



Ju Dou (Gong Li) and Tianqing (Li Baotian) in *Ju Dou*, directed by Zhang Yimou, 1990.
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Chapter 11

The New Woman Incident

Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai

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When the silent film *The New Woman* (*Xin nüxing*) opened in Shanghai during the lunar new year festival of 1935, one newspaper reviewer applauded the number of films with 'the woman question' as their subject over the past few years" and declared that "in a time when the women's movement is being noticed once again, it is inevitable that this kind of film will go on to influence many aspects of the women's movement to come."¹ This passage suggests just one way in which *The New Woman* was a striking convergence point for the cinematic, journalistic, and social construction of gendered activity in 1930s Shanghai. Periodicals and studio publicity drew attention to the centrality of gender in the film, championing the eponymous "New Woman":

Women have been shackled down and treated like non-persons for several thousand years. They have gradually climbed out from the abyss of suffering during the past hundred years, but archaic customs and economics still block the passage for women.

The New Woman is aimed at precisely this state of affairs—it is a call to arms for humanity and society. It offers a model for the spirit of new women and opposes suicide which is an action that is not as new as it may seem. The film characterizes classic archetypes of women and advances a new kind of woman.

Having seen *The New Woman* you will feel that the "Old" Woman is pathetic and pitiable. Watching this film is like suddenly being offered a glass of brandy after a lifetime of drinking plain water—it will stun and provoke even the most complacent person; it is encouraging and inspiring.²

The film's title also attracted audiences for the same reason. One viewer in a province as distant as Guizhou recounted his movie date with a young woman from work this way: "I think that I can easily guess the reason she



Fig. 26. Actress Ruan Lingyu (1910–1935).

wanted to see this movie. Naturally, she wanted to understand what 'New Woman,' as presented by the movie company from the big city, was all about.⁷³ Certainly the film accommodated such curiosity by profiling the life and death of Wei Ming—a schoolteacher and aspiring author who experiences the challenges and confusions facing educated, independent women in the big city, until she is ultimately implicated in a tragic suicidal

tation with the Shanghai news media. In this sense, *The New Woman* resembled some of Hollywood's "fallen woman films" of the 1920s and 1930s, or its "woman's films" of the 1940s, in "documenting a crisis in subjectivity around the figure of woman—although it is not always clear whose subjectivity is at stake."⁷⁴

But in Shanghai's *The New Woman*, the disturbing representation of Wei Ming's suicide was accompanied by a critique of contemporary urban society that alluded to class revolution. The film provoked a debate in the Shanghai news media over the status and symbolic significance of the New Woman, and the protagonist's "crisis in subjectivity" was profoundly magnified when the lead actress, Ruan Lingyu, committed suicide in reaction to the press slander just a month after the premier. The "New Woman Incident" (as it was later dubbed) became the nexus of a controversy over the responsibility of the urban news media—as the modern creators of "public opinion" (*yulun*)—toward women and society.⁷⁵ For historians, the film and the suicide expose Chinese popular culture at a moment of crisis over the degree to which women would be agents, symbols, or victims of modernity.

Criticism on *The New Woman* has appeared under two rubrics. It is either cited as an example of the complications in the leftward developments of director Cai Chusheng's politics,⁷⁶ or it serves as the tragic climax to hagiographies of its star, Ruan Lingyu.⁷⁷ These approaches pinpoint biographical correspondences to the narrative scenario; they do remark on gender and politics in the film but elide the complex interaction between the two. The present essay examines how that interaction was constructed within the film's frame and beyond it, in the scandal and spectacle of the New Woman incident.

The New Woman could be read narrowly as a text in terms of psychoanalytic theory to render an analysis of issues that have become central to feminist film criticism in Europe and America, and also in China, today—such as the relationship between cinematic images and spectators or the function of the star. I have chosen to broaden the scope, however, working on the premise that, like any cultural text, a film is an artifact of specific social conditions, as well as of certain technological capabilities.⁷⁸ I investigate the changing position of filmmakers and the notion of the New Woman in the 1920s and 1930s Shanghