualism. The ideal female gender role suggested by the leftist ideology is, ultimately, "liberated" from feminine features, and boasts masculinized appearance and mentality.

Rising in the national mobilization against Japanese invasion in the early thirties, the leftist campaign restructured the film industry that had been churning out commercial films without any social concern since the late twenties. As the campaign occupied the central scene in cinema world, it produced a number of classic films

with both progressive themes and artistic refinement, and presented a new generation of film idols. Although baring arms, legs, and feet most of the time in film, these actresses were no longer judged as acting the erotic. On the contrary, they were acclaimed for being genuine, as pure, innocent, natural as the heroines (often country girls that leftist films were enthusiastically depicting). The freshness, genuineness, distinguished them from film actresses of the twenties who were often morally suspect, and vaguely related to modernity (although some of them were modern girls living exceptionally modern lives). They appeared vivacious, vigorous, some sweet, some athletic, some a little wild. These charming features had one thing in common: harmless and nonthreatening. Up to this stage, the mainstream discourse on female actors had determinedly denied their legitimacy and continuously discriminated against them. Now, it had eventually reached a positive, approving tone, and a willingness to embrace the brilliance and fascination of the female stardom.

3. Research question and theoretical framework

This research deals with women's return to public performances and the female stardom they built up in the Republican Shanghai cinema with its zenith in the 1930s. I am asking, how did female actors attain legitimacy in a performing world where female roles were traditionally "monopolized" by female impersonators; and when the film era came, how did the phenomenon of female stardom eventually emerge?

The topic was already explored by some researches, both Chinese and Western. Among them, the researches that are most important to my thesis are as follows. Weikun Cheng's researches draw a detailed picture of female actors who performed traditional opera during the late Qing and the Republican period. Zhou Huiling's essay, "Striking Their Own Poses: The History of Cross-Dressing on the Chinese Stage," (1997,) offers both a historical review and a socio-psychological understanding of the phenomenon of cross-gender impersonation in China. Liu Siyuan's PhD dissertation, *The Impact of Japanese Shinpa on Early Chinese Huaju* (2006), demonstrates the inspirations that modern Chinese theatre reformists gained from *shinpa onnagata* on female impersonation. Ayako Kano's insightful reading of female impersonation in Japanese theatre in her essay, "Visuality and Gender in Modern Japanese Theater:

Looking at Salome,” (1999,) makes us aware of the key role of woman’s physical body in the process of legitimizing the performance by the female actors. Zhang Zhen’s book, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (2005), by applying Miriam Hansen’s theory of “vernacular modernism” (or “popular modernism”), provides a general overall picture of Shanghai’s early film industry (she defines the period prior to 1937 as China’s “early cinema”). Michael G. Chang’s essay, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s,” compiled in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (1999), focuses on the changes in social discourse on female stars, from a contemptuous view of them as “courtesan-like”, to a positive one promoting their sincerity and genuineness. Although it is not directly related to cinema, Rey Chow’s reading of the “Butterfly” literature in her book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading Between West and East* (1991), shed light on the 1920s’ female stardom, which was largely built up on fictional presentation of women’s conformity with the oppressive “self-sacrifice ethic” espoused by the Confucian ideologues. In his book, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature & Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* (1996), Yingjin Zhang’s analysis of the leftist male filmic discourse, the most critical force in building up the 1930s’ female stardom, reveals its problematic definition of “new woman” and its strategy of disciplining those emerging “new women”.

In this thesis, I am trying to complement and deepen the existing researches on this topic in following aspects. I will try to explore how the institutional evolutions in theatre and cinema in modern China gradually acknowledged, highlighted, and manipulated women’s advantages in acting, which were largely centred on their naturalness (compared to female impersonators) and sexual appeal. By proving a historical connection between performing and prostitution, and looking at sexual exploitation of female (sometimes male too) actors in modern times, I will try to approach the fundamental issue of the identification of the female actors as “courtesan-like”, and performers in general, regardless of sex, as nothing more than a “plaything”, despite the unprecedented fame and popularity they had achieved. I will

also apply various film theories in my research. I will include Richard deCordova's analysis of the formation of stardom in my investigation of the rise of stardom in China's early film industry. Jackie Stacey's study on complex cinematic identification as an important source for generating spectators' pleasure and fascination, unveils mysteries of star-fan nexus. Molly Haskell's study on female images seen in mainstream Hollywood films offers a fresh interpretation of the dominant type of scenarios featuring woman's "sacrifice". It enriches my understanding of the paralleling situation in Chinese cinema, especially in "Butterfly"-influenced films of the twenties. Jennifer M. Bean's study on the "extraordinary body", which was epitomized by stars starring in action serials from early Hollywood productions, brings new perspectives when I look at a group of "swordswoman" appearing on screen when the martial arts craze swept Shanghai's studios during the late twenties. Laura Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze viewing female figures in film as erotic objects both for the male protagonist and for male spectators in the audience, extends our understanding of the gendered way of presenting/seeing women on screen. I will also include Mark Hedley's research, which furthers nuances of the understanding of women's essential subordinate existence on screen.

Chapter I Return to the theatre: struggling in the shadow of *dan* stars

Introduction of chapter I

In the late Qing, female actors started to appear first as all-female troupes to avoid sex mingling. But even this was not acceptable since the Qing court prohibited women from performing in public. The Republican administration did allow women to perform, yet local authorities occasionally issued new prohibitions “for moral concerns”. Female impersonation posed another major obstacle to female actors, and led to a common neglect of, and contempt for women’s participation on stage. Even in the newly introduced genre of “spoken drama”, *xinju* (literally, new drama), in which reformists had adopted realistic approach in various respects, female impersonation still prevailed. It was treasured as part of the essence of the art of traditional opera. Japanese *shinpa* play had a strong impact on *xinju* formation. *Shinpa onnagata* (female impersonators in Japanese theatre) greatly inspired *xinju* actors and strengthened their identification with the Chinese *dan* tradition. To counter the artificial, unnatural acting of the impersonators, the genuine, natural female physical body had played a significant role during the restoration of “real” women on stage.

Huaju (literally, “spoken drama” – Chinese term used to categorise the new, Western-inspired theatre performances) developed in strict accordance with the institution of Western theatre. The first *huaju* production with a gender-appropriate cast was staged in 1923. Although it did not immediately eradicate female impersonation in “spoken drama”, the use of female actors in female roles has become legitimate since then. Cinema was introduced into China at the end of the nineteenth century. Its foreignness, however, did not prevent China’s earliest filmmakers from taking indigenous theatre “both as an institutional base and as an artistic model.”²¹ Female impersonation was still in use in the earliest Chinese-made shorts, yet realism and sensationalism gradually pushed women onto the silver screen. By the mid-twenties, the Mingxing Company, Shanghai’s biggest studio at that time (operating from 1922 to 1937), had recruited a few film actresses for its early experiments whose

²¹ Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, p. 17, New York: Routledge, 2004.

successes, both commercially and artistically, elevated these women to stardom.

1.1 Historical Background: banned in “old drama” and rejected in “new drama”

As described by Weikun Cheng, the loosely defined social category of “female performers” in imperial China included “courtesans, female members of wandering troupes,” and entertainers who “had been kept by royalty, aristocrats, bureaucrats, and wealthy merchants for centuries.” He notes that before the late Ming, female actors existed commonly.²² Since its early period, the Qing court had repeatedly imposed bans on female actors (various theatrical forms were involved) and prostitutes within and outside as well the empire’s capital. Echoing several times of prohibition in the Kangxi era, the Qianlong emperor reiterated and strengthened the law prohibiting female performers in 1744.²³ As a result, as women gradually disappeared from the world of theatre, *dan* (male actors who played female roles) became popular.

In southern China, the Manchu court seemed to be too far away to completely and continuously exert its authority. Female actors re-emerged there first as all-female troupes (some had to play male roles). In Shanghai, where a commercial society had been rapidly growing, a few female actors were at first active at private banquets, later recruited by troupe managers and invited to teahouses to perform *jingju* (Beijing opera). These troupes were called *mao'erban* (髦兒班) and the plays they performed

²² Weikun Cheng, “The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin,” *Modern China* (Apr. 1996) Vol. 22, No. 2: pp. 197-233.

²³ Relative edicts issued by Qing rulers against female actors are collected in Wang Liqi (王利器) ed., *Historical Documents Concerning the Censorship of Fiction and Drama in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties* (元明清三代禁毀小說戲曲史料), pp. 20, 23, 26, 29, 47, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981. According to Weikun Cheng’s explanation based on the researches by several other scholars, the tightening of the governmental control over female performers and official censorship of playwriting and stage performing, which already started in the Ming dynasty, was linked to the rigidification of the Confucian orthodoxy. For instance, female entertainers in royal theatres and in itinerant companies, were still active at the beginning of the Ming, but had significantly declined by the late Ming. During the Qing dynasty, owing to their minority origins, Manchu rulers seemed to be eager to demonstrate their legitimacy by showing the image of the regime as patron and protector of Confucianism. The Qing court was particularly sensitive to ideological or moral “corruption”, and imposed constant and severe prohibition against female performers and their performing activities. Weikun Cheng, “The Challenge of the Actresses,” p. 199.

called *mao'erxi* (髦兒戲)²⁴. Although prohibited by a new edict issued in 1890, *mao'erban* were little affected and continued to thrive. Shanghai's first theatre providing *mao'erban* for regular productions, Meixian (美仙), opened in 1894 and was followed by many of its kind.²⁵ It took several more years to have mixed-sex plays on Shanghai's *jingju* stage. At the very late nineteenth century, a very few troupes staged plays with mixed-sex cast in regional theatrical forms and had very limited influence. It was not until mixed-sex acting was adopted in *jingju* productions that the phenomenon became a public controversy. This happened approximately during the earliest years of the twentieth century, first in Tianjin and later in Shanghai.²⁶

Tianjin and Beijing were the national centres of traditional theatre and folk entertainment in the late Qing. The operation of female troupes was introduced into Tianjin soon after its emergence in Shanghai. Approximately by the 1880s, actresses had already appeared in plays of local forms in Tianjin. When Cixi and the Guangxu emperor fled the capital in 1900 after China's defeat in the war with the Eight-Nation Alliance following the Boxer Rebellion, Tianjin's actresses took advantage of the chaos and organized performances in Beijing, but were again strictly banned when Cixi and Guangxu returned in 1902.²⁷ The official ban on actresses in Beijing was lifted in 1912, after Yu Zhenting (俞振庭), a *jingju* star, had petitioned the new

²⁴ Literally, *mao'erban* (髦兒班) means *mao'er's* troupe (*ban* 班), and *mao'erxi* (髦兒戲) means *mao'er's* play (*xi* 戲). There are different explanations for *mao'er* (髦兒), some saying that the word *mao'er* was derived from the name of gauze cap which female actors used to wear to play male roles, some saying that it indicated the young age of the girls from these troupes. That is why the term *mao'erxi* had several variations with the same sound, such as 帽兒戲 (related to cap), 毛兒戲 (related to kids), 貓兒戲 (related to cat). See Chen Yongxiang (陳永祥), Luo Sumin (羅素敏), "Rising of Actress and Change of Social Mentality in Shanghai in the End of Qing Dynasty and Early Years of the Republican Period (女演員的興起與清末民初上海社會觀念的變化)," *Republican Archives* (民國檔案) (2005) Issue 1: pp. 65-66. There was another general term referring to all-female troupe, *kunban* (坤班), and *kunling* (坤伶) referring to female actor. The explanation for *kun*, is given in note 13 in "Introduction". In summary, either *kunban*, *kunling*, or *mao'erban*, *mao'erxi*, or all the variations related, tells us that the contemporary audience did not take female actors seriously, seeing them as an inferior substitute for the legitimate and dominant male actors.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁷ Liu Naichong (劉乃崇), "Talks on *Jingju* Actresses (漫談京劇坤伶)," *Beijing Opera of China* (中國京劇) (1995) Issue 4: p. 9.

Republican government to allow woman to play *jingju*.²⁸ From this year, actresses as well as mixed-sex plays became popular. It took almost two more decades to finally legitimize the controversial mixed performance in Beijing,²⁹ although as early as in 1915, in one debate on the newspaper Shuntian Shibao, only a few writers insisted on on-stage sex separation, and by the same year, actresses had appeared in Beijing's all eleven main theatres and numbered more than 200.³⁰

Besides the traditional school of theatre that can be called opera in general, of which *jingju* was the most popular, *xinju* offered the Chinese audience a new option, "spoken drama".³¹ *Xinju* (新劇 literally, new drama), was introduced into China as an innovative theatrical form in 1907. To trace the transformation from *jiuju* (舊劇), the "old drama" that included all the traditional genres, to *xinju*, we must take a look at Japanese *shinpa* play. The introduction of *xinju* belonged to various kinds of the late Qing borrowings from Meiji models.³² China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese war

²⁸ Zhou, "Striking", p. 139.

²⁹ According to Liu Naichong's source, Beijing announced its official permission for mixed performance on Jan. 1, 1930. Liu Naichong, "Talks on *Jingju* Actresses: A Continuation (漫談京劇坤伶 續)," *Beijing Opera of China* (1995) Issue 5: p. 38.

Yet according to Weikun Cheng, the prohibition was ended in 1928. See Weikun Cheng, "The Use of 'Public' Women: Commercialized Performance, Nation-Building, and Actresses' Strategies In Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," Working Paper #275, June 2002, p. 6, published by Women & International Development, Michigan State University.

³⁰ Shuntian Shibao (順天時報) was an influential newspaper in Beijing. It was run by the Japanese. See Weikun Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses," pp. 223, 225.

³¹ Colin Mackerras and Elizabeth Wichmann give a description of "opera" in Chinese theatrical context in terms of its music: "Music is not only the dominant feature of all traditional theater; it is the characteristic music of each regional form that most distinguishes it from others and provides most of the wide variation between the regional styles." Quotes from Colin Mackerras, ed., *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, p. 1, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983.

³² Meiji Japan offered its neighbour China models of importation of Western learning in various fields. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the "importation" was in fact very limited in its scale and its influence among Chinese intellectuals, especially when compared with what Japan achieved in "learning from the West" in the nineteenth-century. However, gradually over decades of slow penetration, there had appeared a significant fusion of Western thought and indigenous intellectual trends, which eventually led to the "intellectual ferment" of the mid-1890s and the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898. *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 11, *Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911*, Part 2, ed. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu, pp. 276-277, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

of 1894-95 marked the rise of Japan as a newly modernizing country as well as the region's preeminent military and economic power. This image made Chinese intellectuals and reformers who were seeking ways of strengthening and modernizing the ancient empire look to Meiji Restoration as a blueprint for national transformation.³³ During the decade that followed the first Sino-Japanese war, an emphasis on overseas study became progressively stronger. Japan seemed to be the most economical and suitable place for such training and received thousands of Chinese students.³⁴ The mass movement of Chinese students to Japan unquestionably led to a direct and profound Japanese influence on the course of importation of Western learning.

Similar to other realms, the introduction of “new drama” into China was also filtered via Japan at first, and bore the stamp of Japanese *shinpa* play. *Shinpa* – also

³³ In Kang Youwei (康有為)'s reform proposals to the Qing court in 1898, he suggested that the Petrine reform of Russia and the Meiji reform of Japan be taken as models for institutional changes in China. The argument of Liang Qichao (梁啟超), Kang's disciple, that “to revitalize China as a nation, political reform was even more important than the introduction of Western technology,” also originated in his learning from the experience of the Meiji reform. *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 11, pp. 286, 295. Besides Kang and Liang, the chief advocates of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898), Meiji Japan had provided a major source of inspiration for many ardent supporters of reform who had pioneered innovations experiments. For instance, Huang Zunxian (黃遵憲), a high official who assisted the governor of Hunan province Chen Baozhen (陳寶箴) in pushing institutional reforms in the 1890s, was inspired greatly from his perception of the rise of Meiji Japan. See *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 11, pp. 301-302. The Japanese impact where Meiji modernization was taken as reform models can be also clearly found in Zhang Jian (張謇)'s reform in Nantong (南通 a city in Southern Chinese near Shanghai). Directly influenced by his sojourn in Japan, Zhang Jian, one of the most famous entrepreneurs of the first half of the twentieth century, built modern education and social welfare projects based on the Meiji models. See Wai-ming Ng (吳偉明), “Zhang Jian's Nantong Project and the Meiji Japanese Model,” *Sino-Japanese Studies* (2009), Vol. 16, article 3: pp. 37-47.

³⁴ There were several reasons, including the next round of European imperialist advances in China that again urged the study of modern institutions; the close link between Japan and China, geographically, linguistically and culturally; and Japan's pioneering work on selecting, translating and publishing Western knowledge which Chinese reformists thought had already contained its essentials. There also gradually appeared a link between Japanese study and bureaucratic employment. The 1905 abolition of civil service examinations led to the ultimate conversion of the basic requirement for one's entrance into government service into study abroad instead of a grounding in the classics. As a result, “[b]y the end of 1905 estimates of Chinese students in Japan rose to between eight and ten thousand, and for 1906, the peak year, from six to twenty thousand.” *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 11, pp. 348-350.

rendered *shimpa*, an abbreviated form of *shimpageki* (literally, new school drama) – was “the first to develop outside the *kabuki* world after the Meiji Restoration as an attempt to modernize and westernize Japan’s drama.”³⁵ *Shimpa* was loved by Chinese students in Tokyo in its heyday after the turn of the century. Early in 1907, Chinese enthusiasts of *shimpa* founded Chunliu (Spring Willow) Society (春柳社) and devoted themselves to innovation in Chinese theatre. After performing an act of *La dame aux camélias* (茶花女 an adaption of Alexandre Dumas fils’ novel) in February 1907, in the beginning of June of that year, Chunliu staged *The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* (黑奴籲天錄 an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), “the first full-length formal Chinese spoken play in history.”³⁶ Apart from applying practical principles learned from the modern Western theatre, like stage setting and lighting, Chunliu was also inspired by *shimpa* practitioners to reevaluate theatre’s role as a tool of social reform. Although Chunliu was warned by the Chinese Legation that saw the company as related to political activities and threatened to cancel the scholarship of its Chinese students,³⁷ the influence of Chunliu’s plays soon reached Shanghai, where, in the fall of 1907, local Chinese audiences saw the Western-style “spoken drama” for the first time.³⁸ The key members of Chunliu, who did not move to Shanghai as a group until after the 1911 revolution,³⁹ managed to maintain a relatively high quality of repertoire and performance in their productions in Shanghai.⁴⁰ However, *Wenmingxi* (文明戲), the localized form of *xinju* flourishing in the mid-1910s in Shanghai and neighbouring areas, shifted the interest from social concern to domestic subjects and melodrama, and thus turned *xinju* into playful popular entertainment.

Xinju actors claimed themselves as reformers and used theatre for political

³⁵ Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism* (hereafter referred to as Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*), Rev. ed., p. 233, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

³⁶ Colin Mackerras, ed., *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, p. 107.

³⁷ Ouyang Yuqian, “Recollections of Chunliu (回憶春柳),” in *The Complete Works of Ouyang Yuqian* (歐陽予倩全集) Vol. 6, p. 165, Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990.

³⁸ Liu Siyuan, PhD dissertation, *The Impact of Japanese Shinpa on Early Chinese Huaju*, pp. 73-74, University of Pittsburgh, 2006.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Ouyang Yuqian, “Recollections of Chunliu,” p. 172.

agitation (like *shinpa* actors did in Japan), ironically, though, they still followed the convention of female impersonation and excluded women. Women did not appear on the *xinju* stage until 1912, five years after the first *xinju* production in Tokyo. In the summer of 1912 in Shanghai, some “articulate” members of the Women’s Suffrage Society were selected to learn *xinju* acting and prepared for their first show, in order to raise funds. The show lasted for three days in the city’s most famous amusement park, Zhang Garden (張園), and brought in enormous profit.⁴¹ The novel practice of *nüzi xinju* (女子新劇 women’s new drama) provoked considerable public interest and was followed by several women’s *xinju* troupes. However, according to an order issued by the Education Ministry of Jiangsu province at the end of 1914, they were all forced to disband due to alleged offences against social morality.⁴²



Fig. 2: Members of the First Female New Drama Ensemble (第一女子新劇社), a women’s *xinju* company active during 1912-1913.⁴³

1.2 Barrier to the stage: the glamorous impersonation by modern intellectuals

The pioneering Chunliu Society and the following *xinju* companies of Shanghai uniformly inherited the convention of female impersonation. Wearing Western-style costumes and telling new stories, however, they still looked to the artistic standard of *dan* acting set by the traditional school. In Chunliu’s first production in Tokyo, an act

⁴¹ Zhu Shuangyun (朱雙云), *History of New Drama* (新劇史), Chapter “Chunqiu (春秋),” Shanghai: Xinju xiaoshuo she, 1914.

⁴² Zhou, “Striking,” p. 148.

⁴³ The pictures of *xinju* and *huaaju* actors and productions used in this thesis are from Shanghai Library’s collection of historical photographs.

from *La dame aux camélias*, “Marguerite” was played by Li Shutong (李叔同 1880-1942). Ouyang Yuqian (歐陽予倩 1889-1962) recalls that Li’s “performance image” (*banxiang* 扮相 an actor’s on-stage make-up and dress) was not good and his voice not beautiful, although Li told the audience about having “sacrificed” his beard for the role.⁴⁴ It was indeed their passion for the *dan* tradition that motivated these modern intellectuals to continue its practice in *xinju*. In order to visually improve his impersonation, Li Shutong not only shaved off his beard but also spent a considerable amount of money on women’s costumes.⁴⁵ Besides emulating *jingju dan* masters, *xinju* actors also admired and learned much from *shinpa onnagata*. For instance, Ouyang specifically claimed the *onnagata* star Kawai Takeo as the model for him.⁴⁶



⁴⁴ Ouyang Yuqian, “Since I Performed Onstage (自我演戲以來),” in *The Complete Works of Ouyang Yuqian* Vol. 6, p. 7. Ouyang was a member of Chunliu, and a distinguished *jingju dan* actor as well as a playwright for both theatre and film. Li Shutong was a master musician, visual artist, poet, and later a devoted Buddhist monk, who was known as the Master Hongyi (弘一法師).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19. The imitation of *shinpa* stars’ gestures and movements was just one aspect of the strong impact of *shinpa* on *xinju*, which is fully explored in Liu Siyuan, PhD dissertation, *The Impact of Japanese Shinpa on Early Chinese Huaju*, University of Pittsburgh, 2006. Some Chinese students involved in *xinju* had personal connections with the *shinpa* circle. Lu Jingruo (陸鏡若 1885-1915), Ouyang’s close friend and *xinju* enthusiast, had studied *shinpa* in an actors’ school in Tokyo headed by Fujisawa Asajirō, and had actually performed with *shinpa* actors. Lu had established a personal friendship with Fujisawa, who coached Chunliu’s first production, an act of *La dame aux camélias*, and the subsequent full-length production, *The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* in 1907. See Ouyang, “Since I Performed Onstage,” and “Recollections of Chunliu.”

Fig. 3 (left): Li Shutong (left) and Zeng Xiaogu (曾孝谷) in costume, 1907, Tokyo. Fig. 4 (right): Ouyang Yuqian dressed as a Western lady, from early years of his *xinju* activities. These three were all leading actors of Chunliu Society in Tokyo.

China and Japan shared this strong tradition of female impersonation. After years of systematic training, professional *dan* could imitate not only women's appearances, tones, but also their expressions, gestures, and bearings. Japanese *onnagata* were required to imitate women in every aspect of daily life during their training sessions. They even became used to women's daily-use items. To look more like women, it was also very common that *onnagata* shaved off most of the eyebrows.⁴⁷ The apparent difference between an actress and a *dan* wearing costumes and heavy make-up might not be as appreciable as we guess today. When female fans went backstage with fruits, snacks or flowers to meet stars like Ouyang Yuqian, it was very hard to distinguish them from *dan* in female disguise since most *dan* used to wear long hair.⁴⁸

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, when the Japanese society had generally not accepted women on stage, actresses appeared in an initial phase of the development of *shinpa* and provoked a complicated response. Kawakami Sadayakko (1871-1946) was the best-known among them. The first Japanese mixed-sex play was presented abroad. While Kawakami Otojirō (1864-1911), a major and remarkable early *shinpa* actor, led his troupe touring America, the troupe was told that the Americans would not understand female characters played by men. Therefore, Otojirō's wife, Sadayakko, played the role that was initially arranged for *onnagata*, and earned the title of the first actress in modern Japan. In the troupe's tours in America and Europe (1899-1900), and three months later again in Europe (1901-1902), Sadayakko, trained as a geisha at a young age, received great acclaim from Western audiences because her acting was fascinating to Westerners who had never seen live performance of a geisha.⁴⁹ An Orientalizing gaze on Sadayakko and her reception in the West for the

⁴⁷ The information on the training of *onnagata* is in Ouyang, "Since I Performed Onstage," p. 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁹ Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, p. 237.

strangeness and beauty of the exotic Other are noticed by scholars.⁵⁰ While this self-styled “Imperial Japanese Theatrical Company” performed in Paris, the troupe and its local promoters “took every available opportunity to satisfy their audiences’ demands for a vision of Japan that conformed to orientalist expectations.” On the audiences’ side, affected by the current craze of European *japonisme* at its apex, they pushed the troupe, and Sadayakko in particular, into the limelight.⁵¹ However, reactions from many members of the Japanese scholarly elite and government officials were just the opposite. They were upset hearing the news about the performances and thought it was a shame to “[have] the nation represented by the likes of geisha and actors (*geinin*), who were considered by the majority to be the equivalent of prostitutes and river-bed beggars.”⁵² Moreover, the play performed in the West was open to criticism for being neither as traditionally refined as *kabuki*, nor properly modern enough to be categorized into the Western kind of theatre. Sadayakko herself, very much encouraged by Europeans’ applause and welcome, decided to continue her acting career. She later headed the Actress Training Institute, Japan’s first modern school for actresses, founded by her husband Kawakami Otojirō in 1908.

While Chunliu Society and more profit-minded *wenmingxi* companies were persistently attached to female impersonation, one company named Minxing Society (民興社), founded by the actor Su Shichi (蘇石癡) in 1914, discovered the use of actress and turned it to be a successful venture. The story sounds a bit like how Sadayakko first time accidentally got her chance. Lacking in top *dan* star and by the

⁵⁰ For instance, Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theater, Gender, and Nationalism*, pp. 89-91, New York: Palgrave, 2001. Also J. Scott Miller, “Dispossessed Melodies: Recordings of the Kawakami Theater Troupe,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, (Summer, 1998) Vol. 53, No. 2: pp. 225-235.

⁵¹ When Kawakami’s troupe arrived in Paris after its successful British debut, the renowned dancer, Loie Fuller, “took them under her wing”, helping to mark the troupe’s Japanese exoticism. “The theater soon filled with the Parisian artistic elite, including luminaries such as Gide, Debussy, Rodin, and a nineteen-year-old Picasso. Most were clearly taken by Sadayakko.” Quotes from J. Scott Miller, “Dispossessed Melodies: Recordings of the Kawakami Theater Troupe,” p. 225. In this essay, the author uses recently discovered documentation to illustrate the Orientalist, exoticist expectations of the Western audience that Sadayakko had fulfilled.

⁵² Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theater, Gender, and Nationalism*, p. 92.

company's first show still not any available, Su Shichi had to apply *shuanghuang* (雙簧) acting, a kind of imitation where two actors cooperated seamlessly to make it appear as if only one person was giving the performance. An actress of the company acted on the stage while *dan* actors were hiding behind the scenery or under the table on the stage, talking and singing for her, also giving instructions on her acting. We can see that the actress was even not well prepared and professional *dan* did generally surpass women in acting. In fact, this actress was so talented that she qualified for independent acting surprisingly within a week. Later a few more actresses joined the company and their mixed shows drew a large crowd.⁵³ Although Su turned a back-up plan into success, the intellectual circle of *xinju* was contemptuous of his business. Ouyang Yuqian's attitude was representative – in his memoirs, mixed-sex plays were bracketed together with snake shows and magic tricks, which were all used by Su's company to attract audience.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the actress who became the pillar of Su's company and her followers as well, did achieve stardom and acquired high reputation among the male critics and reviewers on merit of their acting.⁵⁵

The general neglect of women's participation in theatre and their weak influence in undermining the dominance of *dan* in China paralleled the struggles of *shinpa* actresses in Japan. About a decade before Sadayakko's Western tours, in a performance by a group called Saibikan in November 1891, sandwiched between its two plays, a geisha-turned actress, Chitose Beiha, danced a scene from a *kabuki* play. It was in fact the first mixed-sex production in modern Japan. However, following the disbandment of the group that had only one production, women again remained absent on stage until Sadayakko achieved popularity as the first female *shinpa* star. But she did not

⁵³ Wu Jichen (吳寄塵), "The whole story of Minxing Society (民興社始末記)," in Zhou Jianyun (周劍雲) ed., *Jubu congkan* (鞠部叢刊 Collection of Essays on Theatre) Vol. 1, Chapter three "New history of singing stage (歌臺新史)," p. 37, Shanghai: Jiaotong tushuguan, 1918.

⁵⁴ Ouyang, "Since I Performed Onstage," p. 50. Another contemporary critic claimed that since Minxing Society had been hosting mixed-sex shows, *xinju* was no longer worth any attention. Yi Hua (義華), "Major Events of Shanghai *xinju* in the Latest Six Years, part 1 (六年來海上新劇大事記上)," in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 1, Chapter three "New history of singing stage," p. 15.

⁵⁵ Ju Yuan (菊園), "Actresses of New Drama (女新劇家誌)," in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 2, Chapter eleven "Anecdotes About Actors (俳優軼事)," pp. 23-26.

shake the legitimacy of *shinpa onnagata* immediately, and shared the spotlight with *shinpa onnagata* for years.⁵⁶ In Japan, the persistence of the *onnagata* tradition and the disinterest in the real woman on stage were rooted in a unique historical background.

As kabuki scholars have pointed out, kabuki onnagatas perform what is considered the paragon of womanhood. This role is not based on real women but on the *wakashu*, the junior partner in a homosexual relationship between two samurais that is traditionally initiated as an apprenticeship and rite of passage. Early kabuki onnagata in the late 17th and early 18th centuries were former *wakashu* kabuki players, and the manuals of the onnagata's art emphasized achieving the qualities of ideal womanhood through meticulous gender training both on- and offstage ... (under) the following principles: "(1) gender identity can be divorced from sex *identity*, (2) the gender dichotomy is actually based on the gender spectrum, and (3) gender is presentation and not representation."⁵⁷

1.3 Victory of the authentic body over the disguised one: more physical, more real, and more sensual

Except for some inconsistencies during the localization (for instance, some actors who used to perform *jingju* would sing arias in *xinju* plays), the development of *xinju* was generally towards the standards of Western realism, with relatively realistic mise-en-scene and themes chosen to reflect the current social events.⁵⁸ However, the rejection of the naturalistic way of showing woman with the presence of woman herself seemed to be a paradox, since the realistic approach was one major element of the drama reformists' dedication. Most of the *xinju dan* actors were ardent fans of

⁵⁶ Siyuan Liu, "Performing Gender at the Beginning of Modern Chinese Theatre," *TDR* (Summer 2009) Vol. 53, No. 2 (T202): p. 37.

⁵⁷ Quotes from *ibid.*, p. 38. Liu cites the three "principles" from Maki Morinaga, "The Gender of *Onnagata* as the Imitating Imitated: Its Historicity, Performativity, and Involvement in the Circulation of Femininity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (2002) Vol. 10, No. 2: p. 263.

⁵⁸ Obviously, it was not the same "realism" in *xinju* as in *huaju*, what today's audiences are more familiar with but could not be reached until after the May Fourth Movement, when Chinese students travelled back from Europe and America bringing first-hand experience of the "authentic" Western theatre and its canonical practices. The strengthening of realism, seen in the evolution from *xinju* to *huaju* in China, and from *shinpa* to *shingeki* in Japan, made the modern "spoken drama" (*huaju* and *shingeki*) go further and further ahead, leaving the traditional stylization of *jingju* and *kabuki* behind.

jingju dan stars. They loved the art of female impersonation, and often referred to *jingju* techniques as a set of criteria for judging the achievement of *xinju* actors in impersonation. Japanese *shinpa onnagata* stars had also greatly impressed *xinju* actors, which, to a fairly large extent, fortified *xinju*'s identification with *jingju*'s *dan* tradition. Especially those who took their *xinju* activities very seriously and considered it as “art”, an honourable, meaningful career distinct from the profit-driven “business”, demonstrated the fidelity to the splendid *dan* tradition, which in their mind represented an orthodoxy and a sincere form of art. Later when women emerged on the *xinju* stage, their talent and artistry were then measured by settled norms that *xinju dan* actors had recently laid.

Cross-dressing, the practice of impersonating the opposite sex on stage, can be traced to the early Tang dynasty when men began to play female roles and the mid-Tang when women began to play male roles.⁵⁹ For example, “[b]oth men and women cross-dressed in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), even as they performed side by side on the same stages.”⁶⁰ Zhou Huiling’s interpretation of *kunsheng* (坤生 an actress playing a male role) in the Yuan period can also explain why new drama activists adopted female impersonation as a cultural and psychological legitimacy.

...a performer’s sex was not the primary consideration for the role he or she played onstage. A character’s gender was represented through dress and gesture. The external determinants of dress and gesture are the primary sites where a culture regulates gender differences – in everyday life as well as on the stage. And because these external determinants could be put on and taken off, they were manipulated by artists onstage and were recognized by the society as art.⁶¹

However, during the bubble years of Shanghai *wenmingxi*, a localized form of *xinju*, some critics did predict a gloomy future for impersonation, and turned to support the use of actress. In *xinju*'s realistic scenes, *dan* could no longer use heavy costumes and headdresses decorated with glittering jewels to cover the male body,

⁵⁹ Zhou, “Striking,” p. 132.

⁶⁰ Quotes from *ibid.*, p. 133.

⁶¹ Quotes from *ibid.*, p. 134.

like they used to do in *jingju* performances. This convinced a critic to reconsider the inherited legitimacy of *dan* in a new context of *xinju*, and came to the conclusion that “when performing old drama, *dan* are not as natural as when they perform new drama” (because the natural physical beauty is covered by excessively heavy costumes and make-up), and “when playing female roles, men are even much less natural compared to women” (because women are certainly the best option for presenting a woman/her body in a natural way). This critic had also seen something in the interior of the body that mattered – it is very hard for men to approach a girl’s exquisite feeling and to act it out.⁶² This approving judgement, the recognition that a woman’s on-stage advantage lies in her physical body, exactly repeated how the use of actress was perceived in Japanese theatre in the early 1910s. In Japan, where *onnagata* exerted the same dominance as *dan* in China, emergence of actresses also aroused continuous controversy. Ayako Kano has noticed and summed up a “fundamental assumption” shared by both sides of various debates on the issue.

Both those arguing for actresses and those arguing against actresses align women with what they are “essentially”, “physically” and “naturally”. This is set against the male *onnagata*’s “patterns”, his “art”, or “artifice”. The difference is that the pro-actress faction valued woman’s natural expression, rooted in her body, over man’s artificial one, while the anti-actress faction valued man’s superior art over woman’s inferior nature, also rooted in her body. The *onnagata* might be more skilled, but the actress is more real; women are to nature as men are to art.⁶³

Two competing productions of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* in 1914 tilted the debates, one featuring Kawakami Sadayakko (a *kabuki*-style actress popular in the West when touring abroad) and the other Matsui Sumako (Japan’s first Western-style actress, known for portraying Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in 1911). In the scene of “Dance of the Seven Veils”, the heroine one by one takes off her seven veils while performing an appealing dance, until the play stripes her down to a naked body. Obviously, the

⁶² Ju Yuan, “Actresses of New Drama,” in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 2, p. 24.

⁶³ Quotes from Ayako Kano, “Visuality and Gender in Modern Japanese Theater: Looking at *Salome*,” p. 48.

actress meant to convey an overt sensuality here, and this put Sadayakko at a great disadvantage due not only to her age (more than 40) but also her *kabuki*-style gestures, a restraint rather than a release of the body. However, having received Western theatre training for acting a woman in a realistic, lively manner, Sumako was given a chance to exert all her bodily charm. In her fresh interpretation, by revealing more and more body parts, the display of the female body turned to a progressive exposure of its sexuality, accompanied by the pleasurable sensual experience on the part of the audience. Sumako's triumph over old-fashioned Sadayakko marked what Ayako Kano notes, a shift, "from gender defined as theatrical *achievement*, to gender defined as grounded in the visible body and as *basis* for theatrical expression", also "from gender at the endpoint of acting, to gender at the beginning of acting."⁶⁴ In the old practice of female impersonation, the female body was "translated" into a set of visual symbols (from appearance to movement), and therefore it could be imitated through practicable means; the woman herself was no longer needed. When her body was re-discovered in modern theatre and was employed instead of cross-gender performance, the victory of the arguments in favour of actresses "confirmed the definition of womanhood as an essence naturally grounded in a woman's body;"⁶⁵ she was then reduced to nothing else but her physical body.

1.4 Legitimacy of huaju actresses: a new standard and a hesitant breakaway from the old practice

After its peak years of the mid-1910s, *wenmingxi* fell into a rapid decay. In 1917, its last remaining company, Minming Society (民鳴社), shut down. In 1928, Happy Stage (笑舞臺), the last major theatre organizing *wenmingxi* plays, closed down (it barely presented any influential productions after 1924).⁶⁶ As the name of "Happy

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁶ Seto Hiroshi (瀬戸宏), Japanese expert on Chinese *wenmingxi*, divides the development of *wenmingxi* from Chunliu Society's first productions in Tokyo up to the end of the Republican era (1949) into three phases: initiation (1907-1913), heyday (1913-1917) and decline (1917-1949). See Seto Hiroshi, "On the Historical Period Division of *Wenmingxi* and its Place in the History of Chinese Theatre (試論文明戲歷史分期和它在中國戲劇史上的地位)," (hereafter referred to as Hiroshi, "*Wenmingxi*") *Theatre Arts* (戲劇藝術) (2006) Issue 1: pp. 57-64.

Stage” indicates, and as signalled by the disappearance of the slogan “social education” (社會教育) from *wenmingxi* advertisements after 1917,⁶⁷ the previous political concerns and social enlightenment role of *wenmingxi* had given way to mere entertainment. In the professional theatrical circle, *wenmingxi* was fiercely attacked for its thorough “corruption”, which meant that it had lost its standing as a reform-minded rebellion against the old school, and completely departed from the implication of its term (“civilized drama”) and its original name *xinju* (new drama). The term “*wenmingxi*” even became a target of derision among the local populace. They referred to any exaggerated, farcical plays seen on stage as “*wenmingxi*”.⁶⁸ Since 1917, most of *Wenmingxi* productions moved to amusement centres where they had to compete with various entertaining alternatives whose target market was common folk with little education.⁶⁹ The later encroaching competition of film industry, the newest and the most fashionable entertaining form, left even less space for *wenmingxi*.⁷⁰

Xinju seemed to have led the theatre reform down a blind alley. Hong Shen (洪深 1894-1955), the first Chinese to have studied drama in the West, altered the direction of reform and revitalized the formation of “new drama”.⁷¹ As a director and

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ The decline of *wenmingxi* coincided with the rise of giant amusement centres. They were designed as “department store of entertainments”, “so that customers moved from floor to floor, shopping from one layer of entertainment to the next: from theaters to puppet shows, wrestlers, singsong girls, restaurants, and games of chance.” Quotes from Frederic Wakeman Jr., “Licensing Leisure: The Chinese Nationalists’ Attempt to Regulate Shanghai, 1927-49,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, (Feb., 1995) Vol. 54, No. 1: p. 26. His source: Dora Sanders Carney, *Foreign Devils Had Light Eyes: a Memoir of Shanghai 1933-1939*, p. 19, Ontario: Dorset Publishing, 1980.

⁷⁰ Affected by the film industry, *Wenmingxi* was losing not only its audiences but also its actors. Since 1917, some *Wenmingxi* actors had switched to Beijing opera performing, and in the twenties, some became film actors. Hiroshi, “*Wenmingxi*”.

⁷¹ After graduating from Qinghua University in 1916, Hong Shen was awarded a scholarship to the USA and was expected to study ceramics. Instead, he studied drama in George Pierce Baker (1866-1935)’s famous “English 47” class at Harvard University. He also did a brief internship at the Boston Institute of Performing Arts. He returned to China in 1922, with a master’s degree in drama. Besides his contribution to *huaju*, Hong has been also credited as an important filmmaker. Yingjin Zhang ed., *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (hereafter referred to as Zhang, *Encyclopedia*), p. 188, entry “Hong Shen”, London: Routledge, 1998, and Zhou, “Striking,” note 3, p. 150.

playwright, he laid foundation for the development of *huaju* (話劇 literally, “spoken drama”) in the 1920s. Its faithful adherence to Western theatre theories and techniques distinguished *huaju* from either traditional opera or *xinju/wenmingxi*.⁷² One of Hong’s contributions to theatre reform was his insistence on using actresses in *huaju*, which finally brought about the elimination of cross-gender casting in the modern “spoken drama”.⁷³ Despite the reluctance of *dan* stars among his fellows, Hong was determined to remove this major barrier on the path towards developing a naturalistic acting style, which, guided by the rules of Western realism, automatically demanded a naturalistic gender representation. Another factor, related to a Western-influenced, acute consciousness of appropriate gender roles, also led to Hong’s intolerance of the traditional *dan* practice being inherited in *huaju*. It was clearly indicated in his own words: “the female impersonators on the Chinese stage constantly reminded me of Freudian theories of sexual perversion, which eventually induced me to avoid the old craft of cross-dressing [in the meaning of cross-casting].”⁷⁴

Introduced by Ouyang Yuqian, Hong became a *huaju* director of Shanghai

⁷² The name *huaju* was created after the form had already been practiced for a few years. In 1928, Hong Shen suggested adopting the term *huaju* to address the Western style spoken plays seen on the Chinese stage since the May Fourth Movement. “*Huaju*” has thereby been generally accepted as a term referring to modern spoken drama since 1919, and accordingly, “*xinju*” is confined in the use of referring to spoken plays since Chunliu Society’s first productions in Tokyo (1907) up to 1919. “*Wenmingxi*” (the term did not exist until the 1910s), a localized form of *xinju*, went out of existence in the 1960s when its productions eventually ended. Because *Wenmingxi* had generally degenerated into vulgar recreation since 1917, the term was usually viewed as derogatory. For this reason, when referring to *xinju* activities in the 1910s, today’s scholars tend to avoid using the term “*wenmingxi*”, instead, many prefer the term “early *huaju*” (早期話劇).

⁷³ From applying drama theories and techniques he learned abroad, Hong Shen undertook a systematic and fundamental theatre reform, including using everyday dialog in Mandarin Chinese instead of in regional dialects, completely removing opera singing, emphasizing director’s central position, and starting standard rehearsal process. Rehearsal (in its strict sense) did not exist in traditional opera or in *xinju*. Duo to a general weakness in script, opera and *xinju* actors were only given a brief scenario (*mubiao* 幕表) and had to rely on improvisation when acting on the stage. The common practice was called *mubiaozhi* (幕表制). Chunliu Society paid more attention to the importance of script and was not involved in *mubiaozhi*. See Liu Siyuan, *The Impact of Japanese Shinpa on Early Chinese Huaju*, p. 154.

⁷⁴ The quotation is from an essay of Hong Shen, “Has My Time Passed? (我的打鼓時期已經過了么)” published in *The Young Companion* (良友畫報) in 1935. Zhou, “Striking,” p. 131.

Dramatic Association (上海戲劇協社 established in Dec. 1921), in which there were several leading actors who loved playing female roles and considered themselves specialists in impersonation. In the company's third public performance in September 1923, Hong staged his first production as a director in this company. In order to highlight the contrast between two distinct styles, he intentionally arranged two plays to be performed successively, the first having actresses and the next having *dan*. As expected, the audience laughed and felt funny when seeing *dan*'s mannered movements and deliberate, thin voice right after having experienced a woman playing a female role, which gave much more naturalistic and realistic effect.⁷⁵ It was the first time that *huaju* met the Chinese audience with a gender-appropriate cast. Since then, using actresses became accepted as a mainstream practice of *huaju*.⁷⁶

In the next year (1924), Hong Shen staged his adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a four-act play whose success very much depended on the acting of its female leads. Besides directing, Hong Shen himself played a role. Staging foreign plays could be a risk at that time.⁷⁷ *Lady Windermere's Fan* was staged in

⁷⁵ The first play with a gender-appropriate cast was *The Greatest Event of Her Life* (終身大事), a one-act play scripted by Hu Shi (胡適) in 1919 with strong influence of Ibsen (it was China's first modern *huaju* script). The next, still having female roles played by men, was *Shrew* (潑婦), also a one-act play, was scripted by Ouyang Yuqian in 1922. Huang Shizhi (黃世智), "Shanghai Dramatic Association and the Development of the Chinese Modern Dramatic Form (上海戲劇協社與中國現代戲劇形態的形成)," *Drama Literature* (戲劇文學) (2009) Issue 2: p. 23.

⁷⁶ Earlier in Beijing, a *huaju* play called *Heroes and Beauties* (英雄與美人) staged in May of the same year, scripted by Chen Dabei (陳大悲 1887-1944), also employed a gender-appropriate cast. Chen Dabei was an active *dan* actor in *xinju* era (1910s) and a prolific playwright of the 1920s. He introduced and promoted "amateur drama" and gave it a Chinese name, 愛美劇, by which he advocated engagement in dramatic activities for aesthetic experiment rather than for commercial purposes. The 1923 production in Beijing was staged by People's art drama school (人藝戲劇專門學校), the first of its kind in modern China, of which Chen Dabei was a founder-member. A brief introduction of Chen Dabei's main activities in dram is seen in Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, note 28 of Chapter 6, p. 199, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁷⁷ In 1920, Wang Zhongxian (汪仲賢), an active and famous *xinju* actor, put on stage George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* in Shanghai. Despite its star-studded cast and costly scenery, the play proved failure with the audience, because, as is generally believed, Chinese audiences were not prepared yet to accept such a thoroughly Westernized experiment. In the winter of 1922, Hong Shen staged Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* by adopting Western expressionism, and it was rejected by the audience too.

China for the first time. Hong carefully transformed Oscar Wilde's script into a Chinese story in order to make it more approachable for the ordinary Chinese. He titled the adapted version *The Mistress's Fan* (少奶奶的扇子), a Chinese-sounding name which removed the foreignness of the play in the audience's first impression. He "resettled" all the characters in China, gave each a Chinese name, and, when necessarily, "creatively translated" the wit and humour in their talks in a Chinese way. He set up a luxurious and fashionable scenery with both full Chinese flavour and elements indicating a Western-influenced lifestyle, which exactly catered to Shanghai urbanites. He reduced the satire in Wilde's script, because introducing "intact" Western intellectual thinking might put him at risk of losing the contact with the audience. Finally, the happy ending conveyed moral principles which just conformed to the values of the contemporaneous society – in Hong's own account, the play's purpose was to promote Confucian ethics of loyalty (忠) and leniency (恕).⁷⁸ All these worked together as a deliberate, elaborate device, which perfectly marketed the play and turned it into an epoch-making event in the history of modern Chinese drama. The far-reaching success of the production with both critics and audience, especially the unprecedented excitement it stirred up among the public, greatly reinforced the new practice of using women rather than men for female roles.⁷⁹

Before Hong Shen's systematic and detailed reform, Chinese dramatists had already been rethinking modernization of theatre and seeking for a way out the corruption of *wenmingxi*. During the early twenties following the May Fourth Movement, on one hand, actors did not lose their enthusiastic passion for female impersonation on the stage of new drama; on the other hand, there was an extreme scarcity of available actresses (probably the result of the continuous prevalence of *dan*

⁷⁸ 少奶奶 was a common appellation for young, married lady from middle- or upper-class families.

⁷⁹ However, the custom of female impersonation on the stage of new drama had been repeated off and on by the 1930s. At least as late as in 1931, the custom could still be found, for example, in Qinghua University's production of *Nora* (娜拉). Cao Yu (曹禺 1910-96), who later became one of the most important *huaju* playwrights, impersonated the female lead Nora in the play. Li Jianwu (李健吾), "A glimpse of Beijing Students' *Huaju* Movement in the May Fourth Era ("五四"期間北京學生話劇運動一斑)," *Script* (劇本) (1979) Issue 5: p. 21.

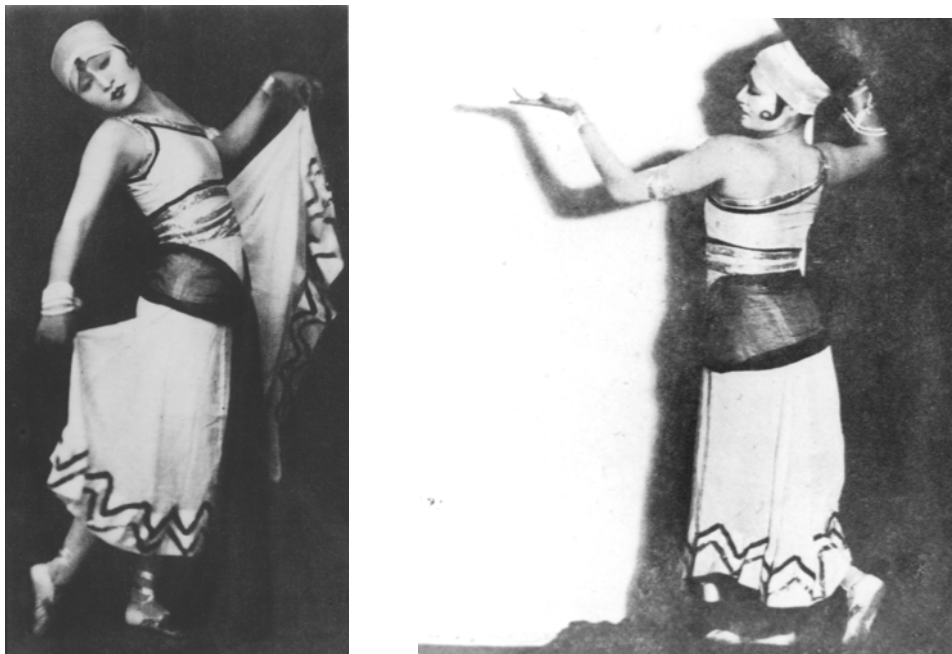
practice). A few companies abandoned *mubiaozi* (see note 71), the custom of relying on plot outlines and improvisation, which was believed to have eventually undermined *wenmingxi*. They concentrated on an adequate preparation of script instead. Yet the issue of cross-gender impersonation had not yet become a “concern”.⁸⁰ In the early phase of the formation of *huaju*, a newest dramatic form in every other aspect, the hesitation in disconnecting the cross-casting custom of old drama was comparable to *shingeki*. *Shingeki* was a new breed of Japanese theatre initiated in 1906, based on serious study, translation, and performance of Western dramatic literature. Even being such a modern school, *shingeki* plays still retained the *onnagata* practice for the first few years due to a very limited pool of talented actresses.⁸¹

In the 1914 competing productions of *Salomé* in Japan, Matsui Sumako, a leading star from the *shingeki* school, triumphed the *kabuki*-style actress Sadayakko. The thrilling Chinese production of *Salomé* was staged fifteen years later. It was the first time the *Salomé* met the Chinese audience. Tian Han (田漢 1898-1968), an outstanding Chinese dramatist, staged the play. Through the stage photograph (see below, figs. 4 and 5) of the performance of Yu Shan (俞珊 1908-68) who played the bewitching role of *Salomé* in the summer of 1929, we can feel an overt display of the female physicality and sexuality similar as what Matsui Sumako’s performance revealed. Yu Shan’s body was explicitly highlighted through her figure-hugging dress, leaving her arms, one shoulder, part of her back, ankles, and part of her feet bared,

⁸⁰ Before joining Shanghai Dramatic Association, Hong Shen staged his adapted version of *The Emperor Jones*, which he titled *Zhao King of Hell* (趙閻王). Without actresses at his disposal, he did not even set any single female part in the play to avoid having males cast in female roles. Shanghai Dramatic Association’s first two productions before Hong Shen’s participation kept impersonation since its leading actors loved playing female roles. In the early 1920s, it was much easier to use *dan* actors for *huaju* plays rather than use professional actresses, who in fact could hardly be found, especially in universities which did not immediately open its door for female students during the current feminist campaign for women’s equal rights. For example, Fudan University Drama Society (復旦劇社), an amateur group starting in 1925 and coached by Hong Shen for a long period, gained its possibility of presenting gender-appropriate cast until Fudan University started accepting female students in 1926. Yang Xinyu (楊新宇), “Hong Shen and Fudan University Drama Society (洪深與復旦劇社),” *Theatre Arts* (2005) Issue 6: pp. 25-34.

⁸¹ Siyuan Liu, “Performing Gender at the Beginning of Modern Chinese Theatre,” p. 40.

and of course through her dance as well. All was indicating that the biological sex of the performer and the stage character's gender identity had no way to be separated any longer – the two must be in a direct conformity.⁸²



Figs. 5 and 6: Yu Shan in the 1929 production of *Salomé*.

The Chinese production of *Salomé* was at first not allowed by the authorities and accused by moralists of its transgressing depiction of sexuality. Once the play was performed, it proved an overnight sensation. According to one account of a member of Southern China Society, the company which staged the play, there were no other actresses of the time acting as “boldly” as Yu Shan, who had amazingly depicted *Salomé*'s fanatical, obsessional love. Her “boldness” was however short-lived – forced by her family, she left the Southern China Society headed by Tian Han after a few performances in *Salomé*.⁸³ Similarly and concurrently, the performing life of the

⁸² The first Chinese production of *Salomé* was directed by Tian Han (田漢), based on his own translation. In 1929, the play was first performed in Nanjing and a month later in Shanghai. Tian Han was one of the most prominent writers and leftist activists of modern China. In 1922, the same year as Hong Shen's homecoming, he returned to China after having studied in Japan for years. In the winter of 1927, he founded Southern China Society (南國社), a major and active *huaju* company which drew quite a few devoted, mostly leftist, young pioneers in modern drama.

⁸³ Yu Shan returned later and performed another high-profile play *Carmen* (卡門) in June 1930. Yu's father forgave his “rebellious” daughter after being told by friends that her performance in *Carmen* was very much praised by the public. Soon after the 1930 production of *Carmen*, Yu Shan got married and ended her career as a *huaju* actress. Shi Wan (石灣), “The Earliest Female Star of

company's another actress was also abruptly terminated when her father, a bureaucrat, heard of her involvement in theatre.⁸⁴

To be sure, since Hong Shen's pioneering productions, which introduced women into female roles, the new convention had generally been recognized and accepted as a basic principle by *huaju* professionals and amateurs too. Nonetheless, it did take more time for the mainstream public outside the theatrical world to see the mixed-casting mode as a common and moral practice compatible with its values. The suspicion and mistrust of actresses' morality and the traditional prejudice against female performers were so deeply rooted in the public's perspectives due to the historical association between actresses and prostitution or moral decay in a general sense (details about this association are given in the next chapter). In schools and universities where amateur dramatic companies started to thrive since the May Fourth Movement, the companies really needed female students following the new mixed-casting convention and increasing number of girls were getting interested in performing new drama. Yet families and "protectors" in schools usually took firm actions to prevent educated girls from entering a life on stage.⁸⁵

1.5 A new medium and the rise of female film stars

China's first encounter with film was only months after the French Lumière brothers' show of projected pictures to a Paris audience on December 28, 1895, which marked the coming of the film epoch. The first motion picture seen by a Shanghai audience in 1896 was shown in Xu Garden (徐園), an entertainment venue for variety shows and acrobatic performances. In the next few years, European and American

Huaju (最早的話劇女明星：俞珊)," *Culture Monthly* (文化月刊) (2007) Issue 7: pp. 82-85.

⁸⁴ Zhao Mingyi (趙銘彝), "Memories of Southern China Society and Comrade Tian Han (回憶南國社和田漢同志)," *Literature & Art Studies* (文藝研究) (1979) Issue 1: pp. 41-51.

⁸⁵ One account gives us a vivid illustration of such frustration. An amateur *huaju* company of Suzhou Dongwu University (蘇州東吳大學) planned to stage Hong Shen's adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Some female students attempted to join (Dongwu University had admitted females by that time), but were not permitted by the university. The company's effort to invite girls from neighbouring schools also failed. This was in the autumn of 1930. See Shu Yan (舒溇), "Life on the Stage: My Theatrical Works and Performing Life, part 1 (在舞臺上的人生——我的劇作和演戲生活 上)," *Historical Documents on New Literature* (新文學史料) (1996) Issue 4: pp. 50-53.

showmen screened films at a number of teahouses in the city.⁸⁶ Film was meanwhile introduced to other main cities and to the Qing imperial house as well.⁸⁷ This foreign novelty quickly settled into the Chinese urban space and had become one of China's most important forms of mass entertainment. Despite the predominant role that foreigners played in the introduction of film,⁸⁸ the Chinese had shown an attempt to integrate film into the Chinese entertainment world since its arrival in China. To facilitate the Chinese reception of the imported medium, film, the Chinese likened it to their traditional leather shadowplay (皮影戲) which they thought applied similar techniques and operations,⁸⁹ and thus called the motion picture “electric shadowplay” (電影戲) or “foreign shadowplay” (西洋影戲), which were usually abbreviated to “shadowplay” (*yingxi*). It was not until the early 1920s that the Chinese began to switch to the current term for film, literally “electric shadow” (電影 *dianying*). The earliest terminology not only reveals that at the beginning the Chinese preferred understanding film through traditional Chinese discourses on art and entertainment rather than modern Western discourses on science and technology, but also in a way foreshadowed the attempt of China's future filmmakers to convert cinema into an

⁸⁶ Teahouse and theatre-house were for a long time interchangeable terms for entertainment establishments of Shanghai, which offered performances of traditional opera pieces and other various shows while tea, snacks and cold towels were served. Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (hereafter referred to as Zhang, *Amorous*), p. 95, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

⁸⁷ “In 1904, when Empress Dowager Cixi celebrated her seventieth birthday in the imperial palace, the British embassy in Beijing presented her with a film projector and several reels of film. Unfortunately, though, the generator exploded during the screening at the party, and Cixi, taking this as a bad omen, ordered the prohibition of any future film exhibition in the Forbidden City.” Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” in Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ The foreign impact can be seen in various aspects. As an industrial enterprise, the exhibition and distribution of film depended on foreigners' operation at the beginning. The majority of early films shown in China were Western imports. In 1908, a Spanish showman built Shanghai's first movie theatre, and later, the city's first-run cinemas for Hollywood productions were all located in foreign concessions and owned by foreigners. All the earliest Chinese productions involved foreigners' support with either technicians and machines or financing. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ “In this form of Chinese folk art, human and animal figures are carved out of leather. ... While the puppeteers and light sources are kept to one side of the screen, the audience watches the movements and shadowy images from the other side.” *Ibid.*, p. 6.

indigenous art form.⁹⁰ The inclination to integrate the new Western medium with China's current popular art forms was clearly demonstrated in the earliest Chinese film productions during the 1900s-10s. These short features either recorded traditional theatrical performances (usually classic pieces of Beijing opera) or adapted *wenmingxi* plays.⁹¹ When we look for actresses in Chinese early film activities, this background may help us understand their absence.

Interestingly, although Chinese filmmakers and audiences had never seen a “Western convention” of female impersonation in early imported films, the practice of impersonation persisted in the earliest few indigenous productions, conceivably because of a very intimate connection between these films and concurrent *wenmingxi* activities.⁹² In China's first short feature, *The Difficult Couple* (難夫難妻 1913), which was made by a *wenmingxi* team, men were cast in female roles.⁹³ It was not until September 1914 did mixed-sex performance appear in *wenmingxi*.⁹⁴ The foreign

⁹⁰ Jubin Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*, pp. 30-33, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.

⁹¹ The first-ever Chinese-made film was produced by Beijing's Fengtai Photo Studio (豐泰照相館) in 1905 featuring Tan Xinpei (譚鑫培 1847-1917), then “the king of Beijing opera” (伶界大王). This film and Fengtai's several other similar productions proved a huge success. Later Chinese filmmakers continued to film the greatest performances of traditional theatre, especial when new technology was introduced and applied, for instance, both the first sound film (1930) and the first colour film (1948) recorded Beijing opera performances. Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 167, entry “filmed stage performance”.

⁹² One research focuses its attention on this intimate connection and examines a few cases of adapting *wenmingxi* into early film productions in detail, see Yutori Iizuka (飯塚容), trans. Zhao Hui (趙暉), “On the *Wenmingxi* Adapted into Films (被搬上銀幕的文明戲),” *Theatre Arts* (2006) Issue 1: pp. 44-56.

⁹³ The film was scripted by Zheng Zhengqiu (鄭正秋 1888-1935), “directed” by Zheng and Zhang Shichuan (張石川 1889-1953), who were both actively engaged in *wenmingxi*. The term “director” did not exist until it was translated as *daoyan* (導演) and soon recognized by the Chinese as a standard name at around 1921-22. Zheng and Zhang's directing task sounds far away from today's meaning of “director” – once the camera started filming, it won't change position (always long shot) and actors acted continuously without a single stop until running out of a roll of film. *The Difficult Couple* premiered in a *wenmingxi* theatre in September 1913. The foreign-financing Asia (亞細亞) Film Company, producer of this film and around fifteen other shorts, was in particular closely connected with *wenmingxi*. It had a contract with Minming Society (民鳴社 a *wenmingxi* company headed by Zhang Shichuan)'s actors who worked for the film company during the day and performed *wenmingxi* plays in the evening. Cheng, *History*, pp. 17-23.

⁹⁴ Minxing Society was the first to employ mixed cast among Shanghai's *wenmingxi* companies,

novelty and its innovative mode of casting women in female roles seemed to have failed to inspire *wenmingxi*, which resulted in the extension of the practice of female impersonation from stage to screen. A short Hong Kong film, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (莊子試妻 1913), brought the first Chinese woman onto the screen. It was scripted by Li Minwei (黎民偉 1892-1953), reputedly the “Father of Hong Kong cinema”. Li’s wife Yan Shanshan (嚴珊珊 1896-1952) played a supporting role, unusually, though, together with a female impersonator – Li himself played the female lead.⁹⁵ Yan’s breakthrough did not reduce the popularity of female impersonation in Chinese cinema. In the budding period of 1905-21, besides newsreels, documentaries, and filmed stage performances, Chinese narrative cinema was full of adapted *wenmingxi* and slapstick comedies which excluded women “as usual”.⁹⁶

As the market demanded and Chinese filmmakers gradually acquired a corresponding ability, three Chinese-made full-length features were produced during 1920-21. In the first of them, *Yan Ruisheng* (閻瑞生 1921), an accentuated realism made actresses indispensable. The film was based on a shocking, real crime in which a prostitute named Wang Lianying (王蓮英) was murdered.⁹⁷ Her friend Wang Caiyun (王彩雲), a former prostitute who had “married into a respected family” (從良) was chosen to play Wang Lianying who, rather than a fictional character, had actually lived in the city. The two women happened to have the same surname, “Wang”.⁹⁸ As a major part of the advertising strategy aiming at accentuating the appeal of realism, casting Wang Caiyun made the story of the murder of a prostitute look “double

see the previous part I.2.

⁹⁵ Born in Guangdong province, Yan Shanshan was a graduate of a normal school in Hong Kong and amazingly, a member of a female bomb squad during the 1911 Republican Revolution. Cheng, *History*, p. 28.

⁹⁶ In 1916, Zhang Shichuan formed Huanxian (幻仙) Film Company and directed *Wronged Ghosts in Opium Den* (黑籍冤魂), another major production during this period whose cast still relied on the *wenmingxi* company Minming Society’s actors. The film was adapted from a theatrical play of the same title which was at first staged as a “reformed opera” (改良戲曲 close to *wenmingxi*) in 1908 and had been very popular with *wenmingxi* audience for years. Cheng, *History*, pp. 23-26.

⁹⁷ Yan Ruisheng was the name of the murderer, a young man who killed a prostitute for money. The sensational murder case of 1920 had already been staged in *wenmingxi* theatres as a hit play. Cheng, *History*, pp. 43-44.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

authentic”. First the character would be equated with a real-life person and then the actress would be equated with the character/the real person. Marketing the “authenticity” was very successful. *Yan Ruisheng* turned out to be a box-office hit.

Wang Caiyun disappeared after her only production and was forgotten soon. Another prostitute-turned actress Xuan Jinglin (宣景琳 1907-1992)⁹⁹ made her film debut playing a minor role in *Last Conscience* (最後的良心 1925) and within the same year gained fame after acting in *A Woman in Shanghai* (上海一婦人), a film scripted by Zheng Zhengqiu and specifically designed for Xuan in the lead role as a kind-hearted prostitute. Realism again placed the actress in focus as the filmmakers exploited the resemblance between her and her fictional role. In Xuan’s case, this resemblance was, however, depending on the fact that she herself once led a prostitute’s miserable life, a history she would rather evade. Still, the story would be inevitably exploited so as to increase the publicity and better advertise the film, in which the actress’ actual life story was embedded. In return, Xuan earned fame and fortune. She also earned freedom through her film career. After the successful release of her debut, *Last Conscience*, Mingxing (明星), the film company that recruited Xuan, paid two thousand yuan to redeem her from the brothel where she worked.¹⁰⁰

In the development of feature film by the early twenties, most productions catered to low-brow audiences. They consisted of loosely structured comedies, adaptations of hit plays from *wenmingxi* (a few from Beijing opera), and imitations of imported, detective and thriller genres.¹⁰¹ This created a general, negative image of film and naturally brought the popular perception of acting as an unrespectable occupation to cinema, or even cemented the degrading attitude. The contempt pushed talented women further away when female impersonation had already systematically excluded

⁹⁹ Xuan Jinglin was a stage name. To avoid unpleasant associations with her life in brothel, with Zheng Zhengqiu’s help, she adopted this new name. Zhang, *Amorous*, p. 354, note 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355, note 16.

¹⁰¹ For example, one of the first three long features, *Beauty and Skeleton* (紅粉骷髏 1921), modelled on a translated detective story, and by introducing martial arts and mechanical tricks, produced a thrilling sensation of horror and mystery which was in vogue in imported American detective serials. Cheng, *History*, pp. 47-48.

women from screen. Wang Caiyun and Xuan Jinglin were recruited from the lowest social strata, which corresponded to pioneering actresses of traditional operas and *wenmingxi*. Since the early twenties, the domestically produced films showed a significant improvement in both quality and quantity, and meanwhile constantly attempted appealing to the popular taste for realism. It demanded more women in lead roles, and the profession of screen acting started to draw some well-educated girls in.

Sea Oath (海誓 1922), another early long feature as well as the first romance film,¹⁰² featured Yin Mingzhu (殷明珠 1904-89), the first film actress to play a lead role and the first female star. She was born into a gentry family and received a highly Westernized education.¹⁰³ An unusual modern lifestyle made her conspicuous quite early. She was interested and skilled in exotica which most of the gentry-born girls of the time would not try, such as dancing, swimming, biking, horse riding, and car-driving. She often imitated foreign film stars' (for example, Pearl White's) dressing and came to be called Miss F.F. for Foreign Fashion. Miss F.F. was loved by the urban print media. Before she became a film star, her pictures showing an image both as a model for young trendy girls and as a fancy for urban males had already been a favourite of newspapers and magazines. When Dan Duyu (但杜宇 1897-1972) was looking for a girl for his first film, *Sea Oath*, he noticed the semi-celebrity Yin Mingzhu and invited her to play the heroine. Yin's daring debut on screen was not acceptable for her family, which believed that her "sensual display" stained the family's reputation. She was "pulled" back to the "respectable" track and away from film acting for three years until she succeeded in persuading her mother to set her free.¹⁰⁴ While its pillar, Yin Mingzhu, was gone, Shanghai (上海) Film Company,

¹⁰² The film tells a love story between a modern girl and her artist lover. Cheng, *History*, pp. 45-46. It "consciously imitates Hollywood melodrama by treating love and marriage as an issue of life and death." Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 297, entry "*Sea Oath*".

¹⁰³ Yin Mingzhu studied at Zhongxi Girls' School (中西女塾 or 中西女中, English name McTyeire School for Girls. Founded by American missionaries in 1892, it was Republican China's most prestigious girls' secondary school, where all classes were taught in English except for Chinese literature. Glen Peterson, Ruth Hayhoe and Yongling Lu ed., *Education, Culture, and Identity in Twentieth-century China*, p. 376, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

¹⁰⁴ Zheng Yimei (鄭逸梅 a screenwriter in the 1930s), *Old Stories About the Film Circles: Dan*

producer of *Sea Oath*, recruited another modern girl, Fu Wenhao (傅文豪 1902-?), whose story was quite similar to Yin. Born into a well-to-do family, studying at Shanghai's best girls' school (she and Yin were schoolmates), and compelled to leave the life on screen after secretly starring in Dan Duyu's third film *The Revival of an Old Well* (古井重波記 1923), but she never gained her chance to come back.¹⁰⁵

In 1922, Mingxing (明星) Film Company was founded by a group who shared a consensus on film's twin function of gaining financial profit and exerting positive moral influence. Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, the most influential figures in the initial stages of Chinese cinema, were two of the co-founders. After adopting Zhang's strategy of making entertaining films (mostly comedy) free of didactic purpose in its founding year, which proved not as profitable as expected, Mingxing turned to Zheng's idealistic course emphasizing filmmakers' social responsibility and produced its first serious long drama (長片正劇), *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (孤兒救祖記 1923). The film's success set a pattern – combining commercial interests and moral didacticism – for a series of films later produced by Mingxing. These films, mostly scripted by Zheng, all “presented the struggle between good (e.g. motherly love, philanthropy, education) and evil (e.g. old social customs, warlords, the tyranny of the traditional family), and always ended in the triumph of good.”¹⁰⁶ Mingxing gained a great financial strength through these productions as well as a positive social reputation which laid a solid foundation for its future development.¹⁰⁷ While the industry was booming during the twenties,¹⁰⁸ female film stars soon reached a sizable

Duyu and Yin Mingzhu (影壇舊聞——但杜宇和殷明珠), pp. 12-15, 25-26, Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 21-22. Besides Yin Mingzhu (Miss F.F.), two other girls were also known by their “foreign” names at that time, one called Miss A.A. (Ace Ace) and the other Miss S.S. (Shanghai Style). Fu Wenhao was that Miss A.A, and “allegedly the first Chinese women to obtain a driver's license in the International Settlements of Shanghai.” Zhang, *Amorous*, p. 39, and p. 362 note 106.

¹⁰⁶ Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” p. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Mingxing stood in the Chinese film industry as one of the oldest and most important studios until its facilities were completely destroyed by Japanese bombing raids on the city when the full-scale war broke out in 1937. Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ The rise of Mingxing initiated the film craze of the 1920s, which saw a total of 176 studios being established in the country and 146 of them in Shanghai alone by the mid-twenties, and 106 movie theatres opened throughout the country with a total seating capacity of 68,000 by 1926.

number. Among them, Wang Hanlun (王漢倫 1903-78 see fig. 8 in II.2), Yang Naimei (楊耐梅 1904-60 see fig. 7 in II.2), and Xuan Jinglin (mentioned above) from Mingxing were the earliest and the most popular female stars.

To summarize, women struggled hard to compete with female impersonators and attain legitimacy for their stage acting, in both China and Japan around the turn of the twentieth century. The 1920s saw emergence of actresses on China's *huaju* stage and silver screen. Since then, the gender-appropriate way has been the only legitimate casting practice in modern Chinese theatre and cinema. The practice of cross-gender impersonation was thus limited to the traditional, stylized opera. Female stardom did not appear immediately during the formation of *huaju* because its audience were relatively smaller and its actresses were mostly amateurs. The newly imported medium, film, was much more popular in urban life and attracted a mass audience. The development of female film stardom was influenced not only by the Western film aesthetics, but also by the new awareness of the erotic appeal of the "real" female body on the screen on the part of China's pioneering filmmakers.

Movie theatre first appeared in Hong Kong and Taiwan in 1901, in Beijing in 1907, and in Shanghai in 1908. The figures of movie theatres by 1926 do not take into account other various entertainment sites such as parks, teahouses and theatre-houses, amusement centres. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

I just give a few more statistics to illustrate what the boom was like. There were in 1923 six films released by three film companies, and in 1924 eighteen released by eleven companies (including one filmed Beijing opera), then in 1925, amazingly, sixty-one released by thirty-three company. Lists of films produced in Shanghai during 1909-1927 are available on the webpage, <http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/node2245/node4509/node28337/node63976/node63978/userobject1ai55740.html>. The lists are given by the official online version (abridged) of *A History of Shanghai Cinema* (上海電影志) (home page, in Chinese, <http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/node2245/node4509/index.html>). The printed version is edited by Wu Yigong (吳貽弓), Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu chubanshe, 1999.

Chapter II Shining on screen: a full-fledged female stardom

Introduction of chapter II

In the previous chapter, I have written on the history of legitimization of female actors. Now I will focus on female stardom. In a general understanding of stardom, I will first look at the significance of attention towards the actor's private life and discourse on acting in formation and legitimation of early stardom. The print media was also a considerable force in the process of building stardom. Besides its great contribution to the star's unprecedented visibility, the cult of celebrity that was especially developed in fan magazines enabled an apparently intimate, but in reality commercialized and impersonal connection between idols and their fans. Related researches have also unveiled more psychological aspects of this "connection", which demonstrates that both "differences" and "similarities" between stars and spectators are source of pleasures and fascinations for the spectators.

Ever since its birth, Chinese film industry had oscillated between the focus on film's entertainment value and that on film's social function. In general, the 1920s saw an irresistible tide of commercial productions, which gained overwhelming dominance over the entire industry in the late twenties. Actresses from these entertaining films were usually recognized as playgirls, fame-diggers, or simply gold-diggers, or girls sacrificed by unscrupulous, mercenary film producers. Their on-screen images were more complicated, though, and need to be examined in the context of an intimate connection between film and the "Butterfly" literature (鴛鴦蝴蝶文學), the genre of urban popular fiction that was in its heyday during the twenties and had a considerable impact on filmmaking in both narrative and ideology. To understand the cultural and social implication of the images of virtuous women repeatedly depicted in these films, I will borrow Rey Chow's reading of the "Butterfly" literature, which has shed light on the fundamental oppressiveness this literary genre and its readership had collectively imposed on women. A specific commercial genre, martial arts film, dominated Chinese film industry from the late twenties to the early thirties. The genre is quite comparable to action serials prevalent in early Hollywood productions, rather in the fascinating depiction of "stunts" carried

out by the heroine, than in scenario and narrative. I will apply theories on realism and “catastrophe” to understand the “extraordinary” body of those (Hollywood action stars and Chinese martial arts stars) who performed hazardous stunts.

In the aftermath of Japanese occupation of Manchuria in Sep. 1931 and the ensuing brief Japanese invasion of Shanghai in Jan. 1932, the intensified political climate urged the film industry to restructure itself from the thoroughly commercialized mode towards the focus on social conscience and national cause. While film studios were looking for more contemporary subjects to revitalize their productions and the leftists were seeking opportunities to expand their propaganda, the recruitment of leftist filmmakers seemed to be a win-win solution. The close cooperation between the leftists, who were sensitive in depicting social realities, and the rising film professionals, who excelled in film language and perception of aesthetics, produced quite a few classics as well as a new generation of female stars. Accordingly, the thirties saw a marked shift of the public opinion on actresses, from an overall negative to an encouraging, positive one. They were recognized as new, fresh idols who distinguished themselves from those of the twenties, as genuine, innocent, good girls acting with “true character” rather than artifice and deceptiveness. Then, what kind of female characters were they playing? The leftist filmic discourse’s reconstruction of the content of “new woman” ideal, a recurring theme since the May Fourth Movement, has been fully investigated in Yingjin Zhang’s study. It reveals that the leftists’ attitude on “new woman” was, in summary, surveillance and de-sexualisation.

II.1 A general understanding of stardom: discourse on the actor’s private life, on acting, and on star-fan relations

The series of serious long drama (mostly family drama) produced by Mingxing proved to be appreciated by the critics, profitable in the market, and morally approved by the mainstream society. Meanwhile, some actors started to accumulate fame and become an essential prerequisite for films’ marketing success. These film actors, both female and male, had noticeable features of what Richard deCordova defines “picture personality”. Since the early 1920s, “the identification of an actor in a specific film

with a name” became popular in film-viewing in China, which, with a dual effort of cinema and journalistic discourse, gradually led to a circulation of the actor’s name. This process reflected the development of a basic form of knowledge which constitutes the “picture personality” – the “intertextuality”.¹⁰⁹

What the name designated above all was a form of intertextuality, the recognition and identification of an actor from film to film. This intertextuality emerged as a measure of the increasing regularity and regulation of the cinematic institution – both in its product (the same actors appeared regularly) and more crucially, in terms of its audience, which had to go to the cinema often for this intertextual meaning to arise.¹¹⁰

Another process was happening in the Chinese film industry and turned the “picture personality” into the “star”. Knowledge about actors was no longer restricted to “the textuality of the films they were in”, instead, “the star [became] the subject of a narrative which [was] quite separable from his/her work in any particular film.”¹¹¹ As actors’ names became familiar with audiences, journalistic discourse and studio publicity departments were more and more engaged in extending knowledge about actors outside their professional existence, offering a host of stories of their private lives which allowed both contemporary and today’s readers draw a lively picture of the personality of a specific actor. The discourse on the star’s private life gradually developed uncontrollably. Film celebrities, and especially female stars, were bound to undergo the scrutiny of the public. By the mid-thirties, to a large degree the film craze had been transformed to the craze for the public consumption of film actresses’ private lives which were “packaged and paraded for a mass audience to both see and judge”.¹¹² The increasing intensity of the popular press’ scrutiny peaked in 1935 when

¹⁰⁹ The notion of “intertextuality” was introduced by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, and used by late structuralists and poststructuralists in France, to indicate that the meaning of texts may be shaped by other texts. The term was later used for analysing stardom by some cinema theoreticians. Now I am using it in the way common in cinema studies, not as a term in literature studies.

¹¹⁰ Quotes from Richard deCordova, “The Emergence of the Star System in America,” in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, p. 25.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹¹² Michael G. Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public

it “killed” the most talented and famous actress Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉 1910-35). The on-going lawsuit with her estranged husband suddenly exposed Ruan’s controversial, romantic relations with two men on the front pages of tabloids, which wouldn’t waste the chance to exploit the “breaking news”, some with mercilessly defamatory titles, to draw readers. Ruan committed suicide at the age of 25, two days before she was to appear in court and to be confronted with “the public”.¹¹³

The discourse on the actor’s private life helped create the “star” and further circulate the star image, and the rising discourse on acting brought expectations and specific requirements for actors. The earliest productions, mostly comedies, relied on *wenmingxi* actors whose acting was characterized by exaggerated movements and expressions. This acting style was sufficient for films in which action and motion played a principal role, but not for the newly developed film genre, serious long feature, which required “delicate touches” of actors to render emotion of characters. Filmmakers had seen the necessity to set up training programmes for actors and for other types of personnel that the industry needed. By the mid-twenties, there were no fewer than fifteen film schools in China, whose credibility varied greatly though. It was common that major studios run attached film schools with their priority task

Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s,” (hereafter referred to as Chang, “The Good, the Bad”.) in Yingjin Zhang ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, p. 154, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 155-158. I have more discussions on Ruan’s suicide and her fear later in the part II.3. The “passion” of both audiences (fans) and the urban print media to scrutinize film stars’ private affairs was well illustrated by a magazine with its keynote explicitly given in the title, *Families of Stars* (明星家庭 Shanghai). Lasting for about one year (1934-1935), it published at least two issues and covered the most popular stars in the thirties, with a focus on their relations with family members in particular and some information about their recreations and hobbies. It included Ruan Lingyu, Li Lili (黎莉莉), Xu Lai (徐來), Zhu Qiuhen (朱秋痕), and Wang Yin (王引) in the first issue, and Li Minghui (黎明暉), Li Zhuozhuo (黎灼灼), Hu Ping (胡萍), Diao Banhua (貂斑華), and Zhang Yi (張翼) in the second issue. The list was remarkably gendered. In the total ten film stars, only Wang Yin and Zhang Yi were male and all the others were female. Shanghai Library ed., *Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals’ Abstracts* (中國現代電影期刊全目書志 hereafter referred to as *Abstracts*), p. 78, Shanghai: Shanghai kexue wenxian jishu chubanshe, 2009. Another film magazine, *Screen Life* (電影生活 Shanghai, 1935), even attempted to make stars themselves to be the “narrator” of a journalist discourse on their private lives. It “appointed” two female stars, Liang Saizhu (梁賽珠) and Yan Yuexian (言月嫻) as “photojournalist” to photograph their family members, work in the studio, and so on. *Abstracts*, p. 92.

being to train and recruit personnel for the studio itself. For example, several actors from Mingxing Film school, founded in 1922, took part in the shooting of Mingxing's first full-length feature and box-office hit, *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923).¹¹⁴ Besides the improvement of actors' professional skills, the emphasis on acting also created a new site of consumption. As Richard deCordova points out, references to the art of acting in film had two effects: legitimizing film as art and expanding its audiences to the middle and upper classes with pretensions for refinement and taste.¹¹⁵

In terms of the building and circulation of star as popular image, the mass media has always been the most efficient device. People tend to be captivated by stars due to their perpetual exposure in the media, not only through their performances on screen but also through modern publicity methods such as the coverage in the newspapers, fan magazines, later radio and television. Before the print media exerted full influence

¹¹⁴ Here are another two major film schools. One was attached to China (大中華) Film Company. Founded in 1924, it had outstanding directors, actors and script writers such as Hong Shen in its faculty, and graduated Hu Die (胡蝶 1907-1989). Rising from the late twenties, Hu Die starred in numerous box-office hits for Mingxing and was the highest paid actress in the thirties. Bai Yang (白楊 1920-1996) was from the school in Beijing run by Lianhua (聯華) Film company. She was invited to take lead roles in films after establishing her reputation on the *huaju* stage. As the most popular actress since 1937, she was still active on screen and enjoyed immense prestige under the communist regime, until her career was cut short due to politics in the early sixties. Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 165, entry "film education"; p. 192, entry "Hu Die"; p. 90, entry "Bai Yang".

¹¹⁵ Richard deCordova, "The Emergence of the Star System in America," p. 23. In his examination of early Hollywood, Richard deCordova argues that this legitimation was centred on the possibility of translating the art of acting from stage to screen, yet we shall recognize the different contexts of "stage" in America and in China. In the Chinese context, by the early twenties, *wenmingxi* was the dominant form to present the Western-style drama in China but was widely perceived as corruption. Before Hong Shen's systematic introduction of authentic Western theatre, reference to the acting of the stage in terms of acting itself probably did not exist in Chinese cinema. As the contemporary *wenmingxi* was very much looked down upon and excluded from the site of art, some genres of opera as theatrical performance, especially Beijing opera, was commonly regarded as a legitimate art form although its actors were not respectable due to historical discrimination (as I have discussed previously). Since the techniques and standards of opera acting were not very "translatable" to screen, it might be argued that reference to the acting of the stage, in the Chinese context, of the opera, was probably more about legitimizing cinema's status as "art", rather than "corruption" epitomized by *wenmingxi*. This elevation of cinema brought both audiences and practitioners from middle and upper classes.

on cinema and relations between stars and their fans, other methods had been developed to “connect” the two groups. As is noted by Michael G. Chang, to generate fame and to a largest extent “reach out” and thus expand their fan base, the first generation of female film stars, exemplified by Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei, very much relied on promotional tours giving live performances and face-to-face interaction, which allowed the fans catch a glimpse of their idol “in person”.¹¹⁶ The rise of fan magazines since the late twenties gradually altered the structure of the film magazines’ publication and more significantly, introduced a new pattern of building and circulating stardom.¹¹⁷ As an important unit of the promotional system, “special issues” (特刊) for advertising a specific film and the press serving the publicity of studios and movie theatres were particularly dominant in the twenties and maintained its prevalence throughout the Republican era.¹¹⁸ Film stars were also advertised and marketed through these promotional publications, but it was not until the rituals such as collecting stars’ autographs, photos, and writing fan letters were highly developed, that an imaginary connection between fans and their screen idols could be routinized.¹¹⁹ As a crucial and possibly the only medium for making these rituals work out, fan magazines, as Michael G. Chang has pointed out, “simultaneously produced a veneer

¹¹⁶ For example, to promote the film *Movie Actresses* (電影女明星 1926) starring Wang Hanlun, Wang went on an eight-month tour of Southeast Asia and gave live performances, usually singing pieces of traditional opera, at numerous movie theatres where her film was shown. Yang Naimei’s live performances were more fascinating. To promote *Rekindling of Conscience* (良心復活 1926), in which she played the lead, Yang performed a musical scene from the film on the theatre’s stage, with the same costume and an exact replica of the film’s set, to “compensate for” the “silence” of the film (sound film had not been introduced yet). For more details about their stage appearance for promotion, see Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” pp. 135-136 and note 15 on p. 291.

¹¹⁷ *Movie Fan Weekly* (影迷週報) was very probably the first film magazine published in Shanghai that had the word “fan” in title. Besides its publication lasting from Sep. 1934 until Nov. 1935 with around 13 issues in total, the magazine had also tried to organize a large “movie fan club”. *Abstracts*, p. 77.

¹¹⁸ It can be clearly seen in *Abstracts*, which, based on Shanghai Library’s collection of extant materials, covers 376 film magazines of the Republican era, most published in Shanghai, a few in other major cities such as Beijing and Hong Kong, and a few in South Asia where Chinese communities were concentrated.

¹¹⁹ There were numerous examples of the phenomenon and I just give one of them here. In the magazine *A Caricature of Cinema* (電影漫畫 Shanghai, 1935), two fan letters to the leading actresses Hu Ping and Xu Lai were published. *Abstracts*, p. 86.

of social intimacy as well as an increased social distance,” and “eventually revealed the fundamentally commercialized and impersonal nature of this media-based ‘intimacy’”.¹²⁰

The importance of the promotional media and the media-enabled communication between the stars and their fans, of the kind that emerged in Shanghai in the 1930s, has been amply researched – on the Western materials – in the field of film studies. One of such research was done by Jackie Stacey. In her analysis of fan letters, Jackie Stacey focuses on the psychological aspects of the star-fan nexus, and tries to understand the diversity and complexity of cinematic identifications based on differences as well as similarities between stars and women audiences. Stacey’s research demonstrates that both “differences” and “similarities” generated pleasure and fascination, and enhance the audience’s connection to the stars. In some cases, by considering stars as something different, unattainable, “way above us ordinary mortals” (a fan’s words cited by Jackie Stacey), fans reinforce the “otherness” of stars and develop worship of stars as gods and goddesses through a denial of themselves, which is found in some religious devotions. This distance created by the “difference” provides a source of pleasures and fascinations. For some other spectators, stars function as role models who contribute to the construction of feminine attractiveness circulating in a society. The recognition of desirable qualities in the ideal and a fantasy of a possible movement between the two identities, from the spectator to the star, motivate spectators to overcome the gap and become more like stars. Images of power and confidence represented by some female stars are frequently favoured because they offer female spectators fantasies of power beyond their own experience, especially the power they lack and desire. Other than recognizing the difference and the gap, in some experiences the difference provides the possibility for the spectator to leave her world temporally and become part of the star’s fantasy world on screen. The escapist pleasure during this process is being experienced as “losing oneself” in the narrative and image stream of the film. The “identificatory” practices (in Jackie

¹²⁰ Quotes from Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” p. 150.

Stacey's terminology) continue outside the cinematic context and involve activities such as pretending to be, resembling, imitating or copying particular film stars. Certainly in this way pleasures and fascinations continue.¹²¹ We have good grounds to assume that such "identificatory" practices became also an important feature of the female stardom in 1930s' Shanghai.

II.2 Two stereotypes: the virtuous woman in "Butterfly" romances and the "extraordinary body" in martial arts

Despite the rising discourse on acting and the effort of Chinese film industry to improve the practical skills of its personnel including its actors since the early twenties, the significance of acting talent in achieving film stardom needs closer examination. Rather than training actors to meet the modern standards of quality acting, that is, the ability to portray a wide range of characters, studios had very quickly developed and skillfully deployed the strategy of stereotyping. It functioned on the principle that "a star is accepted by the public in the terms of a certain set of personality traits which permeate all of his or her film roles".¹²² To be sure, stereotyping of the actors is present in the cinema cultures everywhere in the world, but in the Republican Chinese cinema, especially in its early stages during the twenties, it was more pronounced. Both female and male actors were stereotyped, and were usually known by names the public assigned them, for instance, the following earliest male stars popular in the twenties. Praised for his ability to pose as a villain on screen, Wang Xianzhai (王獻齋 1900-41) earned the title of "the No.1 villain" (反派第一號). Zhu Fei (朱飛 1903-35), a handsome heart-throb, always the lead in romances, was admired by female audiences and given the name of "screen lover" (銀幕情人). Wang Yuanlong (王元龍 1903-59), for his rugged good looks and strong physique, often appeared as hero in films and was called "silver hegemon-king" (銀壇霸王).¹²³

¹²¹ Jackie Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-audience Relations," in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, pp. 141-163.

¹²² Thomas Harris, "The Building of Popular Images: Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe," in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, p. 40.

¹²³ Source: Shanghai Library's online database (in Chinese) "Memories of Cinema" (電影記憶). The database consists of two sections. One is a sub-database of 376 film magazines (1921-1949),

It reminds us the fixed role system of Beijing opera, which, with its antecedent in Yuan (1271-1368) theatre, divided characters into four main categories: male, female, powerful, and comic, known as the *sheng* (生), *dan* (旦), *jing* (淨), and *chou* (丑) divisions.¹²⁴ To show how this role system exactly stereotyped its actors, we can briefly look at the further classifications of the *dan* (female) category, which embraced all female roles. There were two major, contrasting types, *qingyi* (青衣) and *huadan* (花旦), both for young women, but symbolizing those of “virtue, dignity, and strong character, loyal to their family obligations” and those of “bold and extrovert character, full of charm and seduction” respectively. Complementary to these two, *wudan* (武旦) symbolized young woman “skilled in fighting and riding and accustomed to vigorous action while not dispensing with her feminine appeal.” The above female roles were all young, and here is “[t]he matriarchs of the Beijing opera stage,” *laodan* (老旦), symbolizing elderly women “[h]alting in step but firm in spirit, forceful in expression and emotional in their grief.”¹²⁵ *Wenmingxi* had inherited the role system without hesitation. Even its terms for every classification imitated those in traditional opera.¹²⁶ And amazingly, we do find the four types of *dan* in the modern Chinese cinema. These classifications were especially evident in the infancy of the industry, when neither the production of films nor that of stars was fully developed to allow much diversity.

China’s first full-fledged female star, Wang Hanlun, who often played virtuous

based on the library’s collection of extant materials, with abstracts of all, contents of some, and pictures of covers and pages available, see <http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/book/books.htm>. The other is a sub-database of 103 film actors of the Republican era with biographies, lists of film productions of each, interviews from the contemporary press, songs, and film clips available, see http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/dy_index.htm.

¹²⁴ Colin Mackerras, ed., *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*, p. 123.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125. These main divisions and the further classifications of each remain in today’s Beijing opera. Many other regional forms of opera have similar role systems.

¹²⁶ For example, Ouyang Yuqian has once discussed with friends whether he should keep on playing *huadan* or change to *laodan*, when he was active in *xinju* (new drama) acting. He also mentions that classifications of female and male roles were commonly used in *wenmingxi* companies, but not in Chunliu Society. Ouyang, “Since I Performed Onstage,” pp. 44, 62. In Zhou Jianyun ed., *Jubu congkan*, discourses on *xinju* actors and their acting styles very often have reference to role categories and terms borrowed from traditional opera to assign each category.

but tragic heroines, such as faithful wife/widow, wise mother, and distressed lover, matched the descriptions of *qingyi*, or *zhengdan* (正旦, another term for the type). Impressed by her talent for portraying sentimental, melancholic women, critics assigned her the name of “*beidan*” (悲旦 sorrowful woman), a sub-category of *zhengdan*. Yang Naimei, recruited by Mingxing after Wang Hanlun, markedly contrasted with Wang on screen and especially off screen. She had also become a full-fledged star, yet rather controversial. Her modern-style life, such as cohabitation without marriage, was perhaps admired by a few young fans for being unconventional and uninhibited. Yet most of the time she was labelled “playgirl” or associated with “notoriety” considering that the social climate of the early and mid-twenties was still very conservative.¹²⁷ Although she had also portrayed positive characters, Yang Naimei’s most impressive and attractive roles were frivolous, dissolute, or courtesan-like, modern women, which were the closest to *huadan*. Xuan Jinglin, another pillar actress in Mingxing’s early years, demonstrated her gift for *laodan* acting when she successfully portrayed an old woman in 1925. Later she was often cast in elderly roles and was dubbed “the No.1 old woman of the Chinese cinema” (中國電影第一老太婆). During the late twenties and early thirties, martial arts fever gripped studios of all sizes. They produced a staggering output of martial arts films and presented a whole host of swordswomen on screen. Among them there were four dominant *wudans*: Fan Xuepeng (范雪朋 1908-74) and Xu Qinfang (徐琴芳 1909-85) at Youlian (友聯) Film Company, Xia Peizhen (夏佩珍 1908-75) at Mingxing (明星), and Wu Lizhu (鄔麗珠 1910-78) at Yueming (月明).¹²⁸ In this subchapter, I am looking into *zhengdan* and *wudan*, two dominant categories of the twenties, to see how cinematic variations of the classical “stereotyping” served to build modern stardom.

¹²⁷ Yang Naimei’s biography in Zhang Wei (張偉) ed., *Stars were Shining Brilliantly Last Night: 28 Big Stars in the Film Industry of Republican China* (昨夜星光燦爛——民國影壇的 28 位巨星 hereafter referred to as Zhang, *28 Big Stars*) Vol. 1, pp. 16-28. Taipei: xiuwei zixun keji: 2008.

¹²⁸ Shanghai Library’s online database “Memories of Cinema”.



Fig. 7: Yang Naimei (1904-60) in 1933.

Zhengdan, usually for well-bred and virtuous roles, was the most important female stereotype. Throughout the twenties and thirties, the most popular and relatively more respected actresses like Mingxing's first star Wang Hanlun and the "Empress of Chinese Cinema", Hu Die, were assigned to *zhengdan* roles in most, if not all, of their productions. What kind of female image was constructed and conveyed through the on-screen presentation of the stereotyped *zhengdan* roles? To answer the question, we must first look at Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School (鴛鴦蝴蝶派), the popular literary genre that had greatly influenced the film industry from the mid-twenties to the early-thirties. This hilarious name was assigned to the kind of urban fiction extremely popular during the first three decades of the century. It was produced by "old school" novelists, adhering to more traditional styles in contrast with the modern style of the May Fourth literature.¹²⁹ In 1924, the heyday of

¹²⁹ Characterized by love stories focusing on various emotions or sentiments (情), "Butterfly" literature was commonly known as the "fiction of scholars and beauties" (才子佳人小說). These sentimental stories were usually centred on the unfulfilled love between *cai zi* (才子 scholar) and *jia ren* (佳人 beauty), typically summarized as follows. "Boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl are separated by cruel fate, boy and girl die of broken heart." The summary is given in John Berninghausen and Ted Hutters, "Introductory Essay," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1976) Vol. 8, No. 1: p. 2. Rey Chow cites it in her book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (hereafter referred to as Chow, *Woman*), p. 51, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 (second printing 1997). During the twenties, the use of the "Butterfly" label extended to all types of old-style fiction with numerous subjects including social, detective, knight-errant, scandal, ideal or fantasy, comic, legendary novels, and

“Butterfly” literature, one of the three biggest studios Mingxing (another two were Tianyi and Lianhua) recruited the famous “Butterfly” novelist Bao Tianxiao (包天笑 1876-1973) as its scriptwriter, “whose successful stint inaugurated the subsequent participation of Butterfly writers.”¹³⁰ The enormous popularity of “Butterfly” fiction with urban readers led to a full-scale transplantation of its subjects into film production. Studios produced films either scripted by “Butterfly” writers or adapted from their works.¹³¹

Telling a story of the traditional virtue of filial piety and casting Wang Hanlun in the lead, Mingxing’s first long feature, *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923), presented a “family drama” (家庭劇), the genre already popular in *wenmingxi* plays in the 1910s. The film proved marketable due to its well-structured story and its moralist didacticism. In the next year, Zheng Zhengqiu, who had scripted the *Orphan*, adapted (徐枕亞 1889- 1937)’s *Spirit of the Jade Pear* (玉梨魂), a best-selling “Butterfly” novel first published in 1912 and seen as a representative of “Butterfly” love stories.

others. Remarkably, there was a considerable overlap between the subjects of “Butterfly” literature (in its broad sense) and those of films of the twenties and thirties, which reveals a strong connection between the two fields. Rey Chow notes in *Woman*, p. 36 that this broader definition of the “Butterfly” label remains the one adopted by Chinese Communist critics today.

¹³⁰ Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, p. 27.

¹³¹ Although Mingxing also recruited the Harvard-trained specialist in modern drama, Hong Shen, in 1925, “Butterfly” fiction had exerted a much greater influence than May Fourth literature in early cinema. Yingjin Zhang suggests three major factors leading to the situation. Firstly, early cinema rose in a period when “Butterfly” fiction dominated the publishing world. Secondly, the early *Wenmingxi* and film circles shared an ideological affinity with the “Butterfly” school. Both preferred compromised solutions to social problems instead of fundamental social changes advocated by the May Fourth radicals. The third factor might be the elitism of May Fourth writers, who manifested little interest in commercial films of the 1920s. The ignoring or contempt for being “involved” only changed in the early 1930s, when the leftists broke through into the film industry with the recognition of the significance of film as a modern and effective tool of mass propaganda. Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, pp. 27-28. I would suggest another factor. Most of the Chinese film audience, especially those from the lower and middle classes, expected to watch genuine Chinese stories with characters recognizable and motives approachable, which “Butterfly” fiction exactly offered. That was why, as I have previously explained, Hong Shen carefully transformed a foreign script into a story which was formed in a Chinese pattern and embodied a set of indigenous, traditional values. As for a small part of the public, mostly from among intellectual classes, the plethora of imported Hollywood films was apparently enough to satisfy their “exotic” taste for things foreign.

The cinematic version of *Spirit of the Jade Pear* with the same title as the novel was released in 1924 and became again a box-office hit. The film *Spirit* might also be called “family drama” in a broader sense, but the part of “romance” was very much highlighted. It became an actual onset of the integration of “Butterfly” romances into Zheng’s and other *wenmingxi*-bred filmmakers’ favourite, the “family drama”, even before the “Butterfly” writer Bao Tianxiao was enlisted. This particular, thriving genre of “family plus romance”, a combination of two traditional motifs central in literary and dramatic works, thus put modern cinema in the position of heir to a narrative mode rooted in tradition, and connected cinema to the classical, legitimate form of drama derived from Yuan (1271-1368) dramas.



Fig. 8: Wang Hanlun (right) in *Spirit of the Jade Pear* (1924). She portrayed a faithful widow who sacrifices love for chastity.

Rey Chow’s close textual analysis of the predominance of female-related content in “Butterfly” romances, gives us a revealing insight into the mechanisms of women’s subordination, which was deeply hidden in the prevailing literary narrative of the twenties, and exactly mirrored in the filmic presentation. In Rey Chow’s arguments, relationships between a man and a woman are often asymmetrical in the narrative structure of “Butterfly” literature. The seemingly reciprocal relationships are simply pretexts to the woman’s series of trials which constituted the major part of the story.¹³² In these serial struggles, which are in fact tests of the heroine’s morality

¹³² Chow, *Woman*, p. 52.

against requirements of the ideological systems, she is fundamentally self-sacrificial, willingly giving up her desires or even life for chastity and morality. “It is only when she has been properly sacrificed (in lifelong widowhood, or else in death) that a woman can become a respectable model for others to emulate.”¹³³

“Sacrifice” was also a dominant theme in early Hollywood productions. Molly Haskell clarifies the division of on-screen female images between the upper-middle-class elite and the rest of the world, or in other words, between women as models and women as victims.¹³⁴ The very quality of being exceptional does not qualify for its representation of women’s emancipation and thus weakens the political value of the “extraordinary” women. This leads to their unpopularity with a majority of men and women. Then the “ordinary” women seem to have formed the most significant category when women among the audiences are often likely to psychologically transform themselves into these fictional characters. There is a third category between the “extraordinary” and the “ordinary”, the woman who begins as a victim of the discriminatory circumstances, however rises through suffering and frustration, and eventually achieves a remarkable transformation of her life. Seeing “victim” as an essential component of the classical Hollywood narrative, Haskell groups on-screen women, who she believes all begin as victims, thematically under four categories: sacrifice, affliction (usually an illness or disease), choice (at least two pursuers infatuated with the heroine), and competition (the heroine loves another woman’s husband/fiancé/lover and competes with her). The first theme, “sacrifice”, has the strongest association with the image of “victim” and signals the fatalistically inevitable plight for women. They must “sacrifice” (1) herself for her children; (2) her children for their own welfare; (3) marriage for her lover; (4) her lover for marriage or for his own welfare; (5) her career for love; (6) love for her career. The “sacrifice”

¹³³ Ibid., p. 62.

¹³⁴ Along with Marjorie Rosen, Molly Haskell initiated image studies in feminist film criticism at the early 1970s. In Haskell’s most influential book, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974), she pioneered the chronicle of women’s changing images on screen, trying to find out how female characters were portrayed, especially stereotyped in Hollywood films, and to understand whether they served as positive or negative models for female viewers.

film may end happily or tragically. “In either case, the purgative sensations – the joy of suffering, the pain of joy – are very close. But not identical.”¹³⁵ Haskell’s analysis of the psychological connection between the audience and the “ordinary” heroines, is also valid here for the heroines who sacrifice. The purpose of creation of these fictional characters as audience surrogates, “is not to encourage ‘women’ to rebel or question her role, but to reconcile her to it, and thus preserve the status quo.”¹³⁶ Since the “heroic female sacrifice” was an important topic in the 1920s’ Chinese films, Haskell’s analysis seems to be highly relevant for the sake of the research on the characteristics of the female stardom of that period.

One distinction between the Western and Chinese context must be pointed out. As Rey Chow has demonstrated, the celebration of women’s “sacrifice” in Chinese societies was developed as part of the mechanisms of women’s subordination, rather than personal pursuits, which are legitimized and motivated by Western values based upon the recognition of individual ontological freedom. Public celebration of women’s virtues and virtuous women was also essential in that “mechanisms”. The mundane, domestic realm provided sufficient inspiration for the celebration. “Indeed, it was from the familial home that the vast numbers of *lie nü* [virtuous women] were drawn: virgin daughters, faithful wives, loving mothers, filial daughters-in-law, all of whom had nothing personal to define them other than their chastity and their willingness to destroy their own lives when their families’ honor was threatened.”¹³⁷ Meanwhile, the tightly structured extended-family system constituted a social monitoring mechanism, ideologically justified by ubiquitous Confucian moralism. One constantly runs up against other human beings watching and listening to him or her. Under this monitoring system involving every aspect of Chinese cultural life, it is much more difficult to establish the “individual” ontological freedom as a means of resistance against systemized ideology, even when it turns unbearably oppressive. “As

¹³⁵ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, p. 163, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹³⁷ Chow, *Woman*, p. 59.

a ‘well-bred’ woman turns inside to ‘herself’, she runs straight into the two-thousand-year-old definitions, expectations, and clichés of what she always already ‘is’.”¹³⁸

Through the above examination, we have seen an oppressive nature of “Butterfly” literature lying at the root of the traditional Chinese ideological system, namely Confucianism. Now we may approach the logic behind the family-plus-romance model of either literary or dramatic genres. Family was the very site of this airtight oppressiveness that deprived a woman of her personal desires and even her physical existence, in a way that she seemed to have willingly given them up herself. Through sorrowful tales of allegedly “liberated love”, “Butterfly” writers demonstrated an explicit, didactic wish to bring their readers into the public celebration of women’s courageous “deeds of virtue” and resolute sacrifices. “Butterfly” literature had a widest readership, which automatically turned to the widest spectatorship when the romance novels were adapted for the screen (meanwhile, “Butterfly” writers’ explicit, didactic wish was transferred to filmmakers). Female stars had vividly portrayed the self-sacrificial heroines. They were applauded for being best *zhengdan* actresses – relatively more respectable than *huadan* (seductive women) and *wudan* (martial heroines), definitely more attractive than *laodan* (elderly females) – and admired as idols who embodied both beauty and morality. As Rey Chow has written, “it is in what we would otherwise associate as the most enlightened forms of human culture – written texts, literacy, and education – that that subordination was accomplished.”¹³⁹ Now we may add cinema to this list of enlightened forms of human culture that function as the mechanisms of women’s subordination.

“Butterfly” literature provided the prototype of sentimental romances, which had always been a source for filmmaking in the twenties and thirties. Distinct from calm, peaceful, often docile, and even fragile women from “Butterfly”-influenced films, another stereotype, *wudan*, skilled in fighting, riding and accustomed to vigorous

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

action, began to dominate the screen at the late twenties when the genre of martial arts film rose. The martial arts suddenly became a craze and swept the film industry for several years. The most striking example was the *Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (火燒紅蓮寺 1928-31), which was so popular that it was developed to an eighteen-part serial. “During 1928-31, over 250 swordplay films were produced, many of them bearing in their titles ‘burning’ (*huoshao* [火燒]) as a magic word.”¹⁴⁰ These films produced a whole host of swordswomen (the most popular actresses in martial arts films are listed on p. 54). The early Hollywood did not have the martial arts though, presented an array of dauntless female stars in action serials which typified Hollywood star system at its outset. I will borrow Jennifer M. Bean’s finding on these women and their “stunts” to understand the “extraordinary body” in the early stardom.

Jennifer M. Bean argues that the promotion of realism, a primitive feature of the filmic apparatus, channelled the attention of audience into spectacle with name and face; in other words, the machinery of film production was humanized by people who played out the fantasies and real-life dramas. Scenarios in Chinese martial arts films were more closer to fantasy than realism, to be sure, but the martial arts were designed and performed as if all were real. It was the selling point, and often exposed actors to danger, sometimes very serious danger.¹⁴¹ In action-packed films prevalent in early Hollywood, the female power presented by abundant dauntless actresses who were exemplified by Pearl White (1889-1938), the “Girl with Ninety-Nine Lives”, was coupled to the victimization of women through “an extremely graphic spectacle of female distress, helplessness, and abject terror.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 237, entry “martial arts film”.

¹⁴¹ For example, Fan Xuepeng, the leading female star of martial arts film, recalls in one account that she had seriously injured herself when shooting a scene in which she was expected to jump from a house’s roof. Fan Xuepeng, “Remembering My Life on the Silver Screen (我的銀幕生活的回憶),” *Film Art* (電影藝術) (1956) Issue S2, pp. 64-67. Injuries sustained as a consequence of dangerous stunts, are often experienced by the Hollywood actors too. See a related research: Jacob Smith, “Seeing Double: Stunt Performance and Masculinity,” *Journal of Film and Video* (Fall 2004) Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 35-53. Generally, cinematic labour is high-danger labour – and it is relatively low-paying for everybody excluding few star players.

¹⁴² Words of Ben Singer, cited in Jennifer M. Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” in Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, ed., *A Feminist reader in early*

Bean explains how studios made every endeavour to highlight the thrilling realism in early action serials. They were also common practices adopted by early Chinese studios. For instance, the heroine often shared the name of the actress who acted her in order to maximize the proximity between them.¹⁴³ Through star portraits and film frames in which a certain moment was isolated, photography offered readers an opportunity to “scrutinize and appraise daring feats at their leisure”, and “thus compensat[ed] for film’s accelerated pace”.¹⁴⁴ With support of behind-the-scenes interviews and personal testimony from the cast and crew, the truth of the star’s physical feat became even more convincing, and thus breathtaking. The strategy of enhancing the credibility of “stunts” as much as possible is ironically telling: the more dangerous the action is, the more “real” it looks.¹⁴⁵ The stunts bring a sense of impending disaster, an imagination of the potential collapse of technology and the resulting confrontation with death. “In the context of stardom, injury plays death’s substitute.”¹⁴⁶ This is what Bean names “catastrophe”. She borrows the concept “catastrophe machine” from E. D. Zeeman, who considers it as an apparatus that is constructed but guaranteed to *not* work, to “predictably produce unpredictable irregularities.”¹⁴⁷

Interestingly, contrary to the unprecedented adventure queens on screen, stars who project the image of a “girl/woman next door” can also be perfectly marketable. They are not too erotic or fantastically powerful, much more accessible for the female audience. They also build an image of “national motherhood”, showing an example of what a good, optimistic, life-loving and moderately altruistic wife/mother should be. The English-born and later Italian-based actress, singer and comedienne, Gracie Fields (1898-1979), was a good illustration of this category: an ordinary but very humanely attractive body with many good qualities identifiable for the audience. With

cinema, p. 413, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 424, and note 63 on p. 441.

an ordinary appearance, even not pronouncedly feminine, she was presented as an ordinary female figure on screen. Neither were her gestures and movements conventionally feminine. All her ordinariness, her rejection of an exotic image of stardom, as well as her identification with her working-class origin and street life, tied her to the ordinary people. Her de-sexualised, even masculinised character as entertainer, and her focusing on her relations to women, downplaying her relations to men, made her appealing to a wide audience. On the other hand, her glorious voice, vibrant personality, talent and endeavours in musicals transformed her ordinariness into extraordinary performances, in which her star persona served to “blur lines between life and entertainment” and “instil belief in the ‘extraordinary’ dimensions of ordinary life.”¹⁴⁸ Such “extraordinary ordinariness” was, however, hard to find in early Chinese cinema. In my following investigation of leftist films, I will demonstrate that Chinese filmmakers showed a similar attempt to de-sexualize actresses and highlight the depiction of them as the representatives of the working class. Nevertheless, entertainment, an essential element that may “elevate” the “ordinariness” to something extraordinary, was disregarded. Entertainment in any sense (either highbrow art or lowbrow slapstick) had barely taken any central position in Chinese leftist films (if it did, it needed to be re-oriented to serve the revolutionary course. More details are given in the part II.4).

II.3 “Good girls” and “true character”: a new standard of acting and a question of the suitable image on screen

A new generation of filmmakers, mostly from the newly formed Lianhua (聯華) Film Company, were rising at the beginning of the thirties. Lianhua resisted commercial films flooding in the twenties as representing nothing but “entertainment” (as it was alleged) or “degeneration” (as it was criticized). Instead, it tried to embed social conscience, the society’s contemporary concerns and controversies in its

¹⁴⁸ Marcia Landy, “The Extraordinary Ordinariness of Gracie Fields: The Anatomy of a British Film Star”, in Bruce Babington ed., *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, p. 66, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001

productions.¹⁴⁹ The studio launched a campaign to “revive national cinema” (復興國片), and thereby, contributed to the national cultural construction. This nationalistic rhetoric legitimized its filmmaking policy and won the public opinion. Mostly from intellectual background, Lianhua’s filmmakers were fresh, enthusiastic professionals aspiring to advance cinematic techniques, e.g. narrative structure, montage and rhythm; while those veteran but old-fashioned filmmakers (some with *wenmingxi* experience) paid much more attention to ostentatious “tricks” like melodrama, sensationalism, than film language itself.¹⁵⁰ Lianhua created a new trend in filmmaking and was recognized as “new school”, rather than “old school” represented by its two major rivals, Mingxing and Tianyi. Its productions broke the dominance of “Butterfly”-influenced narration and its audience was mainly formed by intellectuals and young students.¹⁵¹ In close cooperation with leftists since 1933, Lianhua produced a number of classics with not only progressive subjects but also refined styles.

While these films reshaped the landscape of the industry, a new generation of actresses were rising too. They were expected to act “themselves” and discouraged

¹⁴⁹ Lianhua Film Company was founded in 1929 by Luo Mingyou (羅明佑), a businessman who operated more than twenty movie theatres and controlled the entire distribution network in Northern China. Lianhua’s film policy was attributed to not only Luo himself’s persistent emphasis on film quality, but also his personal ties to the Nationalist government, which had started to impose censorship on films primarily targeting martial arts, legends and myths. Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” pp. 8,11.

¹⁵⁰ In the mid-twenties, Changcheng (長城) and Shenzhou (神州), two studios founded and operated by young intellectuals who had received professional training in filmmaking during study abroad, also aimed at improving film language, film aesthetics, and reflecting social problems. However, when films on ghosts and martial arts wiped out any artistic pursuit in the late twenties, the two studios had to give up their course and join the tide due to commercial pressure. Cheng, *History*, pp. 90-105.

¹⁵¹ Cheng, *History*, p. 155. The American-educated filmmaking professional Sun Yu joined Lianhua and directed the studio’s first production, *Memories of the Old Capital* (故都春夢 1930), which, along with his next film, *Wild Flower* (野草閑花 1930), are generally viewed as exhibiting an uncompromising attitude to social problems. A new-style cinematography that Sun Yu had brought, which might look immature though, helped the two films stand out among the numerous martial arts and historical costume films structured in a traditional narrative that was unready to change.

from acting with “posturing” or “artifice”.¹⁵² They were also rewarded for acting “good”, which was again a gendered criterion. To be typecast as evil characters was “dangerous” for actresses’ career prospects, but not necessarily for male actors.¹⁵³ Under the new standard of “good girls” and “true character” (本色) acting, a world of “sexpot starlets” of the twenties was now transformed into a world of “genuinely talented artists”.¹⁵⁴ Wang Renmei (王人美 1914-87) and Li Lili (黎莉莉 1915-2005) were the two most popular stars among the fresh, artistic, and progressive idols of the thirties. Their success owed a good deal to Sun Yu (孫瑜 1900-90),¹⁵⁵ a screenwriter and director who specifically designed the heroines for the two girls in his films. When chosen by Sun Yu, Wang was seventeen and Li only sixteen years old. Their modern, fresh beauty and the vigorousness situated between adolescent girls and charming, mature women, contrasted with and overshadowed those who seemed to be artificial, insincere, and represented the “fragile beauty” on screen. They captured a vast number of young urbanities and students.¹⁵⁶

Due to lack of parental care, Wang and Li grew up together in Li Jinhui (黎錦暉)’s Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe (明月歌舞團), in which they had received musical training, toured to Southeast Asia, and developed independent, unconstrained, vibrant, and amiable personalities.¹⁵⁷ Having revolutionaries among closest family

¹⁵² Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” p. 136, pp. 152-155.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149. As I understand it, this new standard observed by Michael G. Chang worked as an “upgraded strategy” of stereotyping – actresses were now stereotyped towards their own character traits, rather than a specific, fixed type of role. Meanwhile, they needed to present “the good”.

¹⁵⁵ Sun Yu studied drama at the University of Wisconsin, and later “studied film writing and directing at Columbia University as well as cinematography, film developing and editing at New York University.” He returned to China in 1927 and soon started a filmmaking career. In 1930, he was recruited by Lianhua where he scripted, directed numerous films considered classics by today’s critics. Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 324-325, entry “Sun Yu”.

¹⁵⁶ See Li Lili’s biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, p. 7. It is also stated in the journalistic materials of the Republican period that these two stars themselves looked like students rather than stars in their spare time. For instance, they did not wear make-up or high heels while not working. Such images might also be a reason why they were more likely to attract students. See Wang Renmei’s biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1 and Li Lili’s biography in *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2.

¹⁵⁷ See biographies of Wang Renmei and Li Lili in *28 Big Stars* in Vols. 1 and 2. Details about their activities in the Song and Dance Troup are recorded in Wang Renmei, *My Rise to Fame and*

members, they both became sympathetic to revolutionaries in general. These personal traits perfectly conformed to the roles they acted on screen and thus made their performances more convincing, realistic and natural. This conformity peaked in two of Sun Yu's films, *Wild Rose* (野玫瑰 1932) and *Queen of Sports* (體育皇后 1934), featuring Wang and Li respectively. The heroine in *Wild Rose* was a pure, innocent girl growing in natural surroundings with a kind heart and patriotism. Sun Yu wrote many scenes close to Wang's real-life experiences for her to simply "be herself" in front of the camera. Later in memoirs, Wang acknowledged that she knew nothing about acting at that time. All she had was an understanding of the heroine's emotion made possible by character resemblance, and the confidence of being herself without imitating "those stars". To her surprise, the film was a great success. Known for directness, naturalness, and vivaciousness, Wang was nicknamed "wild cat" (野貓), with the same "wild" (野) as that of the film title "Wild Rose", which character also indicates "unadorned" and "unrestrained".¹⁵⁸ The film title "Queen of Sports" was sometimes credited to Li Lili herself, since she had an exceptional talent for sports.¹⁵⁹ Sun Yu's contribution in scripting, casting and directing was also critical to the success of these productions. Credited as a "poet-director" (詩人導演), Sun had developed a distinctive cinematic style characterized by poetic sensitivity and idealism. This style seamlessly fused the actresses' real-life character traits with their on-screen personae. Those two factors eventually made their public images impressive and recognizable to audience.

Unhappiness: the Reminiscences of Wang Renmei (我的成名與不幸——王人美回憶錄), Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1985.

¹⁵⁸ Wang Renmei, *My Rise to Fame and Unhappiness: the Reminiscences of Wang Renmei*, p. 108. More details about the shooting of *Wild Rose* are offered in this book, and Sun Yu, *Sailing Across the sea of the Silver Screen: My Life in Recollection* (銀海泛舟——回憶我的一生), Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1987. And surely, watching the film is the best way to get first-hand impressions and more understanding. *Wild Rose*, *Queen of Sports*, and a good few other films shot later featuring Wang Renmei or Li Lili have survived and been recently re-released on DVD.

¹⁵⁹ Besides her remarkable skills in swimming, basketball, tennis, horse riding, Li Lili had even displayed her diving skills in an opening ceremony of a swimming pool, and had once been placed second in a short running race while being a student in a girls' high school. See Li Lili's biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, p. 5.



Fig. 9 (left): Wang Renmei in *Wild Rose* (1932).



Fig. 10 (right): Li Lili in *Queen of Sports* (1934).

The realistic approach based on the consistency between the actor's character, background and that of his/her role was not adopted exclusively by Sun Yu. It seemed to be favoured by many leftist filmmakers and their fellow-travellers, which is quite understandable considering that one of their campaign slogans was "reveal the harsh reality!" The classic film *Street Angel* (馬路天使 1937), starring Zhou Xuan (周璇 1918-57), was another good example. Like Wang Renmei and Li Lili, Zhou had also spent years in Li Jinhui's troupe, and did become a singer.¹⁶⁰ Yuan Muzhi (袁牧之 1909-78) scripted and directed the *Street Angel*, a story of "solidarity, friendship, and love amongst the dregs of urban society".¹⁶¹ Seeing the advantage of the resemblance between Zhou and the heroine, Yuan cast her in the female lead, a poor, good-hearted sing-song girl (the "street angel"), and Zhao Dan (趙丹 1915-80) in the male lead.¹⁶² Through the film, we would even not realize that Zhou Xuan was acting – the heroine

¹⁶⁰ She won a major singing competition in 1934 and was affectionately dubbed the "Golden Voice" (金嗓子) since. Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 395, entry "Zhou Xuan".

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 322, entry "*Street Angel*".

¹⁶² Zhou Xuan played dozens of minor roles (sometimes her name even did not appear in the credit roll) until one day she was "discovered" by Yuan Muzhi. Zhao Dan was one of the most talented actors of all time, active in cinema and in *huaju* as well.

and the actress were so much alike.¹⁶³ Zhou herself was abandoned by her natal parents after she was born and later was on the verge of being sold by her adoptive parents into brothels (they eventually abandoned their plans).¹⁶⁴ Acting “herself” in *Street Angel*, she amazingly interpreted the sing-song girl’s sorrow, despair, and struggle for not falling into “degeneration”, namely prostitution or concubinage, a common outcome of being sing-song girls.



Fig. 11: Zhou Xuan (right) and Zhao Dan in *Street Angel* (1937).

Michael G. Chang has noted that the “authenticity” accentuated in the prevalent female stardom was “grounded in the socially constructed ideal of women as ‘good girls’ who were ‘natural’ (*ziran* [自然]), ‘innocent’ (*tianzhen* [天真]), and ‘genuine’ (*zhen* [真]).”¹⁶⁵ Directors, screenwriters, critics, and audiences as well as actresses themselves thus reached a consensus on the proper image of women on screen, which should be safe to circulate, profitable to market, and welcomed by mainstream values of the society. The answer was clear, that is, presenting women as knowable, harmless and nonthreatening subjects.¹⁶⁶ These seemingly “extrinsic” regulations on women’s public image were often eventually internalized into being a part of actresses’ own artistic pursuit. It was quite often read as an indication of one’s ethical orientation, given the general societal climate and tradition of associating one’s art with his/her

¹⁶³ The extant film has been re-released on DVD.

¹⁶⁴ Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 395, entry “Zhou Xuan”.

¹⁶⁵ Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” p. 153.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

morality.¹⁶⁷ Let us see a quote from an article written by Li Lili. Although she was discussing singing skills, it is no doubt that she referred to what she emphasized, the principles of the genuineness, in a general sense regardless of art form.

If “talking” is the voice of people’s heart, then we may also say that singing is the “talking” of people’s heart. No matter whether talking or singing, I think, it is only the “genuineness” [真] that is the greatest and the most meaningful. ... A ten-year-old little kid can sing songs of coquette on stage; lively, delightful “little spirits” can sing a widow’s weeping tone – all these are not genuine, which I believe absolutely do not have much meaning. ... Among the three essentials in art, the so-called “genuineness” [真], “goodness” [善], and “beauty”[美], I believe it is the genuineness that is worth the most attention.¹⁶⁸

Besides the praise for Li Lili’s authentic on-screen portrayals, also her off-screen genuineness won her plaudits from journalists. According to the contemporary observations, Li Lili did not “treat friends perfunctorily”; even being depressed, she did not “wear a constrained smile to anyone” to “cheat her friends”. Her genuineness was often associated with “childlike” qualities, mainly the innocence which, the adult world believes, is most cherished but easiest to lose. She was described as retaining a “pure spirit” and a “childlike heart” (童心).¹⁶⁹

The harmless and nonthreatening image was also a notable feature in the screen personae of Chen Yanyan (陳燕燕 1916-99), another leading actress of the 1930s and 1940s. The contemporary commentaries were full of praise for her excellence, in appearance and behaviours too, for instance, her healthy figure, tranquil beauty, and diligence in work. In one word, she was seen as a good model for “oriental

¹⁶⁷ The common and traditional perception that an artist’s work reflects his/her morality, is well illustrated by traditional sayings like “the writing mirrors the writer”(文如其人). The words left unsaid here may be (the writer’s) “personality”, “temperament”, “belief”, and what is usually central, “moral values”. Such sayings can also be “the painting mirrors the painter” (畫如其人), or sometimes reversed as “the writer mirrors the writing”, and “the painter mirrors the painting.”

¹⁶⁸ In a recently published book which contains biographies of 28 film stars of Republican cinema, authors have sited a good few quotes from contemporary records, mostly from film magazines published in the Republican era. For example, this quote is cited from an article that Li Lili wrote herself for a film magazine, *Sound of Art* (藝聲) published in Aug. 1935. See Li Lili’s biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

women”.¹⁷⁰ Chen was nicknamed “beautiful little bird” (美麗的小鳥), or an abbreviated form “little bird” (小鳥), which is a part of the compound 小鳥依人. The word 小鳥依人 can be rendered as “charmingly trusting little bird” which, not derogatory though, often suggests women’s dependence upon and subordination to men. We may grasp a deeper implication of Chen’s nickname – she was lovely, innocent like a little bird, and at the same time tame and dependent, also like a little bird. Here we can see an intimate association between this nickname and all the praise for Chen as being a pure, harmless, good girl. This association reveals a (perhaps unconscious) tendency or even aspiration of the patriarchal society to put public women under constant surveillance and full control, while enjoying and acclaiming their beauty and charm.



Fig. 12: Chen Yanyan (right) and Gao Zhanfei (高占非 1904-69) in *Southern Spring* (南國之春 1932).

The most famous actress Hu Die (Butterfly Wu 胡蝶 1907-89), elected “Empress of Cinema” in 1933, and the most talented Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉 1910-35) fitted into the “good girl” category as well.¹⁷¹ Hu Die was frequently cited for her serene look,

¹⁷⁰ In Chen Yanyan’s biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, the author cites a variety of commentaries from contemporary records, e.g. interviews with Chen and reviews of her films. I have picked the above descriptions among these pieces. One commentary from 1943 concluded that “[She is] a holy and pure girl, she has a modest and docile beauty, she has innocent mind and expression, and she has a vivacious bearing.” See Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, pp. 16-27.

¹⁷¹ From two competing studios, Mingxing and Lianhua, Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu were usually considered rivals. In fact, a difference in their target audience can be described as “whereas Ruan appealed most to well-educated audiences, Hu’s followers came from a much wider social

diligence in work, self-confidence, and natural manners.¹⁷² These qualities let filmmakers and critics see an air of refinement in her and believed that she was suitable to portray well-bred ladies, roles that she was actually often assigned to.



Fig. 13: Hu Die (left) and Zheng Xiaoqiu (鄭小秋 1910-89 son of Zheng Zhengqiu) in *Shadow of Red Tear* (紅淚影 1931). Hu portrayed a well-bred young lady.

Ruan Lingyu was especially admired for her extraordinary talent for acting.¹⁷³ She was also described as modest, amiable, most of the time plain-clothed, unadorned and artless, and hard-working. Rather than publicity-oriented, she was respected for trying to be low-profile (those ambitious and aggressive in building up fame were

stratum.” Zhang, Encyclopedia, p. 191, entry “Hu Die”. The early thirties saw the first indigenous experiments with sound films. With the ability to speak standard Mandarin (Hu Die lived in the Beijing-Tianjin area for years in her childhood) as well as her fame and popularity gained from starring in the extremely popular martial arts serials, *Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (1928-31), Hu Die was chosen to star in *Sing-song Girl Red Peony* (歌女紅牡丹 1931), the first Chinese-made “talkie”. She successfully transformed herself into the world of talkies whereas Ruan Lingyu did not. Like many other actresses with immigrant background (quite a few came from Guangdong province and so did Ruan), Ruan was disadvantaged in adapting herself to sound films, her dialect being the main obstacle. Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” pp. 145.

¹⁷² These descriptions from the contemporary commentaries are cited in Hu Die’s biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1, pp. 44-70.

¹⁷³ Ruan’s talent for acting seemed to be “limited” in some way. Once cast in a supporting role, an evildoer, she neither liked playing nor understood the character, and was therefore not able to act what the director wanted. Hu Die, playing the lead in that film, sympathized with her. Hu thought it was indeed very hard for Ruan since Ruan was kind-hearted by nature. This detail again shows us that the dominant standard of “true character” acting and “good girls” was internalized into being the actress’s self-discipline. See Hu Die’s account cited in Ruan’s biography in *ibid.*, p. 89.

regarded as not respectable).¹⁷⁴ Perhaps because she came from a poor family that received little respect (her mother worked as a domestic), Ruan treasured in particular her good reputation that she had build up in her career. However, the exposure of her romantic scandal in tabloids in 1935 literally tore her reputation to shreds and directly caused her suicide.¹⁷⁵ Her “fear of being stigmatized as an immoral woman” has been generally accepted as her reason for committing suicide. Reading the “fear” against the backdrop of “true character” acting, Michael G. Chang points out that the prevailing and the only socially legitimized standard blurred the distinction between an actress’s acting talent on screen and moral character off screen, thus “created” a startling contrast between Ruan’s previous good reputation and her current evil images. What drove Ruan to utter despair was, Chang suggests, the fear that she could not “expect to carry on in her personal and professional affairs as she had previously,” since her “livelihood as an actress and her public image as a harmless and wounded bird were inextricably linked”, and now both were ruined.¹⁷⁶

Through the deliberate erasure of the gap between the star’s fictitious screen personae and off-screen “real” personae, and more crucially, through the accentuation of the “good girl” standard that fused all personae together, a set of new judgment criteria was formed. It distinguished a new, fresh generation of female stars of the thirties from their predecessors in the twenties. Accordingly, the discourse on actresses was shifted from a negative one, perceiving them as courtesan-like, morally

¹⁷⁴ These descriptions from the contemporary commentaries are cited in Ruan Lingyu’s biography in *ibid.*, pp. 84-107.

¹⁷⁵ Love affairs and lawsuits were interwoven in Ruan’s relations with two men, her ex-husband and her lover with whom she cohabited when the “scandalous” news broke. A famous film star had departed too far from the Confucian norm of chastity – the scandal grabbed the headlines. Right after her death, however, the public showed regret for the “great loss” of Chinese cinema, and sympathy for a woman sacrificed by newspapermen’s irresponsible sensationalism – around 300,000 people mourned at Ruan’s funeral (*ibid.*, p. 84). In later publications, she has been restored to an actress of genius who left us lamenting for her tragedy. In China’s traditional culture, suicide was seen as an especially courageous deed. Women who committed suicide for the virtue of chastity or the honour of their families were glorified. See Chow, *Woman*, pp. 58-59. Although Ruan died for “losing chastity”, her suicide seemed to have (in an ambiguous way) partly “expiated” her “sin”.

¹⁷⁶ Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” p. 156.

suspect, and delegitimizing their upward mobility,¹⁷⁷ to a fairly positive one, promoting their natural acting and artistic achievements, purity and sincerity, sometimes patriotism and progressiveness for their active participation in leftist films. It should also be mentioned that the whole picture of the film industry during the 1930s up to 1937¹⁷⁸ was not limited to these “good girls”. One of the largest studios, Tianyi, and dozens of small-scale studios continued producing films for mere entertainment such as popular legends about ghosts and immortals, martial arts films, and comedies, which catered to the tastes of the lower classes but were denounced by critics for sacrificing art and conscience for commercial interests. Some films involved erotic, voyeuristic depiction of women as a low-budget marketing strategy, putting actresses in lascivious or simply nude scenes (I will discuss the “nudity” in the part III.4). Nonetheless, the “good girls” exemplified by Wang Renmei, Li Lili, Chen Yanyan, Hu Die, Ruan Lingyu, and a few others, as well as actors with fresh faces and “progressive aspirations” like the “King of the Screen” Jin Yan (金焰 1910-83)¹⁷⁹, formed the most influential group collectively recognized as genuine and positive. Not only favoured by critics, audiences, studios, the group was also approved by the intellectual elite outside the film circles.

As a gendered way of presenting/seeing females on screen, the construction and dissemination of women’s harmless, non-threatening images is universal. This

¹⁷⁷ In his discussions of actresses of the twenties, Michael G. Chang has found these features of their social image. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-142.

¹⁷⁸ The outbreak of war in 1937 ruined the prospering industry. None of the three major studios survived. Mingxing was literally razed to the ground during the Japanese bombing, Lianhua was soon dissolved, and Tianyi moved its base to Hong Kong. Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” p. 18.

¹⁷⁹ Voted “King of the Screen” in 1932, Jin Yan was in fact an ethnic Korean. He was born in Seoul with the original name Kim Tǒngnin. His father, Kim P’ilsun, was Korea’s first Western doctor. Jin Yan moved to China with family members in the wake of the Japanese occupation of Korea. Before entering the film industry, he was a *huaju* actor in Tian Han’s Southern China Society, where he played leading roles in high-profile plays like *Salomé* and *Carmen*. Under a strong influence of Tian Han, Jin starred in several leftist films. Not only “turning left” on screen, he also identified himself with opposition to the “capitalist class” and advocated “class struggle”. With a similar persona to Wang Renmei and Li Lili, fresh, energetic, and athletic, Jin Yan captured a mass audience as being an icon for modern masculine. He married Wang Renmei on Jan. 1, 1934. Having lasted for ten years, the marriage of the legendary couple ended in divorce. See biographies of Jin Yan and Wang Renmei in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1, pp. 122-135, pp. 180-195.

phenomenon is directly linked to women's subordinate, controllable, and passive status in the cinema context in general. The issue has been carefully studied in feminist film criticism in particular, based on Western film materials. Laura Mulvey's analysis clearly demonstrated a divisive situation of active/male and passive/female dichotomy. She argues that women are simultaneously looked at and displayed in their traditional exhibitionist role. They function on two levels for the male gaze to project male fantasies on to the female figure: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium."¹⁸⁰ In contrast to her apparently central position in many films, the meaning of the woman's existence is essentially subordinate.

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.¹⁸¹

The hero, who controls the fantasy on screen, simultaneously bears the look of the spectator, and becomes his screen surrogate, "so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."¹⁸²

Laura Mulvey's study brings us an awareness of woman's subordinate nature on screen as being nothing more than an "erotic object" of the male gaze and male fantasy, to the study of the Republican Chinese cinema (probably today's Chinese cinema too) where the female figures functioned similarly. Mark Hedley's research has further nuanced and enriched the understanding of women being portrayed as subordinate, weaker partners of men under the omnipresent patriarchal order. Applying affect control theory and statistic methodology, he studied studies mutual interactions in the cases of gendered conflict in the sampling of 50 popular American films from 1986 to 1990 (unresolved situations of conflicts are excluded). Here are the findings. Females from the samples are stereotypically associated with affective

¹⁸⁰ Quotes from Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", p. 11.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 11. Mulvey cites the words from Budd Boetticher.

¹⁸² Quotes from *ibid.*, p. 12.

disadvantages in conflict with males. These disadvantages are related to the outcomes of conflict, when the males emerge as dominant and female as subordinate. Popular culture offers an observable case of patriarchy, and meanwhile, as Hedley has suggested, it does potentially influence the development of gender identities, in this case, influence the film-watchers into commonly expecting women to be relatively powerless and passive. Thus, men are being motivated to impose these expectations onto the women who attempt to defy them in the course of various social interactions.¹⁸³ The findings of Mark Hedley's research are applicable to gendered conflicts and gender relations that we commonly see in the Republican Chinese cinema too.

II.4 Leftist films: an ideological triumph and its ambiguities about “new woman”

The thirties are now hailed as the “golden age” of Chinese cinema. The rise of leftist (or left-wing) films and filmmakers in the early 1930s restructured Shanghai's film industry. Although the political concern usually gained the upper hand, quite a few of the leftist productions were box-office hits and some are still counted as classics by today's scholars.¹⁸⁴ These successful films and the prosperous industry presented a full-fledged group of film stars. Apart from being the most popular and impressive stars in the history of Republican China, they also won a positive public perception. The images of female stars as innocent girls and genuine artists were largely constituted and disseminated by leftist films. In this subchapter, I am trying to find out the gender strategy hidden in leftist discourses that the “innocent girls and genuine artists” had (probably even unconsciously) served. First, I will briefly account for the successful penetration of the leftists into the film industry that had

¹⁸³ Mark Hedley, “The Presentation of Gendered Conflict in Popular Movies: Affective Stereotypes, Cultural Sentiments, and Men's Motivation,” *Sex Roles* (1994) Vol. 31, Nos.11/12: pp. 721-740.

¹⁸⁴ Here are two biggest box-office hits of the decade. *Twin Sisters* (姊妹花 1933), scripted, directed by Zheng Zhengqiu, starring Hu Die (she played both sisters), and produced by Mingxing, was shown in theatre for 60 days continuously and set a record. In the next year, *Song of the Fishermen* (漁光曲 1934), scripted, directed by Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生 1906-68), starring Wang Renmei, and produced by Lianhua, broke the record – it was shown for 84 days continuously. *Song* was the first Chinese film ever to win a major award at an international festival – it received an honorary prize at the 1935 Moscow Film Festival. Cheng, *History*, pp. 239, 334, 338.

barely shown any political interests before.

The triumph of the leftist cinema over other courses and ideologies should be understood in social, cultural, and political contexts. Since the late 1920s, studios had been producing martial arts films, ghosts and immortals legends-based films and historical costume dramas on a massive scale. The Japanese occupation of Manchuria in Sep. 1931 and the First Shanghai Incident (or Shanghai War, brief Japanese invasion from Jan. 28 to Mar. 3, 1932) generated a nationwide, patriotic fever, and in the meanwhile, the interest of the intellectuals in revolutionary social changes radically increased. The thoroughly commercialized filmmaking divorced from the national crisis became not only inappropriate but also immoral. All the commercial elements including “Butterfly” romances were already losing appeal after mass production.¹⁸⁵ The production capacity and the market for domestic films, which had both greatly shrunk, made the situation even worse.¹⁸⁶ Struggling to revitalize their business, studios looked for new blood with a keen sense of contemporary subjects from the leftists. They showed a willingness to be integrated into filmmaking, and expected that their campaign would work in the film industry as it worked in literature and drama (*huaju*). In the summer of 1932, Mingxing recruited three members of the Communist Party.¹⁸⁷ The cooperation did inject renewed vitality into the studio, and

¹⁸⁵ The oldest and biggest studio, Mingxing, was in serious financial trouble after the 1932 war. For solving the crisis, it released *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (啼笑姻緣 1932), a six-episode serial adapted from a popular sentimental novel by Zhang Henshui (張恨水 1895-1967), whose writings were habitually classified by critics as “Butterfly” fiction despite his reluctance. The serial starred Hu Die, cost a huge amount of money, but failed to generate the expected profits. Cheng, *History*, pp. 200-201.

¹⁸⁶ The bombing of the city during the 1932 war destroyed facilities of many studios and movie theatres in its northern district. At least 30 studios shut down after the war due to either bombing destruction or other war-related factors. There were 39 movie theatres before the war, 16 of which were located in war zone and all destroyed. Those theatres that survived were mostly run by foreigners showing foreign films. The Chinese film industry even lost a large portion of its market on a national scale due to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

¹⁸⁷ The three CCP members were Xia Yan (夏衍 1900-95), Zheng Boqi (鄭伯奇 1895-1979) and A Ying (阿英 1900-77). In order to avoid suspicion of both the Nationalists and foreign censors, they were officially on the studio’s script consulting committee, under pseudonyms. Xia Yan (original name was Shen Naixi 沈乃熙), one of the founders of the Chinese League of Left-wing Writers (中國左翼作家聯盟 the leading organization of the entire left-wing cultural movement in the 1930s),

on the other hand, let the leftist ideas spread at a furious pace. On March 5, 1933, the first leftist film, scripted by Xia Yan, was released by Mingxing. Within the same year, Mingxing produced twenty-two films either scripted by the leftists or influenced by the leftist line.¹⁸⁸ Under direct leadership of the underground Communist Party, Tian Han (a leading dramatist, now a devoted leftist filmmaker working for the Party), along with other Communists, turned a small studio Yihua (藝華) into a main base for leftist productions. Tian Han also scripted a number of films for Lianhua. Even another major studio, Tianyi, as well as other small studios, which had relied on productions such as historical costume films, popular legends and myths to draw audiences and were scorned by progressive-minded critics, started to “turn left” under the prevailing leftist climate.¹⁸⁹ To avoid simplifying the picture of the film industry of the thirties, it should also be noted that when the leftist cinema was at the apex, there were still business-savvy producers making films unrelated to the left-wing paradigm, returning to sentimental melodrama and other genres.¹⁹⁰

The leftist campaign, initiated in early 1930, was wide-ranging and intense. In the cultural realm, it aimed at exposing, attacking both the domestic oppression (social injustice resulting in class struggle, corruption and cruelty of the capitalists and the

was “[b]y any standard the most influential figure in Chinese filmmaking for over a half century.” Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 374-375, entry “Xia Yan”, and Cheng, *History*, p. 185.

¹⁸⁸ Cheng, *History*, p. 203.

¹⁸⁹ There was no strict correspondence between leftist films and leftist filmmakers. Instead, leftist films were made by producers from diverse cultural and political backgrounds. The most devoted, also the nucleus of the leftist campaign, were committed underground Communists: Xia Yan, Tian Han, Zheng Boqi, A Ying, and Yang Hansheng (陽翰笙 1902-93). They primarily aimed at discrediting the regime of the Nationalist government by depicting the society’s dark side. Some were accomplished, professional filmmakers who sympathized with left-wing causes, believed in mass enlightenment and national salvation through filmmaking, e.g. Sun Yu and his young fellows from Lianhua. They contributed significantly to the success of leftist films by improving the cinematic language and aesthetics. There were also some veteran filmmakers, e.g. Zheng Zhengqiu (from Mingxing) and Bu Wancang (卜萬蒼 1903-74 from Lianhua), whose critiques of social injustice were rooted in a humanistic concern. Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” p. 14.

¹⁹⁰ For example, Tianyi never ceased churning out costume drama and “Butterfly” romances while it was also producing several patriotic films. Even directors of leftist productions in Mingxing and Lianhua often made conventional-genre pictures during the leftist champagne between 1932 and 1935. Zhang, *Amorous*, p. 251.

regime too) and the foreign imperialist aggression and exploitation. It pertained to, and was, to a large extent, manipulated for the leftists' political propaganda and for the furtherance of revolutionary objectives. The leftist wave was also seen in the contemporaneous Japanese art circles,¹⁹¹ which was again a source of inspiration for Chinese intellectuals.¹⁹² To continue the political battle for socialism, Japanese leftist intellectuals formed a number of *shingeki* (new drama) companies and produced leftist propaganda plays, which characterized the *shingeki* theatre between 1928 and 1932. *Shingeki* plays were criticized for being “dull, repetitious, and devoid of artistic inspiration,” and for the replacement of “theatrical values” by “propaganda slogans”.¹⁹³ The Chinese leftist films faced exactly the same accusations from opponents when the left-wing trend split the Chinese film circle into two camps that were polarized on film's aesthetics and social functions. The fight can be summarized as the vexed question “whether art should be autonomous or dependent upon politics.” The opposite camp argued that the artistic merit was of paramount importance in filmmaking, and urged studios to restore the entertaining nature of cinema. They believed that didacticism and ideological propaganda made film “hard”. Instead, they advocated “soft” films with light, sensuous qualities but no ideological interference.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ The leftist wave in Japan largely died out after 1934-35, due to a very cruel campaign of police repression and militarist indoctrination. Many former leftists recanted and shifted their position, becoming instead propagandists of militarism.

¹⁹² Lu Xun (魯迅 1881-1936), a major May Fourth writer, translated an article from *Film and Capitalism* (映画と資本主義), a book of the prominent left-wing Japanese film critic, Akira Iwasaki (岩崎 昶 1903-81). With more focus on class consciousness, Lu Xun changed the original title, “Film as a Device of Propaganda and Agitation”, to “Modern Cinema and the Bourgeoisie” (現代電影與有產階級). He borrowed Iwasaki's investigation and arguments to criticize Chinese domestic films that paralleled Hollywood films in an intentional erasure of class divisions for “seizing” money from a larger audience. First published on Mar. 1, 1930 in *Sprouts Monthly* (萌芽月刊), a magazine of the League of the Left-Wing Writers, the translation is now collected in *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* (魯迅全集) Vol. 4, pp. 399-423, Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005.

¹⁹³ Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, p. 250.

¹⁹⁴ Huang Jiamo (黃嘉謨), who represented the right-wing Nationalist response to the leftists, gave the most famous definition of the “soft” film: “ice-cream for the eyes and a sofa for the heart.” Huang Jiamo, “Hard Film versus Soft Film” (硬性影片與軟性影片), *Modern Screen* (現代電影) (Dec.

Given the fact that the leftists entered the industry with no prior knowledge of filmmaking, their earliest productions might conceivably lack artistic refinement, as it was usually criticized. A new generation of filmmakers rising at the same time (see p. 64) in sympathy with the leftist campaign, helped greatly to elevate the artistic qualities of leftist films.¹⁹⁵ A large part of the leftist classics of the thirties focused attention on images of modern or new women in urban landscapes. The women portrayed on screen were from various social categories: prostitutes, factory workers, teachers, young artists, revolutionaries, etc. They are classified in scholarly discourse as “conventional, fantasy, career, and progressive,”¹⁹⁶ or in the leftist terminology as the proletariat, the petit bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie. Yingjin Zhang has investigated these female characters using a gender-specific approach. The research has revealed the hidden strategy behind the depiction of “new women” and the dissemination of progressiveness and modernity they embodied.

Wild Flower (野草闲花 1930), a silent film written and directed by Sun Yu, starring two leading actors, Ruan Lingyu and Jin Yan, tells a love story between Lilian, a “wild flower” (a derogatory term for girls from lower social origin), and Huang Yun,

1933, Shanghai) Vol. 1, No. 6: p. 3. Known as the soft/hard film debate, it involved more intellectuals from both sides as it lasted for three years, revealing “the fierceness and intensity of the fight to control film production” although “not everyone took such a partisan position.” Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Cinema,” p. 16. The actual repression of the leftist cinema by the Nationalist government was far more violent and cruel. Besides tightening film censorship (many leftist films were severely cut or sometimes subtitles of silent films were falsified), the leftist film movement was hit hard by the “Yihua incident”. After releasing several leftist box-office successes criticizing the Nationalist Party, Yihua Film Company was trashed by a group of extremists, whom CCP believed was sent by the “fascist government”. The incident happened on 12 November 1933, twenty days before Huang Jaimo’s “Hard Film versus Soft Film” was published. See Cheng, *History*, pp. 291-299.

¹⁹⁵ The leftists were literary writers, ignorant about filmmaking. They even lacked related textbooks. In addition to watching as many films as possible to familiarize themselves with the basics of filmmaking, they began to befriend young filmmakers in Mingxing and Lianhua. The leftists learned filmmaking techniques from these professionals and meanwhile introduced them into left-wing thoughts. The efforts were fruitful. Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: the Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, p. 42, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

¹⁹⁶ Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature & Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* (hereafter referred to as Zhang, *The City*), p. 204, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996.

a young rebel against his patriarchal family. From a gender-specific perspective, Yingjin Zhang has elaborated on the male filmic discourse's containment of the potential subversiveness of "new woman". The subversive side of Lilian is revealed, or rather exaggerated in a scene of dance hall, a place commonly perceived as a site of corruption where people encounter loose women and oversexed men.¹⁹⁷ When Huang finds Lilian in the dance hall, she appears as a professional, seductive dancing girl, drinking, smoking, and flirting with other men. She even set aside his reproach that she has forgotten their wedding on the next day (forced by Huang's father, she is now determined to break the engagement). From Huang's bewildered reaction, Yingjin Zhang reads "a deeply rooted male phobia" of the subversive power of the career woman who is away from home and financially independent (Huang helped the talented girl to sing in an opera and she became a star overnight).¹⁹⁸ Zhang associates the "male phobia" with a general, symbolic threat the "femme fatale" poses to man. E. Ann Kaplan has a remark on the "femme fatale" in Western film noir: her open sexuality makes man desire her at once but fear her power over him; it draws man away from his goal and intervenes destructively in his life. Such a woman is marked as evil and must be destroyed.¹⁹⁹ In Lilian's case, she is reduced to her former voiceless position at home in the end (she loses her voice due to emotional overstress), because "her subversive capacity as a *femme fatale* has to be totally destroyed before Lilian (and, for that matter, any new woman) can be legitimately given sympathy, voice, or history in the male filmic discourse."²⁰⁰

In Zhang's interpretation, the image of "new woman" reflected in *Wild Flower* can be summarized as follows. Firstly, a male representation is indispensable. The heroine's name Lilian (麗蓮) literally means pretty lotus. A lotus may be pretty by

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 193 and pp. 312-313, note 16. Yingjin Zhang indicates the particularity of setting the plot in dance hall by referring to Paul G. Pickowicz's description of dance hall in "The Theme of Spiritual Pollution in Chinese Films of the 1930s", *Modern China* (Jan., 1991) Vol. 17, No. 1: pp. 38-75.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 193-194.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 194. Zhang cites Kaplan's remark on the "female fatale" from E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Cinema*, p. 6, London: Methuen, 1983.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

itself, but it needs a male representation to acquire “cultural” values (such as purity and integrity).²⁰¹ Secondly, and more fundamentally, the Foucaultian notion of panoptic surveillance is applied in the male discourse’s containment of the subversive side of “new woman”, who requires constant policing and disciplining.²⁰² In Zhang’s reading of the following two films, he further reveals how this “policing” and “discipline” are carried out in subtle and thus deceptive ways in the leftist discourse.



Fig. 14 (left): Ruan Lingyu (Lilian) and Jin Yan (Lilian’s lover) in *Wild Flower* (1930). Fig. 15 (right): Ruan Lingyu (right, front, playing Zhou Shuzhen) in *Three Modern Women* (1933).

Three Modern Women (三個摩登女性 1933), a silent film written by Tian Han and directed by Bu Wancang, was Lianhua’s first canonical leftist production.²⁰³ The “three modern women” in the film represents three different types, two of which are critically depicted. Ruoying (played by Chen Yanyan) belongs to the type of sentimental woman living “in a fantasized world rather than in reality” and “tells hardly anything modern.” Yu Yu (played by Li Zhuozhuo 黎灼灼 1906-90) is a

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ It was Lianhua’s first production made by a CCP member. Tian Han became a committed Communist in 1931. Cheng, *History*, p. 120. Besides his great contributions to the leftist cinema as screenwriter and director, his most famous legacy may be the lyrics he wrote for *March of the Volunteers* (義勇軍進行曲), the theme song composed by Nie Er (聶耳 1912-35) from a leftist film *Children of Troubled Times* (風雲兒女 1935). *March of the Volunteers* was officially adopted after 1949 as China’s national anthem. Cheng, *History*, p. 386.

“typical pleasure-seeking modern woman” with her body “sensually and erotically projected in the film,” and “represents a dangerous trap for the progressive males.” The third, Zhou Shuzhen, contrasts sharply with the above two. She does not indulge in her private feelings but is active in labour movement. She is the one who re-orientates the male protagonist toward revolution. More remarkably, the re-orientation “is achieved not through emotion, but through the rhetoric of class consciousness and national salvation.”²⁰⁴ Zhou is the ideal heroine exemplifying genuine new women in the leftists’ eyes. The leftist definition of “new woman” was articulated through the male protagonist Zhang Yu (played by Jin Yan) in a scene in which he speaks at a party to the “carefree” “bourgeois” guests after Zhou’s patriotic speech: “only those who are most self-supportive, most rational, most courageous, and most mindful of public welfare can be the most modern women!”²⁰⁵ Besides the “unquestionably authoritative” way that the male protagonist rather than the female is chosen to give the definition, what is even more problematic, as Yingjin Zhang has incisively pointed out, are the demands of the “masculinisation of modern women” – the adjectives in the definition, “self-supportive”, “rational”, “courageous”, in effect refer to “values constructed in Chinese culture as predominantly male.” Therefore, Yu Yu and Chen Ruoying are both marginalized in the film, conceptually, and the latter is punished with death. Her death symbolizes the eradication of excessive femininity, not simply in a female body, but more in “the feminized discourse of love and passion in vogue in the early twentieth century,” and also in the effeminate males, who, especially those devoted to the pursuit of art and romance, must be remasculinized and reoriented toward national salvation.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Zhang, *The City*, pp. 195-197.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198. The “body” of Shanghai, as is examined by Yingjin Zhang, was not only gendered but politicized as well. Its correspondingly gendered features were given an urgent political reading: “on the ‘feminine’ (i.e. ‘negative’) side – leisure, indulgence, desire, love, passion, sentimentality, sensuality, fantasy, frivolity, ennui, music, film, individuality, bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology, and the colonized mentality; on the ‘masculine’ (i.e. ‘positive’) side – hardship, suffering, labor, strikes, devotion, determination, lack of emotion, asexuality, asceticism, rationality, collectivity, solidarity, the proletarian consciousness, patriotism, and nationalist pride.”

Zhou Shuzhen is undoubtedly an ideal in strict accordance with the exclusively male-centred definition of the “new woman”. As is indicated in her name (周淑貞 *shu* means “gentle, nice, kind-hearted” and *zhen* means “chaste, faithful”), she is portrayed as the embodiment of virtue. Apart from being virtuous in the traditional sense (a virgin girl who refrains from sex), she also has to acquire the virtue defined by the revolutionary ideology, that is, be “asexual” as a female revolutionary. For instance, her renunciation of femininity is implied in her plain clothing, her refusal to wear makeup, as well as her refraining from bodily contact with males, except for an occasional “comradely” gesture such as holding hands with the male protagonist.²⁰⁷ To conclude his reading of *Three Modern Women*, Yingjin Zhang accentuates the problem with the film, which “is not merely that Zhou is figured as a mouthpiece of revolutionary machinery deprived of human desire but more that she desires no more and no less than what leftist ideology desires her to desire.”²⁰⁸

New woman (新女性 1934) is a silent film written by Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生 1906-68), directed by Sun Shiyi (孫師毅 1904-66), and also produced by Lianhua. Before coming to Shanghai, the heroine Wei Ming (played by Ruan Lingyu) had a love affair with a man which was not approved by her family. She managed to escape and married her lover, but was eventually abandoned. Now she is a music teacher at a girls’ school and writes fiction in spare time – independent and literary, she corresponds to the May Fourth discourse of “new woman”. However, continuous frustrations – the patriarchal exploitation of female sexuality, the social hostility towards career woman, and a general class oppression of the proletariat, which constitute the main body of the film – finally exhaust her courage, mentally and

In the leftist cinema, feminized discourses (both femininity in the female and effeminacy in the male) were disciplined or punished. Remarkably, from Zhang Zhen’s reading of the ideological camp opposite to the leftists, we see that “soft” film discourse embraced exactly the subjects and features on the “feminine” side. The article “Soft Film versus Hard Film” written by Huang Jiamo was a manifesto not only within the text but also within its illustrations, the close-ups of female body parts (lips, eye, or legs) framing the text. These decorative drawings perfectly symbolized the camp’s soft aesthetic as “femininity”. Zhang, *Amorous*, pp. 276-277.

²⁰⁷ Zhang, *The City*, p. 199.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

physically. She commits suicide and dies.²⁰⁹ Wei's tragedy echoes another May Fourth discourse which questioned the idealistic vision of "new woman", an idea greatly influenced by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.²¹⁰ A famous vexed question was raised, "what happens after Nora leaves home?"²¹¹ It was rendered as a general question in the Chinese context: what happens after a woman leaves her family (patriarchy) for being a "new woman" (free, self-supportive, educated or enlightened, and dignified)? Wei Ming's answer proves a failure. The failure, in the leftist discourse, is ascribed to her "fundamental weakness – her complicated feelings of ennui and frustration" as well as her "'petit bourgeois' belief in individual values," which can be understood in general, "indulgence in love or private sentiment."²¹² Another female character in the film, Li Aying, appears in sharp contrast to Wei Ming. As a genuine "new woman" defined by the leftist discourse, she is asexual, by both appearance (she has short hair and strong body, always dressed in dark trousers) and disposition (which is reflected in her masculinised gestures, movements; one scene shows her beating a male villain black and blue). She does not seem to be bothered about anything personal, nor does she have sophisticated psychological pains. In a shot when she teaches her working-class sisters to sing the song "New Woman", no one looks differentiated from any other. The final scene opens with a high-angle shot of workers crowding onto the road from factory, literally all faceless. All individuals are erased in such a mass scene. Li Aying and a group of women workers march towards the rising sun (symbolizing "the new agents of social change"²¹³), united and proud, neither gender identification nor individual identification seen in them.

Female stars were admired and adored by the masses, ironically, they rarely had

²⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 200-202.

²¹⁰ The *New Youth* (新青年) journal devoted an entire issue (Vol. 4, No. 6, June 1918) to Ibsen, in which *A Doll's House* was first time introduced to Chinese readers. It was translated by Luo Jialun (羅家倫 1897-1969) and Hu Shi (胡適 1891-1962).

²¹¹ "What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?" was originally the title of a lecture that Lu Xun gave at the Beijing Women's Normal College on December 26, 1923. The text of the lecture was later published with the same title.

²¹² Zhang, *The City*, p. 203.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 202.

any chance to participate in serious, theoretical, intellectual discussion, for instance, the debate over art, politics and philosophy (like the three-year long soft-vs-hard film debate, see note 192). Rather than being allowed to formulate discourses, they were always regulated, or disciplined as the object of ideological discourses, whose nature needs to be transformed or re-oriented. They were seen as embodiments of the “new woman” of the time, and themselves came to the foreground as new women. However, as is revealed in Yingjin Zhang’s conclusions, these images are rather problematic. Women were recognized first and foremost by their bodies (often rendered as sexualized objects), then by their emotions and sentiments (often criticized as excessive), and some by fantasy, some by art, or some by fragility – all these features are “feminine”. According to the leftist discourse, the “femininity” and all kinds of individual concerns are valueless, “petit bourgeois”, and thus need to be erased, or re-identified as gender-neutral. The masses, females and effeminate males (indulgent in love, emotions, aesthetics – such things are considered “feminine”) in particular, need to be re-oriented towards revolutionary passion as an undifferentiated whole.

To summarize, the new foreign medium, film, not only significantly changed the leisure life of Chinese urbanites and urban cultural landscape, but also created a new trend in gender presentation characterized by women’s higher visibility and the emergence of female stardom. This newly-emerged female film stardom was greatly influenced by prevailing ideologies and commercial interests of film studios, which moulded female star images into specific, easily recognizable stereotypes. As I have demonstrated, the dominant literary genre of sentimental romances brought an array of fictional virtuous women onto screen in the 1920s; and in the late years of the decade, in a tide of commercial martial arts films, fascinating swordswomen suddenly and literally occupied every screen of movie theatres. A new generation of female stars rose in the bitter political and ideological confrontation between the leftists and the Nationalists in the 1930s. Often cast in roles of innocent girls in the leftist films, they were approved by critics as “good girls” who acted by revealing their true personal characters (which was seen as “genuine”), rather than pretending to be someone else (which was seen as “dishonest”).

III Fear, exploitation, possession, and manipulation of the sexuality of the performing women

Introduction of Chapter III

As I have discussed in the part I.3, the actress's physical body largely contributed to her theatrical legitimacy. However, the very body and its sexual implication have always been highly problematic. The tradition of patronage left a blurred scene of extensive yet often covert sexual exploitation of the actors, both female and male, in both old and new drama. This exploitation appeared to have attained social legitimacy in the context of institutionalized prostitution. Shanghai's late-Qing courtesans formed a marginalized group of performing woman.²¹⁴ The word "marginalized" indicates both a general disregard of their artistry and performing activities as "not professional enough", and an underestimation of the scale of their theatrical involvement as "not considerable enough". Performing-centred courtesans were originally exclusively patronized by the local elite and the literati. However, new social groups emerged later in the city's rapidly changing, economic and social landscape, desiring to taste this privilege but expecting more sexual services. The increasing tendency among male customers to automatically see courtesans' performances as a mask and the bodies underneath the mask as sex, eventually fused these women into an undifferentiated sex market. The sexualization of high-class courtesans was universal among the contemporaneous Japanese geisha and Korean *kisaeng*.²¹⁵

The institution of late-Qing courtesans belongs to a long tradition of a performing profession being historically and inextricably interwoven with prostitution. Consequently, a national policy had relegated performers at the bottom of the social hierarchy throughout several dynasties up until the end of the imperial era. Moreover,

²¹⁴ The term "courtesans" in this thesis refers to women working in the sex market, who formed the upper strata of prostitution establishments.

²¹⁵ Miho Matsugu, "In the Service of the Nation: Geisha and Kawabata Yasunari's 'Snow Country'," in Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon ed., *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, pp. 243-246. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. And John Lie, "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," *Gender and Society* (Jun., 1995) Vol. 9, No. 3: pp. 310-327.

the craft of the actors as “not being themselves” was recognized by others as their fundamental character, dangerous and dishonest. All these elements psychologically justified the public’s deep-rooted discrimination against the performing profession and performers, both female and male.

In addition to the general discrimination, actresses could hardly avoid being a target of moral condemnation in a society where sex segregation had a long history and was just about to change. The danger of the female body and its sexual implication was the fundamental issue in debates over the legitimacy of actresses and mixed-sex acting. Future chaos of unrestrained sex mingling pictured by scholars, as well as the alleged encouragement implied by mixed-sex performance for transgressive contact of men and woman in the audience, characterized the negative opinion on women who extended their prescribed gender role to theatre and stage. At the same time, due to commercial exploitation and, perhaps, woman’s growing awareness and interest in the autonomous control over her own body, gradually, female performers were more and more emboldened to emphasize their sensuality. However, this only worsened the destabilizing image of actresses.

The institution of cinema seemed to have developed effective mechanisms for manipulation of the sexuality of female body, instead of fearing or rejecting it, or else leaving it to overflow. The bodies of female actors, and male alike, demonstrated a capacity to serve different, even contradictory political and ideological causes. In the leftist productions prevailing during the first half of the 1930s, although the audience saw ingenuous proletarian girls revealing body parts on screen, the sensual content was transformed into a revolutionary power and a legitimate artistic language. Meanwhile, the physique fitness and athleticism embodied in popular film stars (amazingly, they were the same group starring in leftist films and acclaimed as fresh, genuine artists as I have discussed in II.3), was in fact an important element of the whole package of the Nationalist regime’s ongoing national campaign, which was designed to counter Communist ideology. Besides, the female sexuality could also well serve a director’s personal aesthetic pursuit, or simply sensation, as it has always worked.

III.1 Sexualizing the performing women: covert in theatrical patronage, legitimate in the institution of courtesans

In the traditional theater-going experience, an actor's *se* (色 physical beauty) and *yi* (藝 artistic expertise) combined together as something we call "art". Before women re-appeared on stage, *se* was already, and always a very essential part of a male actor's image, regardless of whether he excelled in playing handsome men or pretty women. For a *dan* (female impersonator) star, *se* was especially regarded as the very primacy of his captivation and mysterious magnetism.²¹⁶ The pursuit of beauty dominated the audience and eroticized patronage. It was a significant but usually ambiguous relationship between stars and their fans. On one hand, it was practically expedient for actors to build up a patron-client relationship which brought fame and fortune; yet on the other hand, for male *dan* actors and female actors in particular, such ties often mingled with romantic liaisons. In such cases, outsiders never knew exactly whether actors were willing or forced to be involved in the romantic relations. Generally, male actors faced relatively less troubles than female actors when tackling "aggressive" patronage. In the male-dominated society of China, patrons of actors were usually powerful or wealthy men. Only a tiny portion of women patronized male actors, mostly courtesans and prostitutes, and very few influential female socialites. These women barely had power of any kind to force actors to marry them, or to control and oppress actors if they did enter into marriage. Since homosexuality was not after all a possible marital alternative, male patrons had no way to use marriage to "possess" their favourite male stars. However, female actors could be literally "possessed", as concubines.

A detailed biographical account of most famous *jingju* (Beijing opera) actresses given by a Japanese expert, Hatano Ken'ichi, reveals that especially during the earliest years when *jingju* actresses started rising and dominating the scene, they could hardly escape the fate of being concubines of warlords and high-ranking officials, who might even use them as bribes for promotion or for lucrative

²¹⁶ Ju Yuan, "Actresses of New Drama," in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 2, pp. 23-26. The author Ju Yuan himself believed *se* was more important than *yi*.

vacancies.²¹⁷ By utilizing a Tianjin-based actress, Yang Cuixi (楊翠喜), Duan Zhigui (段芝貴 1869-1925), a military officer in the Qing government, directed a notorious case of serial bribes. Duan was at first a patron of Yang and somehow took the actress into his disposal. He secretly gave Yang to Zaizhen (載振), son of the Qing Prince Yikuang (奕劻). In return, Zaizhen convinced his father to appoint Duan as Provincial Governor of Heilongjiang in Manchuria. Duan also took advantage of Zaizhen's desire for Yang (Zaizhen intended to take her as a concubine) to help many other officials to get promotions. In this way, Duan got bribed with an enormous sum of money. When the secret deals were finally uncovered, Duan was dismissed by Cixi.²¹⁸

About a half century later, the familiar scenario of “the most powerful man gets the most desirable woman” even happened to the most prestigious film actress. Hu Die, the one elected “Empress of Cinema” (電影皇后) in 1933, was the real-life heroine of that shocking case. After Japanese army invaded Shanghai in August 1937, Hu Die fled to Hong Kong with her husband, Pan Yousheng (潘有聲), a Shanghai businessman. The Japanese took over Hong Kong at the end of 1941 when the Pacific war broke out. The couple then fled to China's wartime capital, Chongqing. Dai Li (戴笠 1897-1946), head of the secret intelligence of Chiang Kai-shek's wartime government, was smitten by Hu Die at first sight. He secretly kept Hu Die as his mistress and his agents terrified Pan into silence. The “relationship” accidentally ended in 1946 when Dai Li was killed in an air crash. Hu Die was finally released, and fortunately, still had a family to return. Her former husband took her to Hong Kong to live. Hu Die never spoke of Dai Li and erased everything related in her autobiography.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Ken'ichi, *Opera*, pp. 290-314. Such warlords included Zhang Xun (張勳 1854-1923), a Qing-loyalist general (he attempted to restore the Qing house in 1917). Such actresses were “countless” – Ken'ichi tells the names of the six most prominent.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 290-291.

²¹⁹ Hu Die married Pan Yousheng in 1935. Dai Li wanted to marry Hu Die, and made some efforts to get her divorce papers issued. But he eventually did not succeed in it due to the air crash. Frederic E. Wakeman has collected many details about the “forced affair” between Dai Li and Hu Die in his book, *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese secret service*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Hu Die published her autobiography in her last years, *The Reminiscences*

When modern intellectuals brought the art of impersonation as a legacy of traditional theatre into *xinju* (new drama), the culture of patronage was retained too. While Ouyang Yuqian and his Chunliu Society fellows performed *xinju* in Shanghai in early 1910s, the troupe's *dan* stars received the sort of attention and adoration from both male and female admirers that sometimes contained implicitly sexual demands. Among the female fans, mostly courtesans, Ouyang had also noted in his memoir an elderly lady, an anonymous young women who showed a decent education, and a very rich woman. Some of Chunliu's *dan* stars, including Ouyang himself, did have established intimacy with devoted courtesans. Yet as progressive reformers, they generally kept a distance from courtesans to avoid tarnishing their own reputation. Some believed that it was an unwise strategy that Chunliu Society neither utilised these famous women for publicity nor paid enough attention to socializing, and this partly contributed to the eventual failure of the troupe.²²⁰ The argument in a way reflects the significance of patronage in the theatrical world.

The tendency of the male public to sexualize female performers, viewing them as object of sexual desire and possessive instinct, was not only evident but also legitimate in the late-Qing courtesan culture, which belonged to a long-standing convention of a leisure combining performing and sex. Courtesans who engaged in performing were generally categorized as prostitutes rather than actresses in authentic sense of the term. Their theatrical accomplishments were mostly noted in male patrons' accounts and memoirs of the "world of flowers" (花國), but were given little attention in theatrical documents.²²¹ In these memoirs, *shuyu* and *changsan* had become nostalgic

of *Hu Die* (胡蝶回憶錄), in which she had no single reference to Dai Li in the few words on her sojourn in Chongqing.

²²⁰ Ouyang, "Since I Performed Onstage," pp. 38-49, 68-71, 76-78.

²²¹ Li Fei (李菲), master thesis, "Study of Theatrical Performance in Prostitution in Modern Shanghai (近代上海青樓演劇研究)," Shanghai Normal University, the Faculty of Humanities, 2003. In Appendix 2, the thesis offers a very rough sketch of courtesans famed for theatrical artistry, and the texts are cited from accounts and memoirs of some active patrons of courtesans' house. In Hatano Ken'ichi's work, he devoted more than twenty pages to a biographical account of most influential Beijing opera actresses, yet gave only a few words to Shanghai's most famous Lin Daiyu (林黛玉) in the late Qing, who named herself for the heroine of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* and achieved huge popularity with her expertise in theatre. Ken'ichi, *Opera* p. 299.

terms, accompanied with writers' lament for the loss of their (especially *shuyu*'s) company with their original content. With a literal meaning of "storytelling houses", the term *Shuyu* (書寓) referred to these courtesans as a group dominant during the 1860s and early 1870s.²²² They entertained the local literati with Chinese regional dramas, and stood at the very top of the pyramid of prostitution.²²³ Customers could enjoy their music talent either in public places like teahouses, or in *shuyu*'s residence if the patronizing relationship had reached a certain degree of intimacy between the two. They also might be able to invite *shuyu* to sing at private banquets. In principle, *shuyu* did not prostitute themselves, and usually, they would consciously distinguish themselves from lower-class courtesans, who in the eyes of *shuyu* were real prostitutes. For instance, *shuyu* would refuse to perform and even leave if they observed the attendance of prostitutes at a same banquet.²²⁴ In reality, however, *shuyu* struggled vainly to resist their eventual integration into the world of common prostitution. From the late years of the Qing empire to the Republican period, *changsan* courtesans occupied the top of the hierarchy of prostitution. With a fixed tariff of their services, which the term *changsan* (長三) originally indicated, *changsan* women in fact implicated a greater accessibility to their sexual favours compared to *shuyu*.²²⁵

²²² Other terms such as *shushi* (書史, storytelling official), *cishi* (詞史, poetry official), and *xiansheng* (先生, a term usually for respectable men) were also commonly used to address *shuyu*. All these terms showed respect for these women. Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures, Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (hereafter referred to as Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*), p. 42, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

²²³ Some *shuyu* performed *kunqu* (昆曲), a traditional theatrical genre known for its elegance. Others played *tanci* (彈詞), a local and popular genre using Suzhou dialect. Both required skills of singing and storytelling. There was gathering of *shuyu* once a year, which functioned as a strict system for evaluating their performance. In order to qualify as *shuyu* for the next year, in the gathering, they performed and competed with each other. One major requirement for *shuyu* was the skill of singing *kunqu*. Those who did not attend the meeting or could not sing properly would not be given the title of *shuyu* in the following year. Li Fei, "Study of Theatrical Performance in Prostitution in Modern Shanghai," pp. 15-16. Later, some *shuyu* performed *jingju* (京劇 Beijing opera), which was regarded artistically inferior to *kunqu*. The change signalled a decline in *shuyu*'s artistic skill in general.

²²⁴ This phenomenon has been noted by many scholars. Some argue that, in a strict sense, *shuyu* should be separated from the study of prostitution.

²²⁵ *Changsan* women charged three yuan for an assignment outside such as drinking companionship and three more for spending a night together. Although the fee structure changed

“Selling art” (賣藝) and “selling body” (賣色) were also inextricably intertwined in *xianggong tangzi* (相公堂子), a leisure institution similar to courtesan house, which was prevalent throughout the last century of the Qing rule in Beijing. It was sometimes called *xianggu tangzi* (像姑堂子 像姑 means “like woman”), or usually abbreviated to *tangzi*, a term commonly used for “brothel”. *Xianggong tangzi* was a private school where *nandan* (男旦 female impersonator) were trained for *jingju* performing, as well as a brothel where these young boys prostituted themselves (often dressed in costumes of female characters).²²⁶ Besides the noticeable resemblance in the overlap between social companionship and sex trade,²²⁷ *tangzi* establishments had a distinctive artistic training system compared to courtesan houses. Some of its boys trained for *jingju* female roles, later became masters in the profession.²²⁸ In 1912, when the establishment of the Republican regime had just been proclaimed, the Beijing government officially abolished the city’s *tangzi* establishments. Yet the decline of the institution had already occurred during the last two decades of the Qing dynasty. The announcement of the police explicitly targeted at *tangzi* owners and boy prostitutes who were accused of seducing “sons of good families”, however, it did not mention any responsibility of patrons. This was echoed by the controversy over the

later, the term remained long. See Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, p. 43. *Changsan* were also addressed as *jiaoshu* (校書), a term for ancient official. This was a manifestation of their standing as high-class courtesans, and showed clients’ respect for them. See Christian Henriot (author), Noël Castelino (translator), *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History 1849-1949* (hereafter referred to as Henriot, *Prostitution*), p. 24, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

²²⁶ The imperial rulers banned women prostitutes but not boy prostitutes. Zhou Huiling suggests that “(the Manchurians) were anxious about female sexuality, not prostitution.” Zhou also believes that it was the prohibition on women prostitutes that caused the rapid expansion of *xianggong tangzi*. Zhou, “Striking,” p. 148.

²²⁷ *Tangzi* and courtesan house had the same function of offering social companionship. The customs were also very similar, such as the way a customer visited brothel to develop intimacy, and the way courtesans/young boys were invited to sing at banquets, to accompany at drinking or gambling. Even some of the terms related were exactly the same, such as *da chawei* (打茶圍), a popular type of encounter that a customer went to the brothel for tea, snacks and conversation with the one he desired. Henriot, *Prostitution*, p. 34, and Yao Shuyi (幺書儀), “*Tangzi*: A Gay Sex Brothel and Opera Training Ground during the Late Qing (作為科班的晚清北京“堂子”.)” *Social Science of Beijing* (北京社會科學) (2004) Issue 3: pp. 22-28.

²²⁸ Zhou, “Striking,” p. 137. Yao Shuyi’s essay offers more details about the achievement and success of *jingju* training in *xianggong tangzi*, see *ibid.*, pp. 22-28.

abolishment among the literati, who generally agreed on the judgement that, it was a deficiency of virtue and morality of the actors/apprentices involved to blame for the eroticization of the profession.²²⁹

In the society of contemporaneous Meiji Japan, the institution of geisha had functioned similarly to that of Chinese courtesans. Geisha was recognized as woman who “skillfully offered a pleasurable space and time for ordinary men, who enjoyed talking drinking, singing, dancing and playing games in a group.” Due to the sexual implication of the career, geisha had to endure the tension between the sex work that many of them engaged in and their official denial of it.²³⁰ The social and economic backgrounds that played the role as a fertile ground for the flourishing of popular prostitution were similar in many aspects in Shanghai’s courtesan establishments and in Japanese geisha houses. For instance, the market was largely “encouraged” by the authorities, for which taxes, including the license fee, were a significant source of income. The city of Shanghai was divided into three administrative entities. Despite the Qing governmental ban on prostitution,²³¹ brothels could well open in the foreign concessions, especially in the Shanghai French Concession, which “concerned itself solely with the tax revenues that prostitution could bring to it,” as long as the business

²²⁹ Wu Cuncun (吳存存), “An Opportunity for Something New in Place of Stubborn and Disgusting Customs: A Early Twentieth Century Debate Regarding ‘Private Apartments’ and the Conflation of Actors and Prostitutes (‘舊染污俗，允宜咸與維新’二十世紀初關於私寓、倡優并提的討論與中國性史的西化),” *Chinese Culture* (中國文化) (2008) Issue 2: pp. 99-101.

²³⁰ Matsugu, “In the Service of the Nation,” pp. 243-246.

²³¹ Pan Honggang (潘洪綱) has written on a brief history of the prohibition against prostitution in the Qing dynasty. See his essay, “Prostitution in Qing Dynasty and the Governmental Prohibition Against Prostitution (清代的娼妓與政府的禁娼),” *Historical Monthly* (歷史月刊) (Nov., 2009, Taiwan) No. 262: pp. 96-102. During the reign of the Kangxi (1662-1722) and the Yongzheng (1723-1735), the ban on prostitution was especially strict. Although the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795) also condemned the custom and continued imposing the ban, the royal edict had very limited effect on the de facto prospering prostitution, which was protected by local administration and favoured by the literati. The next reign, the Jiaqing emperor (1796-1820) was determined to eradicate prostitution and introduced more severe punishment on those who violated the ban. These efforts demonstrated Qing rulers’ attempt to enhance the Manchu dynasty’s legitimacy by presenting its authority as defender of ethical code, but their attempt seemed to be futile. Years of the late Qing period since the Tongzhi reign (1862-1874) even marked the most prosperous, nationwide sex market in the history of Chinese prostitution.

caused no public scandal.²³² In Japan, the state had gained a good profit from the prospering prostitution since a new licensed prostitution system was launched in 1872.²³³ Girls sold by impoverished families for the sake of survival due to socio-economic instability helped the sex market continuously expand. It was more particular to Japan rather than the contemporaneous Chinese society that prostitution served in several ways also to support empire-building. It includes tax income the state gained from prostitution, and especially its use for military purpose – military brothels were used to a large extent to boost the morale of Japanese soldiers and officers.²³⁴

In the modern era of both China and Japan, modernity and capitalism had gradually destroyed the traditional courtesan culture. As in either Henriot's terminology "type" or Hershatzer's "hierarchy", the structure of Chinese prostitution had gone through significant transformations during the hundred years of 1850-1950, and ended in the universal integration into the general sex market of those "genuine courtesans" who possessed the artistic sensibilities, the pride and prestige of their performing skills, and the exclusive adoration and appreciation from elite patrons. The dominance of the courtesan community only lasted for nearly two decades. The progressive blurring of the distinction between "genuine courtesans" and lower-ranking categories first occurred during the last quarter of the 19th century. Although still in use, terms like *shuyu* and *changsan* no longer corresponded to the original contents in both cultural and practical dimensions. The main dividing point of the changing is estimated at around 1914-1915.²³⁵ This complex "downward integration" process could be ascribed to reasons in diverse aspects of a wide social context. Through an unprecedented, rapid economic growth after the opening of Shanghai as treaty port city, flourishing wealthy merchants contributed to the evolution of the city towards a consumer society. In this process, the sex market was turned from status-dominated to money-dominated as well. The newly-emerged

²³² Henriot, *Prostitution*, p. 289.

²³³ Matsugu, "In the Service of the Nation," pp. 243-246.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Henriot, *Prostitution*, p. 58.

middle-class urbanities, with more disposable resources but less education than the traditional literati, showed different expectations and tastes for prostitution. Courtesans did not necessarily provided the kind of easy sexual gratification they looked for, whereas lower-class brothels were prospering to meet the demand. The aesthetic lifestyle of leisure, which high-class courtesan houses had exclusively offered and the gentry society had enjoyed, was eventually replaced by the extensively commercialized sexuality. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) also contributed much to the transformation. A vast influx of refugees from surrounding areas stimulated the demand for prostitution, and meanwhile many women from better-to-do families were pushed into the sex market.²³⁶

The tendency of “pulling down” the high-class courtesans, whose performing tasks were often prioritized, into the general market for commoditized sex was not only Chinese, but also a regional, pan-East Asian phenomenon in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In Japan, prestigious courtesan houses and vulgar brothels were merging into a general sex market too. Having become “mass-produced” by the late nineteenth century, geisha were increasingly required to sell not only artistic performances but also sexual services, and to work for the market rather than for their patrons, *danna*. The change also reflected the gradual disappearance of the status gap between the elite and the lower classes in an urban milieu. The divisions between different groups of geisha previously patronized by respectively lower and upper classes, were now becoming increasingly vague. Lower-class patrons desired to be symbolically included in the upper class. Thus on a tangible level, in the way of patronizing geisha, they got such chance to taste those privileges. For middle-class men and workers as well as farmers, to be able to buy the services of a geisha for an evening created the illusion of equality. Interactions with “mass-produced” geisha made these men feel that, they could “elevate their class status, attempt a slight revenge against the dominant class, and experience what it is to

²³⁶ See Christian Henriot, “‘From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy’: Shanghai Prostitution Revisited (1849-1949),” *Modern China* (Apr., 1996) Vol. 22, No. 2: pp. 132-163. Also Henriot, *Prostitution*, p. 22.

be a ‘Japanese’ man.”²³⁷

The late nineteenth and the early twentieth century also saw a dramatic scale-up of sexualization of *kisaeng*, Korea counterpart of the Japanese geisha or Chinese courtesans. In an agrarian society during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), the traditional state-organized *kisaeng* “constituted a caste and functioned as a guild,” which means that the retired *kisaeng* trained successors, often their daughters, performing skills for serving their “masters”. Apart from the performing duty, *kisaeng* were often taken as concubines or secondary wives by *yangban* (members of the privileged families of scholars-officials, often also owning land). In the hierarchy among *kisaeng*, those on the top were expected to demonstrate exceptional beauty or proficiency in literature and art (most women were illiterate), while those fallen in the lowest stratum were trapped in poverty and brutal exploitation, and in between, there were part-time prostitutes as performers, paid companions or entertainers. In the late nineteenth century, as the commercialization stimulated the expansion of prostitution, *kisaeng* restaurants began thriving and catered to the agrarian elite. Under the Japanese colonial rule, the hereditary status system and state patronage of *kisaeng* disappeared, although a high stratum of prostitutes was reserved for the elite Japanese and Korean clientele. Besides the Japanese-run schools for producing upper-class *kisaeng*, many private sexual entrepreneurs extensively recruited women from poor rural families, who, despite a symbolic preservation of *kisaeng*’s performing tradition (singing and dancing), were turned into prostitutes primarily selling sex services. The later boom in the sex market was fuelled by the “comfort divisions” the Japanese military created in the 1930s for recruiting *wianbu* (Korean name for “comfort women”; Jap. *ianfu*). Geisha were recruited too as “comfort women”, and were reserved for officers in the Japanese army, because the “Japaneseness” made them more favourable than either Japanese prostitutes or non-ethnic Japanese women. Korean *wianbu* mostly served ordinary Japanese soldiers.²³⁸

²³⁷ Matsugu, “In the Service of the Nation,” pp. 245-246.

²³⁸ John Lie, “The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea,” pp. 310-327. And Matsugu, “In the Service of the Nation,” p. 245. The sex workers from the existing sex market

III.2 A justification for the discrimination: a historical survey of the link between performing and prostitution, and its psychological impact in the modern era

To trace and examine the semantic development of the terms referring to the profession where musical/theatrical performing and prostitution were historically and commonly intertwined into each other, do help a lot in understanding the convergence and divergence of the two sides of a performing career through its evolution. This is indeed a laborious task. Fortunately, however, I have found a couple of essays which give a precise and comprehensive explanation of the two pairs of confusing individual words, 倡/娼 and 伎/妓, which were used to term the profession in history.²³⁹ Each pair consists of two homophones – this is a particular phenomenon of Chinese linguistics, *tong jia* (通假), or *tong jie* (通借), which means that characters with the same sound can be interchangeable.

Let us first look at 倡/娼. In pre-Qin China (before 221 BC), there only existed the character 倡, not the character 娼. 倡 was initially interchangeable with 唱 (sing) – 倡 and 唱 are also homophones. The word 倡 functioned more like a noun, referring to a person who sings, and gradually became a general term for those who perform, regardless of sex – the radical 亻 means person, and the phonetic element 昌 tells the character's sound, “chang”. The character 娼 appeared during the Wei (220-265), Jin (265-420), Southern and Northern dynasties (420-589), derived from and in a long period interchangeable with 倡. Since the activities of female performers had developed a greater diversity and thus differentiated themselves from male performers, there was a need to have a specific term for these women separately – the radical 女 of 娼 means female and thus specified the meaning of 倡 as female performer. The transition from the word 倡 to the word 娼 and the spreading of the

were only a small portion of the “comfort women”. The majority of them were teenage girls newly recruited, in most cases from extremely poor families. They were either forcibly dragged into the sex slavery or recruited through false promises of “good jobs” at army hospitals, factories etc. See more details in Chunghee Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

²³⁹ Zhang Jie (張杰), “Chang and Chang (娼與倡),” *The Chinese Journal of Human Sexuality* (中國性科學) (Mar., 2007) Vol. 16, No. 3: pp. 37-39; and Zhang Jie, “Ji and Ji (妓與伎),” *The Chinese Journal of Human Sexuality* (Jan., 2010) Vol. 19, No. 1: pp. 41-43.

latter also accompanied the dissociation of performing arts as entertainment from the exclusive privilege of the ruling class. In the pre-Qin, Qin (221-207 BC) and Han (202 BC-AD 220), female singers mostly served the imperial court and the aristocracy. Yet since the Wei and Jin, some of them had gradually become entertainers working at commercial establishments. During the Sui (589-618), Tang (619-907), Song (960-1276), Yuan (1271–1368), female performers in the private sector serving an unspecified audience rather than the court, the gentry or high-ranking officials, continued to thrive.²⁴⁰

Let us move to the second pair, 伎/妓, the evolution of which paralleled that of 唱-倡-娼. The character 伎 was derived from and initially interchangeable with 技. 技 means a specific skill, regardless of type. The word 伎 referred to those who possessed certain professional skills, and later its meaning was narrowed to performers. The character 妓 existed as early as in the Eastern Han (25–220), interchangeable with 伎, and was in common use since the Wei and Jin. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, the word 妓 usually referred to female singers and dancers who were kept by the aristocracy and officials at home, their status being somewhere between concubines and female domestics. Such women were called *jiaji* (家妓), and they were likely, but not necessarily, to become concubines. In the meantime, women termed 娼 were also characterized by musical performing skills, but 娼 more commonly referred to those who worked in commercial establishments. Yet the difference in this sense was not absolute. In the Sui and Tang, the character 妓 was used on an even larger scale. Besides *jiaji* (家妓), there were *gongji* (宫妓) who served the imperial court and *guanji* (官妓) who served the officials. These two groups were typical female musical performers. Another category, *siji* (私妓), approximated to the later courtesans from prostitution establishments.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ My introduction of the use of the Chinese characters 倡 and 娼 in this paragraph is based on Zhang Jie's essay, "Chang and Chang."

²⁴¹ My introduction of the use of the Chinese characters 伎 and 妓 in this paragraph is based on Zhang Jie's essay, "Ji and Ji."

Clearly, the characters 娼, 妓 and the compound 娼妓, which are all used as exclusive terms for prostitutes and prostitution in modern China, are derived from the characters 倡 and 伎, which generally referred to musical/dancing/theatrical performers throughout their long history. Derived from the word 倡伎, which presumably had already appeared in the Eastern Han, the word 娼妓 appeared during the Sui and Tang, and came into common use during the Song and Yuan. Before the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), scholars had gradually developed some principles, yet no absolutely strict standard, for using 倡, 娼, 伎, 妓, from which we can see the progressively growing popularity of the use of the characters 娼 and 妓. It reflects an increasing tendency for those 倡 women or 伎 women as performers to fall into prostitution. But it should also be noted that, during the Song and Yuan, these women should be generally recognized as entertainers who made a living off performing rather than prostitution. In effect, erotic elements were already seen in the Tang dynasty. Despite the attempt of the authorities to put stronger emphasize on the performing part of *guanji* (female performers who entertained the officials) in order to distinguish them from prostitutes, these women usually could not reject demand for extra services such as accompanying at drinking, and sometimes even could not avoid offering sex. As mentioned above, *siji* approximated prostitutes. Not limited to performing, they were controlled by a brothel madam, as was common in later brothels. The institution of *siji* was even more prosperous during the following Song dynasty. The increasing number of *siji* and the extension of their activities, as well as the emergence of some prostitutes who did not have performing skills, were pulling down the reputation of 妓 performers as a whole. It resulted in a common perspective on the character 妓 as a term for an unrespectable career.²⁴²

A significant division between performing and prostitution as two relatively separate occupations occurred during the Xuande period (1426-35) of the Ming dynasty, which was signalled by the abolishment of the institution of *guanji* (官妓). Thereafter, the confusing term 倡伎, which could refer to either performers or

²⁴² The information given in this paragraph is based on Zhang Jie's two essays, "Chang and Chang," and "Ji and Ji."

prostitutes, was rarely used. Prostitution replaced performing as the characteristic feature of women who were termed 娼妓. From the late Ming to the Qing, women disappeared in the performing arts due to the official ban on female actors. Theatre was thus dominated by male performers. Prostitutes (娼妓) and theatrical performers (they were termed 優伶, 優人, 伶人, 伶官, 梨園子弟 and so on in the Qing and the Republican China) eventually diverged.²⁴³

The nature of professional performers as entertainers who historically and currently had an intimate connection with prostitution brought constant anxieties to the authorities. In their eyes, performers should be subject to tight regulation and supervision, which assured that these people were separated and excluded from the general public and hardly had any chance to move to another class. Male performers were not allowed to attend official examinations, which were the main gateway to the bureaucracy. Such ban was issued in 1313 in the Yuan dynasty and in 1369 in the Ming.²⁴⁴ Women were barred from the exams in any case, regardless of occupation. Marriage, another gateway to social mobility, was also strictly regulated. The Yuan law prohibited performers from marrying into normal families.²⁴⁵ Throughout the Qing dynasty, the court had issued numerous bans on various theatre-related activities in order to limit theatre's popularity and its influence. Correspondingly, according to the principle that the inferiority of one's occupation decided the inferiority of the person's status, the Qing law classified actors as "low-born people" (賤民), distinct from the category of "good people" (良民).²⁴⁶ The Qing rulers obviously inherited the common contempt for both the performing career and the performers characteristic for the previous regimes. During the Yuan, Ming, Qing, besides the exclusion from exams and marriage with "good people", the daily life of "low-born people" – their

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ *Historical Documents Concerning the Censorship of Fiction and Drama in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties*, compiled by Wang Liqi, pp. 5-6, 11-12.

²⁴⁵ Zhou, "Striking," p. 134. Her source is *Green Bower Collection* (青樓集), in which the author Xia Tingzhi (夏庭芝) recorded the activities of 117 Yuan actresses.

²⁴⁶ Yao Shuyi (幺書儀), "The Changing of the Social Status of Actors in the Late Qing (晚清優伶社會地位的變化)," *Study of Chinese Opera* (戲曲研究) (2005) Issue 2: p. 140.

clothing and transportation - was also regulated.²⁴⁷

Both the actual, close link between performing and prostitution, and the legal status of performers as “low-born people”, something that seemed to be of a fundamental character for the profession itself, contributed to the disdain of the public for performers. Besides, the craft of actors of “not being themselves”, which is “morally slippery, dangerous, and somehow thought to be dishonest,” brought more suspicions.²⁴⁸ These judgments developed certain sense of moral superiority among “ordinary people”, which psychologically justified their disdain as fair and legitimate criticism towards those who were morally inferior. The “ordinary people” thus felt no need to take the “inferior Others” seriously. Instead, they could treat them as mere playthings by making use of the entertaining function of actors at their pleasure. The psyche is well reflected by a story recorded in Ouyang Yuqian’s memoirs. During his sojourn in Guilin in the late 1910s, he saw a strange phenomenon at the city’s theatre. Gentlemen held banquet in backstage while the show was going on (backstage there was much larger than in other places). *Dan* actors, who used to play flirtatious plots in Guilin’s local drama, would join the banquet and accompany at drinking, when they finished their part on stage but were still wearing costume and make-up. Many actors slept in backstage in the evenings, which means that the theatre was literally their home. Such scenes just looked like Shanghai’s courtesan houses. No wonder Ouyang wrote with pity and angry, “as Shanghai’s professional actors had slightly elevated their status, yet people of the hinterland still saw performers as prostitutes.”²⁴⁹

The Qing dynasty witnessed a gradual but significant change of actors’ social status despite their legal status as “low-born”. Almost every Qing emperor was fond of theatre (they had their own theatrical institution exclusively serving the court, so

²⁴⁷ Zhou, “Striking,” p. 134.

²⁴⁸ Words quoted from *ibid.*, p. 135. There is a vulgar saying in Chinese, but rarely used nowadays: 婊子無情，戲子無義. It literally means that prostitutes have no love and actors have no honesty. The saying expressed the disdain and disgust for these two groups in such an explicit and offensive way. The pattern that the two groups are usually mentioned together, also confirms the overall impression that they are intimately connected.

²⁴⁹ Ouyang, “Since I Performed Onstage,” pp. 25-26.

that these activities were not related to public performances and the official bans on them). During the late Qing, as the emperors and Empress Dowager Cixi became even more captured and fascinated by *jingju*, some of the regulations on actors were actually loosened or became dead letter. The exceptional honour given to a few outstanding *jingju* actors in the late Qing was not imaginable in the past. For example, those invited to perform in the royal palace were called *neiting gongfeng* (內廷供奉), a title for officers who worked in the inner court for the imperial family (it was not an official title for actors, rather informal but popular in the court). They were decently paid with monthly salary and rice, and were rewarded with extra pay after every performance.²⁵⁰

To be sure, as theatre became a form of mass consumption of art, and occupied a central position in urban life, the public view regarding theatre as “career for the low-born” (賤役) and actors as “low-born people” (賤民) was more or less shaken, especially when opera stars appeared. However, the custom of seeing actor as a “plaything” seemed to be too deeply rooted to easily die out. Among dozens of stories that reveal the custom, the “kiss accident” of the most distinguished *jingju dan* star, Mei Lanfang (梅蘭芳 1894-1961), can be a good illustration. It was in 1924, more than one decade after the founding of the Republican China, at the age of 31, Mei was at the apex of his career. Mei’s grandmother died this year. While the rituals were going on during the funeral ceremony, dressed in mourning, Mei was listening to the ritual text read by monks when a street sweeper suddenly rushed in, clasped him, rudely kissed him and ran away. The intruder did this because his fellow, probably drunk, had offered one yuan (a silver dollar) to the one who would kiss Mei Lanfang.²⁵¹ Here we get a sense that anyone could offend actors, because the “inferior” label rooted in their social identity made them look like easy prey, even for those classified into the same “inferior” category by law – for those who belonged to the lowest social strata in reality. A female *jingju* star also encountered “kissing

²⁵⁰ Yao Shuyi, “The Changing of the Social Status of Actors in the Late Qing,” pp. 148-152.

²⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 165-166. Yao Shuyi cites the story from Tang Lusun (唐魯孫), *Love For Hometown* (故園情), p. 73, Taipei: Taipei shibao wenhua chuban gongsi, 1984.

attack". It was Liu Xikui (劉喜奎), who gained enormous popularity among the Beijing theatregoers when she moved her career from Tianjin to Beijing at the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915. Liu was strikingly good-looking and was chased after by renowned scholars, military officers and the warlord Zhang Xun (see note 215). Fans used to compare Liu with Mei Lanfang, acclaiming that the two possessed unsurpassed beauty and expertise. One day Liu was on her way home from a theatre when a man abruptly attacked her with a forcible kiss.²⁵²

III.3 A need for a "real" woman and the danger of her untamed body

Women's return to stage performing in a way epitomized the gender relations which had been undergoing changes during tremendous social transformations since the turn of the twentieth century. On one hand, feminist activists and elite women had raised their profile, and meanwhile, industrialization and urbanization had greatly stimulated the female labour force participation in general; while on the other hand, mixed-sex patterns of association and recreation still lacked and unhappy arranged marriages still commonly persisted. A very significant gender imbalance among the urban population, which inevitably resulted in disproportionate numbers of unmarried young men, even intensified tensions generated by the physical absence of women in public.²⁵³ It is conceivable that quite many in male audiences watching women's performances were seeking a certain relief from their daily sexual frustration. They needed a genuine female body with charming looking or even flirtatious expression, with sweet, tender, but natural voice and gesture rather than traditional *dan*. Visually, difference between women and professional impersonators in how they "appeared" on stage might be almost subtle (see p. 24). However, psychologically, the authentic

²⁵² Ken'ichi, *Opera*, p. 299.

²⁵³ Since Shanghai became one of the treaty ports in 1843, massive migrations to the city had brought an enormous growth of population which reached 3.7 million in the year of 1935 and was ranked first in the country. A strong need for manpower in industry and service sectors tilted the age distribution of migrated population towards young, of which sex distribution clearly tilted towards male (with a male-to-female sex ratio 156:100 in the Shanghai International Settlement, 141:100 in the Shanghai French Concession, and 133:100 in the Chinese areas in the city in 1935). See Lou Jiajun (樓嘉軍), "Effects of Urban Population on Shanghai Entertainment Industry of the 1930s (城市人口對 30 年代上海娛樂業發展的影響)," *Problems in the Teaching of History* (歷史教學問題) (2007) Issue 6: pp. 4-10.

female body which suddenly intruded into men's world, entertaining them with the genuine femininity (ironically, though, following the highly stylized patterns that *dan* masters had established), did imply a brand-new experience. Sometimes, the female body even invited unscrupulous viewing, for instance, in the story of Zhou Chu (周處), a *jingju* actress famed for acting *Jing* (淨 a male role with painted face and forceful character) and active in a *mao'erban* (a kind of all-female casting troupe popular in Shanghai at the end of the nineteenth century). Once at a theatre, a customer asked Zhou Chu to act one play in which the character used to be naked to the waist according to the plot. He tempted her with gold. Surprisingly, she did appear on the stage, naked, wearing a fake beard long enough to perfectly cover her breasts.²⁵⁴

In Minxing Society's productions in Shanghai in 1914, men and women for the first time performed together on the *xinju* stage. The popularity and the commercial success of Minxing's mixed shows were undeniable. According to Zhou Jianyun (周劍雲 1893-1967)'s explanation, the success was partly due to company's location in the French Concession, which was less prosperous than the International Settlement. It means that the majority of its audiences were from the city's underclass who enjoyed farce or eroticism. They came to the theatre for "simple" recreation and serious drama failed to reach their hearts. In fact, as Zhou informed, all theatres in the French Concession, regardless of what they hosted, new drama or old drama, had offered mixed-sex shows by 1918.²⁵⁵ However, Zhou Jianyun expressed a determined rejection of the mixed-sex acting. One reason was that there was already an ample supply of *dan* actors with a certain degree of education which helped them add value to the

²⁵⁴ Zhou Huiling, "Actresses, Realism, and the Discourse of the 'New Woman': the Performance of Gender in Modern Chinese Theatre From the Late Qing to the May Fourth Era (女演員、寫實主義、"新女性"論述——晚清到五四時期中國現代劇場中的性別表演)," *Studies on the History of Modern Chinese Women* (近代中國婦女史研究) (Aug. 1996) Issue 4: p. 97, published by Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei. Zhou cites the story from Li Youning (李又寧) and Zhang Yufa (張玉法) ed., *Source Materials on the Feminist Movement in Modern China* (近代中國婦女運動史料), Taipei: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1975.

²⁵⁵ Zhou Jianyun, "Thoughts on Xinju, part 1 (新劇雜話 一)," in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 2, Chapter twelve "Residual thoughts on Theatre (品菊余話)," p. 83. Zhou Jianyun was a fan of *jingju* and an active *wenmingxi* practitioner. Later he became a founder of China's early film industry.

script through acting; while women, who Zhou believed had barely knowledge, were therefore not capable of the task. The other reason, which in my reading constituted the core of his rejection, was the fear of lust that “real” women playing onstage might provoke in the audience. In 1912, when the official ban on female actors was just lifted and mixed-sex acting started to appear, such fear was already expressed by some scholars. A comment in one of Beijing’s influential newspapers reads:

In the past, when mixed acting did not occur, the audience was not aroused, because they knew that the female roles were in fact played by actors. But when men see on the stage real women, who engage in such seductive posturing, how can they fail to be stimulated erotically? If the performance is watched by the unmarried, how cannot they be induced to find their own sex partners?²⁵⁶

Zhou Jianyun’s arguments were more centred on *xinju* plays. Compared to old drama, new drama generally more often depicted romantic scenes. When dealing with flirtatious and amorous plots, old drama, bounded by its stylization and settled patterns, refrained from free and frank portrayals; whereas new drama, which claimed to be pursuing realism and authenticity, indulged in such depictions and, according to Zhou’s accusation, let the actor and actress flirt as if it were for real, explicitly displaying every erotic detail.²⁵⁷ The Confucian teaching of self-control was epitomized by the statement “to start from emotion yet stop within Rites and Righteousness” (發乎情，止乎禮義)²⁵⁸. Derived from poetic philosophy, it had greatly extended the influence as an instruction for striking a balance between desire and morality in an appropriate way. In Zhou’s comparison of old and new drama, the code that restrained *jingju* actors from excessive emotion can be read as an attempt to “stay within Rites and Righteousness”, whereas *xinju*’s co-acting going beyond gender

²⁵⁶ Shuntian Shibao (順天時報), December 23, 1912, quoted and translated by Weikun Cheng, “The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin,” pp. 217-218.

²⁵⁷ Zhou Jianyun, “Thoughts on Xinju, part 1.”

²⁵⁸ It is from *Mao Shi xu* (毛詩序), a preface, know as the “Great Preface” (大序), to the *Book of Songs* (詩經), the earliest major work of Chinese literature and Confucian classics with a collection of 305 poems. It is commonly accepted that *Mao Shi xu* reached its present form no later than the first century A.D.

boundary had totally betrayed the ancient principle. Eventually, the “*xinju* trend” would result in the removal of gender boundary in an actual social milieu, and thus generate the society’s mounting anxiety over woman’s untamed body. To the male elite, women’s physical presence on stage and their image as “negative” model in the first place, was to blame for the future amoral chaos of unbound desires. The warnings proved prophetic. Due to the rapid corruption of *wenmingxi* during the mid-to late 1910s, Minging Society, the first to stage mixed-sex plays, later produced plays with many erotic scenes which had little to do with the scenario.²⁵⁹ Neither could the traditional theatre resist the tide of “lascivious plays” featuring bold and seductive women who acted in a lust-filled manner and used dirty language. Although not quite acceptable in upper-class theatres, such plays won popularity as lower-class urban amusement.²⁶⁰ One of Beijing archive sources gives us a glimpse of how “lascivious” these plays could be. Bai Yushuang (白玉霜 1907-1942), a leading actress from one of the regional operas, Ping Opera (評劇), headlined in the play “Catching Flies” (拿蒼蠅), which turned out to be a great success in the mid-1930s.

Bai and other two actresses played the roles of fly spirits. They dress in tight white cloth and long scarves, with red dudou in front. Their pants are narrow and high above their knees. During the entire performance, the stage was illuminated by colorful lights. The actresses

²⁵⁹ Shanghai Library ed., *A Picture History of Modern Chinese Drama* (中國近現代話劇圖志), p. 188, Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu wenxian chubanshe, 2008.

²⁶⁰ This was also due in part to the harsh financial situation of many leisure entertainments such as theatres, dance halls and cinemas. Archives reveal that Beijing’s cinemas could be subjected to seven kinds of taxes and levies and the heavy taxation resulted in the inability of some cinemas to continue operations. Profit margins of theatres and dance halls were even narrower than cinemas, and it is believed that the economic pressures impelled some theatres to organize erotic performances in order to survive. Except the elite performers and stars, most troupes and theatres were in financial straits. Despite the disdain of scholars, romantic and seductive plays became a popular solution, because they catered to the taste of the lower middle and lower classes, which constituted the major theatrical audiences. See Li Shaobing (李少兵), “Entertainment Culture in Beijing 1927-1937: The Authorities, Folks and the Formation of New Fashion (1927-1937 年的北京娛樂文化——官方、民間因素與新時尚的形成),” *Historical Archives* (歷史檔案) (2005) Issue 1: pp. 109-118. The author cites the statistics on taxes from documents of Beijing Municipal Archives. The representations of actresses’ beauty and sexuality in the imported, foreign-made films might have inspired stronger visibility of the females on the contemporaneous Chinese theatrical scene, but the topic is underresearched so far.

sang and danced as if they were naked. Both the story and lyrics are obscene.²⁶¹

Despite their geographical and cultural remoteness, we see a surprisingly remarkable resemblance in the fear of the female sexuality displayed on stage as well as the desire to greedily exploit it, between Western Europe and East Asia of the period when actresses began to appear. In the mid-seventeenth century, public stage performances were banned for almost two decades in England due to their rejection by the puritan ideology. Meanwhile in France, where theatre was considered by monarchy as “both an instrument of state and an enjoyable and legitimate pastime”, actresses were hired as part of the mixed troupes and began to regularly appear on the French stage. In Restoration England, the sudden arrival of actresses and the new spectacles centred on the very scenic presence of female figures stirred up a prurient interest in actresses among the theatregoing public, who thereby demanded scenarios that would exploit all the richness of the female sexuality for entertainment. French audiences demonstrated a more muted expression of the passions for actresses and a less prurient interest in them, to some extent because of the introduction of actresses in France at a gradual pace and tempo. However, it did not prevent French moralists from envisioning actresses’ “danger”. Firstly, their behaviour was believed “inherently unseemly”. Secondly, compared to their male counterparts, adolescent boys in female roles, on stage, the spectacle of attractive women was more likely to inspire immoral, lustful thoughts among the (male, heterosexual) audience, and off stage, their personal morality was also called into question.²⁶² In the following lines, the logic of fearing the “danger” of female sexuality, as well as the traits of actresses’ presumed “immorality”, are strikingly familiar for those studying the history of female performers in East Asia.

²⁶¹ Weikun Cheng cites and translates the text from *The Archives of the Social Bureau of 1912-1949: Education and Sanitation* (1912-1949 社會局檔案：教育和衛生). Weikun Cheng, “The Use of ‘Public’ Women,” p. 8. *Dudou* is a piece of cloth worn as underwear in the past, draping over a woman’s chest and belly, leaving the arms and back uncovered.

²⁶² The brief introduction of the emergence of actresses in England and France and its background given in this paragraph is based on Julia Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV: Cross-casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet and Opera*, pp. 11-17, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

[T]he nudity of her breast, her face covered with paint and with beauty spots, her lascivious winking, her amorous talk, her mannered adornments and all this lubricious paraphernalia are the nets in which even the most resolute find themselves caught.²⁶³

[T]here are innumerable reports of the disruption caused by the hordes of followers they [the actresses] attracted backstage, together with expressions of real or mock outrage at the apparent fashion for members of the Court to take actresses and opera singers as their mistresses.²⁶⁴

III.4 Manipulation of the female body and its sexuality, for “fleshy feeling”, revolutionary power, and athleticism

What the elite envisioned while debating the legitimacy of mixed-sex co-acting – an increasing public interest in actresses as sexual objects, an over-exposure to their sexual implications, a collective exploitation of their sexuality, in short, the flood of carnality – seemed to have come true in the film era when the female body was unprecedentedly, visibly displayed on screen. Here are some of the words most often seen in film advertisements which occupied about two full pages of a daily newspaper in Shanghai: “amorous” (風情), “romantic” (浪漫), “erotic” (香豔) “sorrowful and erotic”(哀豔), “fleshy feeling” (肉感), “passionate” (熱情) – all come after the word “extremely”.²⁶⁵ Clearly, all these words connote female sexuality. Except the most daring and explicit “fleshy feeling”, they were all masked with romance. Yet one should not rely too much on advertisements. Considering that the official censorship agency did not allow scenes of female nudity in films (either domestic or foreign), Chinese audiences would probably walk out of movie theatre with disappointment because they did not see the expected “fleshy feeling” or anything racy.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 16. Author of the quoted words: Joseph de Voisin.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. Author of the quoted words: Jan Clarke.

²⁶⁵ Lu Xun listed a dozen words that studios used to set in advertisements to promote films. I have picked some of them concerning women. See Lu Xun, “Modern Cinema and the Bourgeoisie,” published on Mar. 1, 1930 in a major leftist magazine, *Sprouts Monthly* (萌芽月刊). It has also been collected in *The Complete Works of Lu Xun* Vol. 4, pp. 399-423, 2005.

²⁶⁶ The Nationalists came into power in 1927 and founded the Nanjing government, which started its operation of film censorship soon after it took over Shanghai. A tight censorship system was gradually built up in the late twenties, with films involving superstition (magic/ghost) among the

A film released before the Nationalist government implemented censorship of films was an exception. *The Cave of the Spider Spirit* (盤絲洞 1927) probably has been the most frequently cited example of a film featuring the “fleshy feeling”, notorious in most cases, for its nudity. Featuring an erotic episode from the classical novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記), the film “opened on Chinese New Year’s Day to full houses in several Shanghai theaters and was immediately picked up by Southeast Asian distributors.”²⁶⁷ It was directed by Dan Duyu (但杜宇 1897-1972), a veteran director who had made one of the earliest three long features, *Sea Oath* (1922), also the first romance film. For shooting *Sea Oath*, Dan invited a gentry-born, modern girl to play the heroine, even prior to Hong Shen’s 1923 *huaju* production that legitimized female actors in modern theatre. Presumably arousing controversy though, the enthusiasm towards presenting women on screen, especially towards unveiling their romantic and feminine sides (both relevant to female sexuality), had motivated and inspired Dan from the outset of his film career. His previous formal training in fine arts might account for his obsession with visual refinement, which centred on depiction of females.²⁶⁸ Dan was also a well-known Shanghai painter, particularly well versed in painting fashionable beauties, mostly for calendars,²⁶⁹ In this way, he trained himself to be sensitive to female figures and their commercial potential. We can feel this sensitivity in fig. 17 and 18 (see below) showing the heroine of *The Cave of the Spider Spirit*, which, striking enough though, seems to be “acceptable” compared to fig. 16. Even more surprising, the model posing completely nude was a film actress, Hu Shan (胡珊/姍), cousin of Hu Die. It was one of the few elaborate

first targets, and in the early thirties with leftist films among the most prominent targets. More details in Zhiwei Xiao, “Constructing a New National Culture: Film Censorship and the Issues of Cantonese Dialect, Superstition, and Sex in the Nanjing Decade,” (hereafter referred to as Xiao, “Film Censorship,”) in Yingjin Yingjin Zhang ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai*, pp. 183-199.

²⁶⁷ Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, p. 42.

²⁶⁸ Dan Duyu graduated from Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (上海美術專科學校). Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 136, entry “Dan Duyu”.

²⁶⁹ It was a very popular kind of advertising posters, often featuring a beautiful woman beside the advertisement text. Known as the “calendar poster” (月份牌), calendar was sometimes not attached though.

nude photographs shot by Dan Duyu in studio, which are meant to be studies of “light and shadow”.²⁷⁰ Zhang Zhen has a good description and inspiring reading of the one picture featuring Hu Shan. “With her bare back facing the camera, Hu Shan’s face turns to the viewer with an obvious pride in her own body. This is a modern girl self-assured about her photogenic, streamline curves.”²⁷¹

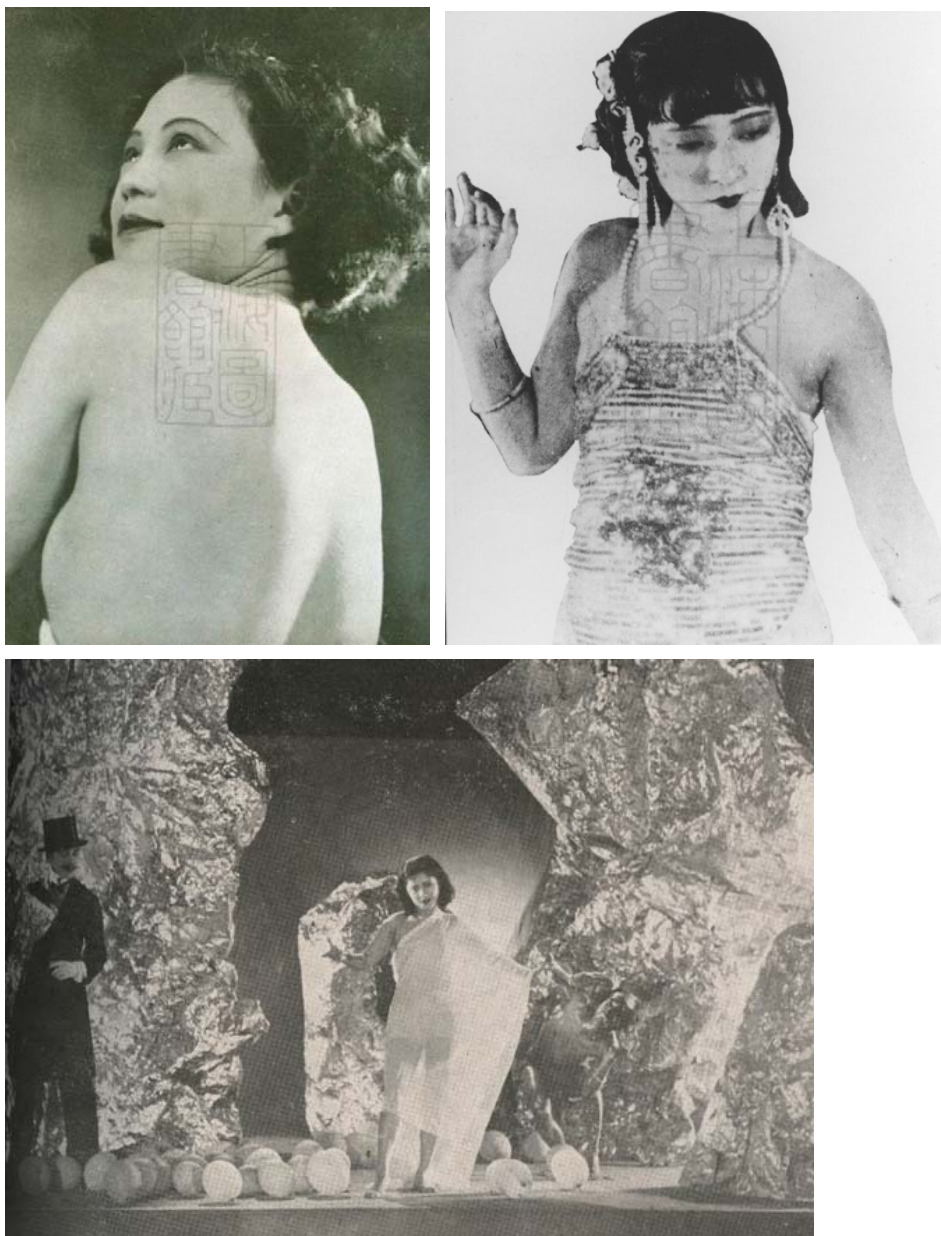


Fig. 16 (left): Hu Shan in Dan Duyu’s nude photograph. Fig. 17 (right): Yin Mingzhu in *The Cave of the Spider Spirit* (1927). Fig. 18 (below): Yin Mingzhu in *The Cave of the Spider Spirit* (1927) and the surrealistic mise-en-scène.

²⁷⁰ Zhang, *Amorous*, p. 277.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

In the thirties, the “fleshy feeling” was also present in the works by leftist filmmakers, which often depicted farming or fishing villages where people struggled at the bottom end of the social hierarchy and experienced bitter class conflicts. In these films, screen images of modern female stars were “remoulded” into peasants or fisherwomen with bare feet instead of wearing high heels. Even Hu Die, Mingxing’s pillar actress who had been always cast in well-bred, elegant roles, portrayed a woman working in salt field with rolled-up trousers in *Salt Field Fury* (鹽潮 1933). In Mingxing’s another leftist film released in the same year, *Spring Silkworms* (春蠶 1933), two modern-style actresses played workers of silkworm farms dressed in coarse cloth.²⁷² The leftists seemed to be aspiring to turn the sophisticated modern ladies into simple country girls. The female sexuality accentuated in these depictions, which used to symbolize “decadent, bourgeois indulgence”, was now conveying revolutionary tones. It was to imply that these women were no longer obsessed by personal sentiments but were instead dedicated to national cause. Screenwriter and Director Sun Yu, not a Communist himself though, also utilized cinema to disseminate patriotism and national sentiments. Sun discovered the most talented and most typical examples of the new generation of actresses, Wang Renmei and Li Lili, who even did not need a transformation since they already fitted into the leftist mould when rising to stardom. We will see, in the two following photographs (also in fig. 9 in II.3), that, although Wang and Li bared most of their arms and legs, their ragged clothes instantly identified them as “the proletariat”; their genuineness, innocence veiled their sexuality and rendered the bare body parts as a manifestation of a primitive power, which was to be perceived as a revolutionary power.

²⁷² Zhou Huiling, “Masquerading the Revolutionary Cats: Marketing, Actresses, and Chinese Film Industry (1933-1935) (“性感野貓” 之革命造型：創作、行銷、電影女演員與中國現代性的想像 (1933-1935)),” *Studies on Modern Chinese Women’s History* (Aug. 2001) Issue 9: p. 86, published by Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei.

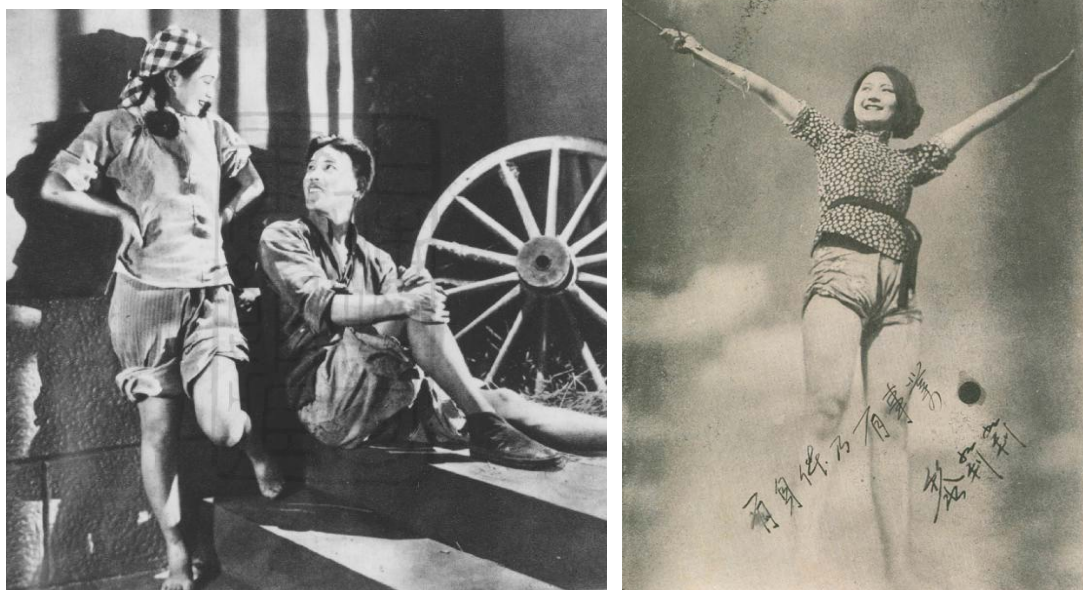


Fig. 19 (left): Wang Renmei (left) and Gao Zhanfei (高占非) in *Morning in a Metropolis* (都會的早晨 1933). Fig. 20 (right): Li Lili in *Little Toys* (小玩意 1933). Both films are considered classics.

Remarkably, the same bodies were manipulated by different, even contradictory ideological forces. As Zhang Zhen points out, the new constellation of screen actors, “despite their on-screen images as oppressed peasants or workers, were marketed for their Hollywood-style physiques and athleticism.”²⁷³ In the early thirties, the Nanjing regime launched a campaign called New Life Movement (新生活運動), by which the Nationalists attempted to counter Communist ideology with a mix of Confucianism, fascism, and Christianity. In sync with the campaign, the film censorship agency strove to embed “modernity” in cinema by promoting an athletic ideal. Screen images such as those of Wang Renmei and Li Lili who looked healthy and physically fit were encouraged while those falling short of this ideal were banned. Under this guideline, which applied to both female and male actors, and in a general climate inside the film circles where it was common to expect “genuineness” from actors (as I have discussed), not only athletic-looking actresses became popular, but effeminate male stars from the twenties were also replaced by a much more muscular group of male idols from the thirties. For instance, the “King of the Screen” Jin Yan, the most

²⁷³ Zhang, *Amorous*, pp. 279-280.

admired actor of the thirties, had a perfect muscular physique. Actresses tired to adjust themselves to the athletic standard (like Ruan Lingyu in fig. 22), or volunteered to promote the athleticism – the words Li Lili wrote beside her autograph (fig. 20) read, “there is no good career without a good physique.”²⁷⁴



Fig. 21 (left): the athletic couple, Wang Renmei and Jin Yan.

Fig. 22 (right): even the delicate and gentle star Ruan Lingyu posed as a sports fan.

Before stepping onto screen, Wang Renmei and Li Lili had received musical training in Li Jinhui’s Bright Moon Troupe, one of China’s first song and dance troupes.²⁷⁵ In 1931, Li’s troupe merged with Lianhua Film Company, because Lianhua’s manager Luo Mingyou wanted to increase the studio’s viability in the new era of sound film.²⁷⁶ In the eyes of progressive artists who attached more ideological

²⁷⁴ A film was banned in 1935 because the male protagonist was, “in the words of the censors, *youtou fenmian* [油頭粉面] (an oily hair and powdery face), a reference to an effeminate male type who is meticulously groomed, covered with makeup, and dandyish.” Although the film scenario was written by Chen Guofu (陳果夫 1892-1951), a dominant political figure in the Nationalist Party, it was banned by the censors who “did not think such an image should serve as model for Chinese youth.” See Xiao, “Film Censorship,” p. 197.

²⁷⁵ For more information about the development of Li’s troupe, see Chang, “The Good, the Bad,” p. 146. Chang has noted an interesting detail. Although the troupe “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.”

²⁷⁶ By that time Mingxing had just released China’s first “talkie” and Lianhua had been looking for new film talent suitable for “talkies”. Girls from song and dance troupes had the advantage of Mandarin skills and stage performance, which made them more prepared for “talkies”. Ibid.

meaning to art, song and dance troupes were mere light entertainment and commercial performances, not worth being taken seriously. For instance, Wang Renmei's husband, Jin Yan, who had been considerably influenced by Tian Han and became a faithful supporter of the leftist movement, had once criticized Wang Renmei's dance performance in Li Jinhui's troupe as "selling legs" (賣大腿) (because the girls usually bared legs while dancing, see fig. 23).²⁷⁷ Without being framed upon particular ideologies or values, or any other discourse in vogue like nationalism and patriotism, the female sexuality seemed unlikely to attain legitimacy and power. Nor could art and aesthetics legitimize the female sexuality, given that art and aesthetics were not legitimate themselves (due to the association with femininity) and needed to be reformed, re-oriented according to the leftist discourse.



Fig. 23: rehearsal of Li Jinhui's Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe, Wang Renmei (front) leading the dance. This kind of "song and dance" (歌舞) was a newly imported form of art. It is obvious that the troupe's dance style and poses were very much influenced by Hollywood musicals.

Although lacking cultural or political power, there is no doubt that female sexuality could, often effectively, generate sensation and bring the actress to stardom overnight. One of the popular female stars of the thirties, Xu Lai (徐來 1909-73), appeared in her film debut *Late Spring* (殘春 1933) with a nude scene (fig. 24), which

²⁷⁷ Wang Renmei's biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*, p. 190.

somehow managed to escape censors' scissors and proved a sensational success.



Fig. 24: Xu Lai in *Late Spring* (1933), naked in bath.

To summarize, the exploitation of female sexuality of the performing women was universal. It was seen in erotic representations of women in plays and films, as well as in patronage relations. This exploitation was especially a dominant feature among those who engaged in performing while being commonly identified as “prostitute-like”, available women. During the process of sexualization of these women, which happened universally in East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea) in its modern era, they gradually merged with common sex workers. In the female film stardom, the exploitation of female sexuality had developed in nuanced, manipulative forms. On screen, women’s bodies were exposed to the mass audience, and that still worried the defenders of morality. However, the female sexuality exposed in the films attained new power through ideological, political discourse embedded in attractive, vigorous female images.

Conclusion

I have reviewed a long journey of female actors from their first step back to stage performance to the overwhelming star status they eventually attained on the silver screen. At first, female actors strove to prove themselves by competing with *dan* stars, who achieved extreme popularity by art of female impersonation. The progressively greater emphasis on realism in modern forms of theatre led to the gradual obsolescence of the highly stylized female impersonation. The physical body of female actors, which instantly enabled them to present women naturally and realistically, not only legitimized women in acting, but also directly constituted their unprecedented and incomparable visibility. The gender structure of stardom completely reversed in the film industry, which coincided with the full-fledged emergence of the print media during the thirties and forties. Studios probably needed equal numbers of female and male actors. Yet there turned out to be an absolute predominance of female stars in terms of popularity and visibility, in a bodily way. In a best-selling photography collection of 1934, it featured eight top film stars of the time (also the top of the Republican cinema), all female.²⁷⁸

After having examined institutional evolutions, which pushed women (back) to the public sphere of performing and then built up their stardom, let us finally meet the actual “protagonist” of these transformations. With a very few exceptions, film actresses were no longer recruited from the abused or impoverished, as traditional theatrical actresses used to be. The novelty of filmmaking even attracted a few girls from affluent families and upper social classes to be involved. Despite the considerable number of the total productions of the Republican film industry

²⁷⁸ It was a eight-volume series, named *Photography Collection of Chinese Female Film Stars* (中國電影女明星照相集), featuring one star in each. The series was elaborately made by Chen Jiazhen (陳嘉震), a distinguished photographer. The predominance of female stars is also demonstrated in *28 Big Stars*, a book published recently with biographies of 28 stars. Its editor explains the principle of his selection: he selects those whose faces appeared the most on front covers of the film magazines published in the Republican era. The front covers had already picked the most famous faces. For this reason, the book has only a few stars from the twenties, especially early twenties, when both the film industry and film magazines were not well-developed yet. Stars who were most frequently shown on these front pages were incredibly gendered. From the names chosen by this book, we see 26 females and only 2 males.

(1920s-1949), which showed an apparent prosperity, we can hardly see anything related to modernity in probably more than a half of these films, which were made with conventional subjects and narrative as well as the patriarchal ideology, not much differentiated from traditional theatre. Meanwhile, we also need to put a question mark over the modernity of film actresses, who appeared as the most modern group of women of the time, though.

Once female actors rose out of the shadow of *dan* stars, they became the most fashionable, impressive, and dominant icons. They were a tiny group of the exceptionally visible women in a society with a deep-rooted convention of gender segregation. Such icons were during a long time read as “courtesan-like”. That reading seemed to be implied in terms like *nüyanyuan* (female actor 女演員) and *nümingxing* (female star 女明星), while there was no need to specify male actors or male stars in most cases. What is exactly “courtesan-like”? I have proved a historical connection between performing and prostitution (see III.2). Yet the content of “courtesan-like” image was more complicated. Not just actresses, women working in the entertainment and recreation sector in general were “courtesan-like”, and some of them, who offered sexual services much more commonly, were thus “prostitute-like”. If we put all these women into a larger category, a category of professionals of diversion and amusement, features of being “courtesan-like” or “prostitute-like” will be more noticeable. They were all recognized by sociable behaviours and loose morals. They sold their skills (which would be valuable if it was art) as well as social company (which could be pleasurable conversations or presence in social gatherings, but could also be “selling souls”).

1. Who were they?

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, a few women appeared to fill the vacuum of “real” women on stage created by Qing rulers’ constant prohibition against female actors. These pioneers generally suffered many hardships at an early age. Quite a few lost parents in childhood, which was the main reason why they became *jingju* actresses. A few was wife or daughter of an actor. Another few, not less common, had associations with prostitution – she either was daughter of a prostitute,

or was herself a prostitute and a *jingju* star at the same time, or was at first a *jingju* star and later became a prostitute.²⁷⁹ With the similar backgrounds to that of *jingju* actresses, *xinju* actresses active during the mid- to late 1910s in Shanghai were mostly of humble origins and poorly educated, who included prostitutes, concubines, divorcees, and a very few exceptions from the middle class having some school education or even well-educated.²⁸⁰ It is remarkable that male *xinju* initiators were, on the contrary, mostly scholars.²⁸¹ did not have good reputation themselves, since they

In the twenties, women engaged in performing were still likely to be seen as “courtesan-like”. The earliest filmmakers and actors were mostly from the *wenmingxi* circle, and *wenmingxi* had become a target of strong criticism from reform-minded dramatists and derision from ordinary audiences since 1917 (see explanations for “corruption” of *wenmingxi* in I.4). This even reinforced the image of film actress as a career not suitable for good girls. However, a great self-confidence and an aspiration to extend their modern lives to the exotic, mysterious silver screen, brought a few gentry-born, well-educated girls to the industry. Yin Mingzhu, Fu Wenhao (see descriptions of both in I.5), and Yang Naimei (fig. 7) were the earliest stars who fell into this category, but faced the fiercest rejections from family members. In fact, most of the earliest film actresses came from families operating studios.²⁸² The practice of

²⁷⁹ A detailed biographical account of the most famous *jingju* actresses of the late Qing and early Republican era is given in Ken'ichi, *Opera*, pp. 290-314.

²⁸⁰ A contemporary account of eleven leading *xinju* actresses is given in Ju Yuan, “Actresses of New Drama,” in *Jubu congkan* Vol. 2, Chapter eleven, “Anecdotes About Actors” pp. 23-26.

²⁸¹ As a target of disgust and derision, the performing career was shunned by the upper classes. Actors were usually from either a long line of performers, or families in or close to poverty. Members of Chunliu Society (the first *xinju* company) were young intellectuals studying in Japan, mostly from wealthy or noble families. They had to cover up the “scandal” in their hometowns, and repeatedly stressed their activities as art, to distinguish themselves from previous *dan* actors involved in gay prostitution.

²⁸² Li Minwei, an important early filmmaker, relocated his Minxin (民新) Film Company from Hong Kong to Shanghai in 1926. Minxin (Shanghai)'s actresses were mostly from Li's family: Yan Shanshan (Li's wife, the first film actress), Lin Chuchu (林楚楚 1904-79, Li's another wife), Li Dandan (李旦旦 1910-40, daughter of Minxin's another manager). In the early thirties, Li Minwei's cousin, Li Zhuozhuo (黎灼灼 1906-90), also became a film actress. See Cheng, *History*, p. 105. Dan Duyu, who made one of the three earliest long features, *Sea Oath*, operated his Shanghai Film Company like a “family business” too. The studio's male and female actors were

introduction into filmmaking by family member in or closely related to the film business, as the most “natural” way for girls to start a “silver life”, was not limited to the very early stages of the film industry, but lasted for quite a long time.²⁸³ Otherwise, there seemed to be no reason for a girl (if she was not exceptionally unconventional, or even a little rebellious) to join the film circle, which was full of “strangeness” deviating from a normal life. In terms of the gateway to a performing life, film actresses, especially in the twenties, were closer to those from traditional opera and *wenmingxi*. We do not see much of autonomous motivation in their career choice, or, such motivation was often veiled by other reasons, such as financial pressure or family influence. However, *huaju* actresses, a tiny group which appeared at the same time, were a completely modern species. Born into the middle class, they were beneficiaries of the feminist campaign for women’s right to a decent education. Motivated by personal interest in *huaju* and passion for theatre reform, they chose to experience a Westernized theatrical life as amateurs, not for a living.²⁸⁴

In the thirties, song and dance troupes became a large pool of talented and fresh actresses, from which these girls became film stars: Wang Renmei, Li Lili (see

mostly Dan’s nieces and nephews. See Zheng Yimei, *Old Stories About the Film Circles*, p. 11.

²⁸³ Besides the two “film families”, this category included more leading actresses. Li Minghui (黎明暉 1909-2003) and Yan Yuexian (嚴月嫻 1911-?) were both from famous musical families. Li’s father, Li Jinhui (黎錦暉), was head of the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe, where Wang Renmei and Li Lili spent years. Yan’s father, Yan Gongshang (嚴工上), and her brothers were all versed in composition, and wrote many great songs for films. Xia Peizhen (夏佩珍 1908-) and Fan Xuepeng (范雪朋 1908-74) also belonged to this category, but they chose to be film actresses as a way out their difficult situations in life. Xia, whose parents were barely able to support themselves, was adopted and raised by her uncle, Xia Tianren (夏天人), a prominent *wenmingxi* actor. Xu, was trapped in an unhappy marriage (arranged by her mother) when she learned of the relationship between her classmate, Xu Qinfang (徐琴芳), and a film director (the two got married soon). Xia became the most famous “swordswoman” on screen in the late twenties when the martial arts craze swept the film industry. Source: brief biographies of 103 film actors in Shanghai Library’s online database, “Memories of Cinema”: http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/dy_index.htm; and Fan Xuepeng, “Remembering My Life on the Silver Screen,” pp. 64-67.

²⁸⁴ The girls who acted in Hong Shen’s 1923 production as the first *huaju* actresses were Qian Jianqiu (錢劍秋) and the sisters, Wang Yuqing (王毓清) and Wang Yujing (王毓靜). They were students at Shanghai’s elite Wuben Girls’ School (務本女學). In the next year, Hong Shen cast Qian Jianqiu and one of the sisters, Wang Yuqing, in leading roles in *The Mistress’s Fan*, a very successful and influential play during the formation of *huaju*.

descriptions of both in II.3), Xu Lai (fig. 24), Zhou Xuan (II.3), Ying Yin (英茵 1917-42), and Gong Qiuxia (龔秋霞 1918-2004). Although not impoverished, their families more or less had financial difficulties or were in unstable situation.²⁸⁵ Gong and Zhou were in particular talented in singing and became singing stars as well. The two were so popular and professional that it became customary that they sang the theme song of every film they starred in. In the thirties, another considerable group of leading actresses came from leftist *huaju* organizations as part of the leftist penetration into the film industry. They were Ai Xia (艾霞 1912-34), Hu Ping (胡萍 1910-?), Chen Bo'er (陳波兒 1910-51), Wang Ying (王瑩 1913-74), and Shu Xiuwen (舒繡文 1915-69).²⁸⁶ The workforce in the film industry was strictly gendered (the same in most fields of the time), with men in screenwriters, directors, and all the technical, mechanical personnel, with women on screen as the sweet or seductive face of the impersonal industry.²⁸⁷ Remarkably, a very few women enjoyed the prestige of being “writer” and “intellectual”, besides being a film star. They were found in the leftist group. Among Mingxing's productions in 1933, the screenplays of two, *A Modern Woman* (現代一女性) and *Tragedy of the Sister* (姊姊的悲劇) were written by Ai Xia and Hu Ping respectively. They also played the heroines in the two films.²⁸⁸ Wang Ying was more exceptional. She toured Japan to study music, drama and literature in the thirties, and in 1942 began to tour the US to promote the cause of Chinese resistance in World War II. She befriended Pearl S Buck, and performed

²⁸⁵ Wang Renmei's parents both died early. Li Lili's parents were both underground Communists, occupied with revolutionary activities. Zhou Xuan even never knew her biological parents. She was an adopted daughter with a miserable childhood. Ying yin lost his father early (usually, father was the major or only one who supported a family). Gong Qiuxia's family was also on a tight budget. Except for Gong, the others were all from Li Jinhui's Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe. See their biographies in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1 and 2.

²⁸⁶ Cheng, *History*, p. 185. Ai Xia adapted her screenplay from her original novel (with the same title), which tells a story about a “modern woman” obsessed with love. An outline of the novel is given in He Xueying (何雪英), “*Movie Times* and Ai Xia's *A Modern Woman* (‘電影時報’與艾霞的《現代一女性》)” *Journal of Beijing Film Academy* (北京電影學院學報) (2010) Issue 3: pp. 101-104.

²⁸⁷ A film produced in 1925 was directed by Xie Caizhen (謝采貞), reportedly the first Chinese female director, and probably the only before 1949. She also played the female lead in this film. Zhang, *Encyclopedia*, p. 362, entry “woman's film”.

²⁸⁸ Cheng, *History*, p. 242.

China's most popular "resistance" play in wartime, *Put Down Your Whip* (放下你的鞭子) in English. Her performance was seen in the White House in the presence of President Roosevelt, his wife, and diplomats residing in Washington.²⁸⁹

As film occupied a central position of the fashionable urban life, it started to appeal to more ordinary girls from the outside of either film world or political camps. They were habitual moviegoers and big fans as teenagers, who dreamed to experience the "dreams" on screen themselves, and to be stars adored by others. Their beauty and talent were "accidentally" discovered by film directors as they were "intentionally" seeking opportunities around studios or filmmaking teams, like Chen Yanyan (see description in II.3, and fig. 12) and Tan Ying (談瑛 1915-2001). Being confident and courageous enough, Ye Qiuxin (葉秋心 1913-84) tried a more direct and effective approach, selling herself to the owner of one of the biggest studios, Tianyi. After persuading their conservative families to agree with their unconventional choice, these girls started filmmaking at the early thirties and soon climbed to stardom. Hu Die also started as an ardent movie fan. She went to an audition for a place at a major acting school (details of the school in note 112) in 1924, under an assumed name, because she was afraid of rejection by her parents. This time, from among more than 2000 applicants in total (we don't know the sex ratio), more than 100, including Hu Die, were admitted. It seems that by the mid-twenties, the lure of stardom, and for some, the ambition of achieving great success in life, had already started to exert influence in the Shanghai urban populace, who saw an incredible boom in the film industry from the year of 1923 (see note 106). On the other hand, because of the boom, studios felt an urgent need for new acting talent (which was also the reason for setting up training institutes). In 1926, Mingxing advertised for a female lead in a film on Shanghai's several major newspapers, and found the most talented actress. A daughter of a domestic without any acting training auditioned and got the part. She was Ruan Lingyu.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ See Wang Ying's biography in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*, Vol. 1 pp. 153-165; and Bernd Eberstein ed., *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900-1949: The drama*, p. 92, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990.

²⁹⁰ See biographies of Chen Yanyan, Tan Ying, Ye Qiuxin, Hu Die, and Ruan Lingyu in Zhang, *28*

2. *How (modern) did they live, and love?*

Since they acted in the shadows of female impersonators, actresses' artistic talent was often ignored, while their off-stage lives received lots of attention in a few accounts on their life stories.²⁹¹ From these sources, we see that the fate of being concubines seemed inescapable for Beijing's earliest *jingju* actresses (examples in III.1), and for some of Shanghai's *xinju* actresses too. *Xinju* actresses' love affairs with fellow actors or wealthy patrons were also often reported.²⁹² Such images even pushed them closer to prostitutes. But not many would see Yu Shan (俞珊 figs. 5 and 6) as prostitute, no matter how much she bared her body and how seductively she danced in the 1929 *huaaju* production of *Salomé*. *Huaaju* rose as a new site of intellectual ferment, where young theatre reformers and students were pursuing art, freedom, and modernity. As a daughter of the elite class standing on the *huaaju* stage,²⁹³ Yu Shan was seen as muse to an intellectual audience. She even fascinated some of the most distinguished intellectuals, and married one of them.²⁹⁴

Film actresses lived in a time with the full-fledged print media, which circulated stars' private lives as an essential part of their stardom (discourse on actors' private lives is discussed in II.1). Their off-screen romances, the news of which were usually

Big Stars Vol. 1 and 2. "Hu Die" was the fake name that she made up for the audition. Her original name was Hu Reihua (胡瑞華).

²⁹¹ In Ken'ichi's book published in 1926, singing and acting skills of *jingju* actresses were mentioned, though, only formed a tiny part of their biographies, whereas most of the text was centred on sensational stories of love affairs. See Ken'ichi, *Opera*, pp. 290-314. Ju Yuan's account on *xinju* actresses had a similar tendency. See Ju Yuan, "Actresses of New Drama," pp. 23-26.

²⁹² See Ju Yuan's account. It shows the outcomes of some *xinju* actresses – there was one ending in prostitution, one kept in secret as concubine by a wealthy merchant, and another married to Su Shichi, the founder and manager of Minging (the first *wenmingxi* company to adopt mixed-sex acting), after being concubine of a merchant.

²⁹³ Names in Yu Shan's family pedigree were connected with the most renowned figures such as high government officials and outstanding scholars. Yu Shan herself was born in Tokyo, later went to Tianjin's famous Nankai Girls' school (南開女中). When "discovered" by Tian Han, she was a student studying in Shanghai National Music School (上海國立音樂專科學校). See Wang Mingjian (王鳴劍), "Yu Shan and Wits of the Crescent School (俞珊與新月才子的情感糾葛)," *World of Literature & History* (文史天地) (2009) Issue 8: pp. 45-57.

²⁹⁴ The most famous among them included the poet Xu Zhimo (徐志摩 1897-1931), the writer Liang Shiqiu (梁實秋 1903-87), and the professor as well as enthusiast of modern dramatic education Zhao Taimou (趙太侔 1889-1968) who had divorced his wife to marry Yu Shan. *Ibid*.

called *taose xinwen* (peach-coloured news 桃色新聞), were always selling points. These romances had two noticeable features. Firstly, their marriage partners or lovers were mostly from the film circle too, either directors or actors. Starting from the first female star, Yin Mingzhu, who married the director Dan Duyu,²⁹⁵ the list of “silver couples” (it excludes actresses introduced into film acting by their director-husbands as it was found in family-studios) is amazingly long, including female stars rising from the twenties – Zhang Zhiyun (張織雲 1904-?), Xu Qinfang; from the thirties – Wang Renmei, Chen Yanyan, Yuan Meiyun (fig. 1), Tan Ying, Gong Qiuxia, Chen Bo'er, Gu Lanjun (顧蘭君 1917-89) and her sister Gu Meijun (顧梅君), Bai Yang; from the forties – Shangguan Yunzhu (上官雲珠 1920-68), Qin Yi (秦怡 1922-), Huang Zongying (黃宗英 1925-) and Li Lihua (李麗華 1924-).²⁹⁶ It was probably because film actresses worked days and nights with these men, and were thus more likely to develop relationship with them. This strikingly high proportion²⁹⁷ may also indicate that film actresses were perhaps still not acceptable for most “ordinary” upper-class families outside the film circle, on account of their unusual, or, for some, courtesan-like career. However, the same or similar backgrounds did not always guarantee the security of marriages or relationships. Breakups and divorces often occurred to these “silver couples”. The second feature of their romances was cohabitation. Not as significant as the first one, though, it caused more controversy.

²⁹⁵ Zheng Yimei offers detailed stories about the couple in *Old Stories About the Film Circles: Dan Duyu and Yin Mingzhu*.

²⁹⁶ In terms of the most popular actresses in the Republican era, I should say, the list is not comprehensive, though close to a complete one. We may also take into account the following actresses, whose marriages were quite close to this category. Xu Lai married Li Jinhui, head of the song and dance troupe where she served for years. Zhou Xuan married Yan Hua (嚴華), her singing instructor and later fellow singer from Li Jinhui's troupe. Chen Yumei (陳玉梅 1910-?) married Shao Zuiweng (邵醉翁), owner of Tianyi (one of the three major studios in Shanghai before 1937). Li Lili married Luo Jingyu (羅靜予), a distinguished film technician and producer. Ye Qiuxin married a *jingju* actor. Hu Die was engaged to a film actor in the late twenties, but cancelled the engagement at the end of 1930. She married a businessman in 1935. My main source: Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1 and 2.

²⁹⁷ Take the book *28 Big Stars* for example. Except for 2 male actors, the book includes 26 most popular film actresses of Republican Shanghai. In my list, except for 6 names, there are 10 names that are found in this book, which, plus 6 (also found in the book) from last note, is 16 in total. 16/26 is a very high proportion.

For some, cohabitation between unmarried persons was a fashionable, modern life, or a revolution in sexual mores. Yet for others (probably the majority), it was illicit and rebellious, and seen as particularly harmful to the social morality when film celebrities promoted it publicly. The relationship between Zhang Zhiyun and the prominent director, Bu Wancang (卜萬蒼 1903-74), in the twenties, and that between Tan Ying and Cheng Bugao (程步高 1896-1966), a director in close cooperation with the leftists, in the thirties, were especially publicized cases of “cohabitation”. Tan Ying even bore Cheng a baby without marrying him.²⁹⁸

The changes of marriage patterns seen among film actresses, the most visible examples of the first generation of female professionals, who gained more autonomy in their own lives once they became financially independent, can be read against the backdrop of the feminist movement initiated from the May Fourth debates on chastity, free love (*ziyou lian'ai* 自由戀愛), and women’s career. Rules of arranged marriage, which had been questioned by radical thinkers but still regulated the lives of the majority, lost authority among film actresses. They chose marriage partners from those they knew and loved, and enjoyed courtship (some had been courting for years), a process omitted in arranged marriage (or perhaps happened after getting married). The relationships they were in were much more “relaxed” and flexible than those common in the mainstream society. Some got married, some broke up after being courting for a short or long time, some got married and divorced. Some cohabitated, exhibiting a kind of love which was not leading to marriage. All these had gone incredibly far away from the Confucian ideal of female virtue and chastity. When Tan Ying was asked about the possibility of infidelity of Cheng, her cohabiting lover who went inland seeking opportunities and leaving her in Shanghai, we even hear a feminist tone in her answer.

I have sent a letter to *Bugao* (her lover), telling him frankly: If you have no [other] woman,

²⁹⁸ One writer commented on Tan Ying’s shocking deed of getting pregnant before marriage: “An unmarried virgin conceives a baby? Then what is the baby going to be when it is born? Oh dear! This baby is too miserable!” The words are from an article published in a 1935 film magazine, cited in a biography of Tan Ying in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*, Vol. 2, p. 225.

I will be willing to remain [chaste] for you; not limited to three years, I can do it for eight or ten years. Women should remain chaste for men as a matter of course. However, if I get to know that you have [other] woman, I won't be [chaste] any more. I cannot be a living widow for someone who has [emotionally] abandoned me.²⁹⁹

A transformation – envisioned by the feminists – from a weak, constrained, dependent, invisible traditional woman to a new woman with all the opposite qualities, was manifestly epitomized by one of the earliest and brightest female film stars, Wang Hanlun (1903-78) (fig. 8). Born into a “well-to-do” family, she studied at Shanghai’s prestigious missionary-founded school, St. Mary’s Girls’ School. Except for the fact that she used to be very quiet, not sociable at all, her early years were just like those of Yin Mingzhu and Yang Naimei, until her father’s death brutally ended happy schooldays of the sixteen-year-old girl. Her brother and sister-in-law arranged her to marry a man in the Northeast China. The man kept a mistress and claimed a legitimate right for a husband to do so. Since she became determined to divorce her husband when he began to hit her, she had started to explore an unknown path leading to a new life, and to the “new woman” role as defined by the May Fourth discourse. She made a living first as a teacher and later as a typist in Shanghai. Ren Jinping (任矜蘋), one of the co-founders of Mingxing, met her by chance while the studio was looking for an actress for the female lead in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*, the first Chinese-made full-length feature. Ren thought she was suitable for the role and invited her to join. When the film was successfully released, her family were outraged by her engagement in the “disgraceful” film acting. She cut kinship ties and adopted a new name. With unbound feet, and a new identity, she even extended her life roles from female leads to producing, and to a completely new field, the beauty industry. The considerable earnings from the film produced by the film company run by Wang Hanlun herself, enabled her to open a beauty parlour in 1931, named after her.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ The words are from an interview with Tan Ying published in a 1940 film magazine, cited in *ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁰⁰ Wang Hanlun recorded her life story in “My Experience in the Film Industry (我的從影經過),” *Film Art* (電影藝術) (1956) Issue S2: pp. 59-63. Her original name was Peng Jianqing (彭劍青). Giving up one’s family name means to seriously and completely break off ties with his/her family

Although film actresses always appeared as modern girls, not all were labelled as “new women”. Yang Naimei (1904-60) (fig. 7) portrayed a playgirl in her first film, because the filmmakers had seen something close to that character in her. Her portrayal of a modern playgirl on screen was successful and impressive, however, off screen, her own life as a dissolute playgirl was out of control. One of her startling deeds was her visit to Qingdao to meet Zhang Zongchang (張宗昌), a notorious warlord who kept numerous concubines. Zhang invited Yang Naimei when he learned of her plan to found her own film company. From this visit, Zhang got several days’ company of the most popular film star of the time, and Yang Naimei raised sufficient funds for her ambitious plan. She gained huge profit from the film starring herself and produced by her company in 1928 (Wang Hanlun came up with the same idea a year later). Her personal fortune evaporated in a few years due to extravagant lifestyle, mainly owing to gambling and opium addiction.³⁰¹

The question of whether these women felt fortunate and worthwhile, or otherwise, to have spent a life in film studios remains forever mystery. In terms of individual autonomy and modernity they had demonstrated, we see many complex stories behind the fact that they did live a fashionable, modern, independent life in many respects. For instance, opium addiction was not rare among film actresses. It involved, besides Yang Naimei, at least several other leading ones.³⁰² Zhou Xuan (1918-57) was

(and clan too). She deliberately chose Wang to replace her family name Peng. The Chinese believe that the character for Wang (王), which also means king, resembles to the marking on a tiger’s forehead. She connected her name with tiger to encourage herself to be as fearless as a tiger. She was the only film actress with unbound feet, which means her feet used to be bound, an now unbound when the anti-footbinding campaign was in vogue. Unbound feet was referred to at that time as “civilized feet” (*wenmingjiao* 文明腳).

³⁰¹ See a biography of Yang Naimei in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*, Vol. 1, pp. 16-28.

³⁰² Biographies of Yang Naimei, Yuan Meiyun, and Ye Qiuxin in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*, Vol. 1 and 2 show clearly that they had been addicted to opium while working for studios. Another three female stars from the twenties, Zhang Zhiyun, Xia Peizhen, and Yan Yuexian (their biographies not included in Zhang, *28 Big Stars*) also had opium addiction, which is frequently mentioned in reminiscences about figures related to early film activities. Opium addiction also involved early filmmakers and male actors, such as the most famous screenwriter and director, Zheng Zhengqiu (son of a Cantonese opium merchant), and Zhu Fei, the first and the most famous “screen lover”, just to name a few. It has been generally believed that quite many tried opium smoking because they had heard it would help relieve pain and stress, both physically and psychologically. Life in

another special example. At the end of 1938, when she joined Guohua (國華) Film Company, Liu Zhonghao (柳中浩), one of the two brothers who owned the company, became Zhou Xuan's *guofangye* (過房爺). The term *guofangye* used here had transcended its original use in adoption.³⁰³ It meant that one established a relation with someone much more powerful and influential who agreed to help that person handle critical situations. Masquerading as kinship terminology, it sounded like a relation between a father and his adopted child, which blurred a tacitly accepted economic relation between the two and integrated it into the universal and legitimate kinship system.³⁰⁴ Although she was one of the most popular and productive wartime film stars (1937-1945), Zhou Xuan's timid and weak character seemed to have identified her more as a helpless and tame girl than a star. This allowed her *guofangye* play a significant role in her public, professional life, and even in her private life.³⁰⁵ Growing in an adoptive family, Zhou Xuan did not remember anything about her natal parents and never found them. Her *guofangye* appeared as a new authority in her life. She somehow agreed that she should not challenge him, and accepting being his "money tree" (*yaoqianshu* 搖錢樹 the same as "cash cow" in English).

3. What is "courtesan-like"?

studio was harsh and exhausting for all the crew. They often worked day and night due to tight schedule. In addition, emotional and mental stress might also affect directors and actors greatly.

³⁰³ According to Myron L. Cohen's explanation, *guofang* (過房), or its formal form, *guoji* (過繼), meant in traditional Chinese societies "one brother's facilitating the continuation of another's descent line by giving him a son who was also expected to take care of his new parents during their old age." Cohen translates *guoji/guofang* as "to transfer from one agnatic branch line to another." Myron L. Cohen, *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State: Anthropological Perspectives on China*, p. 284 and note 28 on p. 329, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

³⁰⁴ The phenomenon of *guofangye* was in fact quite prevalent at that time in Chinese political, economic scenes, and also in the Shanghai Green Gang (*Qingbang* 青幫), a confederation of individual gangs. But having employer as *guofangye* was rarely seen among film actresses, especially among top stars. So far, I haven't seen any material showing the reason why Liu became Zhou Xuan's *guofangye*.

³⁰⁵ Liu's intervention in Zhou's life is evident in various sources. Many are quite sceptical about his role during the sensational divorce fight of the legendary couple, Zhou Xuan and Yan Hua (see note 294), in 1941. Although there is no direct evidence, some (including Yan Hua) believe that Liu had either alienated Zhou from her husband, or encouraged the fight, in order to reinforce his control of her.

The seamless combination of a set of refined artistry for entertainment and a pleasurable presence for company, was seen as quintessence of the late-Qing high-ranking courtesans. A sophisticated, elaborate relation between courtesans and patrons, in which they played subtle games of seducing and courting, offered men not just company, but opportunities of getting in touch with unattached women and feeling heterosexual affection, a kind of experience excluded by the Confucian code of rigid sex segregation and the institution of arranged marriage. This unique and exceptional relation also brought some relief from the formality – a quality which usually marked the ties of husband and wife by setting a certain distance between them, especially on social occasions.³⁰⁶

Masseuses, waitresses (there used to be only waiter before), and dancing partners emerged in the 1920s as new groups of female labour in the recreation industry, and as new disguised forms of prostitution. In the following two decades, these new groups significantly expanded the sex market.³⁰⁷ Among them, dancing partners, also known as cabaret girls, and taxi dancers.³⁰⁸), were the most noticeable and fashionable as the Western-style social dancing had become an indispensable leisure fashion by the end of the 1930s.³⁰⁹ Besides *wunü* (舞女), the verbatim translation of

³⁰⁶ In other words, when women were no longer confined in the domestic domain and the western notion of marriage as a companionate partnership had been gradually introduced to the Chinese young people since the May Fourth Movement, the courtesan practice was doomed to die and only sex would be left in the world of the prostitution. Comments on the connection between the courtesan practice and the institution of arranged marriage are seen in Henriot, *Prostitution* pp. 56-58; and Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, p. 20.

³⁰⁷ Compared to those working in brothels, the number of masseuses in massage parlours and waitresses in amusement centres who were selling sexual services was much smaller. For more information about masseuses and waitresses, see Henriot, *Prostitution*, pp. 99-103.

³⁰⁸ Paul Goalby Cressey explains the work of taxi dancers and its apt name. “The girl employed in these halls is expected to dance with any man who may choose her and to remain with him on the dance floor for as long a time as he is willing to pay the charges. ... Like the taxi-driver with his cab, she is for public hire and is paid in proportion to the time spent and the services rendered.” Quotes from Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, p. 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008 (first published in 1932).

³⁰⁹ Despite the Chinese official judgement on dancing as “decadent” and prohibitions from the authorities, dance halls thrived within foreign settlements. See *ibid.*, p. 104. Dancing partners included recycled (former) prostitutes of all kinds, waitresses, students gone astray, and some foreigners, mostly White Russian refugees. In general, they came from poor families or war-zone

“dancing woman”, the city of Shanghai gave its dancers a more vivid and colourful appellation – *tanxing nülang* (彈性女郎), a local *Yangjingbang* translation for “dancing girl”.³¹⁰ The word 彈性 borrowed here for “dancing” had several layers of meaning and connotation. With the literal meaning of elasticity, 彈性 implied sprung floor (*tanhuang diban* 彈簧地板), which was exclusively housed in Shanghai’s most glorious dance hall, Paramount Hall (the Chinese called it *Bailemen* 百樂門). Meanwhile, it conjured up a picture of bouncing steps of modern ladies wearing high heels and slinky dresses, swinging in dance hall. The meaning of elasticity applied to these women’s skin and flesh as well, which were “soft and subtle”, seduced men around them. 彈性 sometimes implied “flexibility”, thus the compound 彈性女郎 conveyed a certain expectation for dancing girls to react more “flexible” in ballrooms or other socializing occasions than those chastity-minded girls. In other words, if the client felt lust for them, they might offer more sensual pleasures and more accessibility for the gratification of sexual needs. As Christian Henriot’s reads dance halls as “between sensuality and sexuality”, and as Andrew Field suggests that dance hostesses were in many ways “modern surrogates for courtesans of the late Qing and earlier periods,”³¹¹ it appeared that the imported Western dancing institution picked

refugee backgrounds, and were at a rather young age with very limited or no education. They were trained in dancing schools which had developed accelerated programs for supplying the up-and-coming market. See *ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

³¹⁰ Xue Liyong (薛理勇), “Dancing Girls and Dance Halls in Old Shanghai (舊上海的舞女和跳舞廳),” *Century* (世紀) (2000) Issue 5: p. 35. Named after the creek that divided the International Settlement, *Yangjingbang* English was a phonetic system invented to help the local Shanghai people to better communicate with English-speaking foreigners after the city was opened as a treaty port. The *Yangjingbang* translation worked like this: they picked Chinese characters with similar sound to syllables of a certain English word and form a new word for that English meaning. The most cited and well-known example of this invention was translating “number one” into *namowen* (拿摩溫 or 那摩溫), a widespread word which completely melt into both verbal and written vocabularies of the Shanghai vernacular and even can be understood nowadays although it is not much used any longer. 彈性女郎 was partly *Yangjingbang* English. The word 女郎 was a normal translation for “lady”, and more precisely, referred to those who are young and fashionable. 彈性 was translated in a *Yangjingbang* way (彈性 and “dancing” sound very similar to the Chinese especially in Shanghai dialect).

³¹¹ Andrew D. Field, “Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1920-49,” in Yingjin Zhang ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, p. 99.

up where the traditional courtesan practice left off.

Jingbao (晶報 some scholars call it the *Crystal*), one of the most successful mosquito journals in Shanghai, was the very weathercock of the “pleasure world”. The journal’s entertainment page (in all four pages), in the 1920s were mostly devoted to leading opera figures and courtesans, in the 1930s gave an increasing share of coverage to the singing hostesses, dancing hostesses and film stars. By the late thirties, it had been eventually dominated by dance hostesses, who overshadowed other competitors except male opera stars.³¹² At least in the eyes of *Jingbao*’s editors, all these professions fell into the same category, where people made a living by entertaining their customers, who could buy their art, their company, or perhaps, their bodies too, as long as the buyer wanted and afforded. No matter whether they were courtesans, dancers, *jingju* stars, or film stars, besides being a commodity in a general labour market where others were treated similarly, they established unique relations characterized to a certain degree by intimacy and companionship with a few among their buyers. The social companionship was often not less significant than the professional skills (singing, acting, or dancing) they offered in patronage relations. Especially the most famous, popular, and admired from the top rank, they were seen as a scarce social resource. Patrons loved to bring them to social occasions or boast about an exclusive intimacy they had luckily attained with them. Such information was conveyed as a manifestation of the patron’s wealth, power, privileged social status, or a personal charm which some also valued. Even the popular rituals of voting for “dance empress”, or “film empress”, or the *jingju* “Great Four Dan”, mirrored those from the world of courtesans, with a familiar terminology.³¹³ Film actresses were

³¹² Ibid., p. 102. Film stars faded into oblivion in *Jingbao* probably because a large number of them fled the city for patriotic reasons and for survival after the Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937 and bombing raids severely damaged Shanghai’s film industry.

³¹³ The world of courtesans used to be termed as the “world of flowers”. From the 1860s to 1920, the community of patrons and readers of guidebooks (on patronizing courtesans) irregularly held elections of the most popular courtesans. Those who were elected were often assigned the title of “president of the flower world” (*huaguo zongtong* 花國總統). The ritual remained in the “dance world”, where contests of “dance empress” were held annually and the winner was termed “empress of the dance world” (*wuguo huanghou* 舞國皇后). Elections of “film empress” (*dianying*

courtesan-like, or simply prostitute-like, in early stages of the film industry. At that time, studios did not seem to have offered ordinary actresses a decent pay, since some of them worked as waitresses, an ambiguous job, to augment income, and some were secretly but clearly involved in prostitution.³¹⁴ *Tanxing nülang* (彈性女郎) was a more common and more public sideline for film actresses throughout the Republican era. For some, it became their main job once they found that they could earn much more in dance halls while they did not have there the exhausting schedules they had in studios.³¹⁵

It was not until a new generation of stars rising with the leftist film campaign in the thirties were acclaimed as “genuine” artists, that social discourse on *nüyanyuan* or *nümingxing* shifted noticeably from negative or sceptical to positive or promotional, and the their collective, public images as “courtesan-like” were greatly changed, if not completely.³¹⁶ Let us take a look at the extraordinary achievement of the following figures, something a “courtesan-like” *nümingxing* would never had. Hu Die, the “Empress of Cinema”, was the only film actor in the officially formed Chinese film team (seven people in all) dispatched to Russia to attend the Moscow International Film Festival in 1935.³¹⁷ Bai Yang (see note 112), a *huaju*-turned film actress, was the

huanghou 電影皇后) took place occasionally, though, were highly publicized and drew enormous public attention. Hu Die won the eye-catching election of 1933, and did dominate the film world for years. For details about elections of courtesans, see Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, pp. 165-169, about dancers, see Andrew Field, *A Dazzling Dance: Cabaret Culture and Modernity in Old Shanghai, 1919-1954*, pp. 140-146, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2009.

³¹⁴ Albeit not in detail, the fact of early actresses working as waitresses and prostitutes to augment income is clearly recorded in memoirs of Ouyang Yuqian, who had worked as a filmmaker during the twenties. He recalled that even film stars from the early period lived actually on a tight budget, although they appeared to be affluent. Ouyang, “Since”, p. 127.

³¹⁵ The most cited example of film star “falling” into the “dance world” was Liang Saizhen (梁賽珍), who starred in several films between 1929 and 1932, and became a dance hostess in 1932. She was the oldest and the most successful of the Liang sisters, who were all ranked as the most celebrated dance hostesses. More details about the Liang sisters are seen in Andrew Field, *A Dazzling Dance: Cabaret Culture and Modernity in Old Shanghai, 1919-1954*, pp. 124-128.

³¹⁶ The most prestigious *jngju dan* stars, the “Great Four Dan” (see introduction), carefully built up a reputation of their own and their pupils too, to distinguish their career from the late-Qing gay prostitution. Over time, they also won an approved discourse.

³¹⁷ The team also visited Germany, France, Britain, Switzerland, and Italy, where they learned from local film industries. See a biography of Hu Die in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 1. p. 64.

only one who represented Chinese actors of all kinds to stand on the top of Tiananmen Gate when Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China, on 1 Oct., 1949.³¹⁸

In this thesis, I attempted to explore both institutional impetus for women's gradually expanding participation in public performances in the late Qing and the Republican era, and female actors' individual initiative that they to a certain degree showed in this process. I also attempted to demonstrate the nuanced nature of female stardom in the Republican Shanghai cinema. While the female stars were almost unique in being publicly influential female figures, and enjoyed certain modern freedoms in their lifestyles – for example, were no longer bound by the Confucian norms and expectations of chastity etc. – the freedom came at a price. The sexy images of the stars were soon commercialized, becoming an object for middle class males' voyeuristic consumption, and their bodies too were often expected to be available to the wealthy patrons at a suitable price. Eroticised cinema images of the stars were facilitating their emergence as high-quality sexual labourers of sorts. The “courtesan-like” images of female stars and the “plaything-like” images of all actors in general often distracted the public attention from their artistic pursuits and their efforts to seek modern lives, and associated them with loose morals and sexual commodities instead.

China started its reform era more than thirty years ago. The Chinese have seen “mind liberation” (which often equals “approaching Western models”) in various social realms. In terms of acting talent and “liberated mind” (willing and daring to do nude scenes for the sake of art), Chinese film stars have already caught up with Hollywood stars, and often proved themselves to the Western world in international

³¹⁸ A biography of Bai Yang in Zhang, *28 Big Stars* Vol. 2, p. 144.

We might say, however, that the most influential figure from the Republican film circle was probably Li Yunhe (李雲鶴). In the thirties, known by her stage name, Lan Ping (藍蘋), she was a *huaju* actress who also played a few roles (only one major role) in films. She changed her name to Jiang Qing (江青) when she arrived at the Chinese Communist headquarters in Yan'an in 1937. There she met Mao Zedong and married him in the next year, after her two failed marriages. When Mao came into power in 1949, Jiang Qing became the “first lady”. She played a key role in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

film festivals, with an advantage of mysterious oriental flavour. Then, how is China's public perspective on *nüyanyuan* and *nümingxing* nowadays? The “courtesan-like” and “plaything-like” images seem to be still present among these groups. They are seen as celebrities. Their beauty and stardom made them exceptionally desirable. But at the same time, they are seen as entertainers as well. This image constantly implies a legitimacy of “not” taking them seriously. On the other hand, (in a way) as the heir to the traditional professionals of diversion and amusement, they are sometimes expected to offer social companionship. In a society commercialized on today's scale, what else can we imagine in such companionship besides the magic that money plays?³¹⁹

³¹⁹ Not all actors perform such function, to be sure, but those who do have drawn a collective image clear enough as “courtesan-like”. This is an under-researched and under-reported subject. Voice of the public, which is often more informative than journalist discourse in the Internet era, especially in a country with insufficient media freedom like China, gives us some evidence and leaves more space for imagination. We can feel the “courtesan-like” of today's stars, through the word *baoyang* (包養), which has become more and more frequently used when referring to popular stars during recent years. *Baoyang* can be seen as an exclusive patronage (a patron “possesses” a star exclusively). A star (either female or male) is kept by her/his patron, no matter whether the patron is married or not, who, in return, covers all necessary or extra expenses the star needs. The patron is either very wealthy, or in particular position which has great power. This phenomenon is not limited to stars. Women (or men, less common) with exceptionally good appearances or those who become public topics or sensations for any reason, can invite patrons. The relation of *baoyang*, which can be either heterosexual or homosexual (less common), is kept secret, but may be recognized within a related small circle.

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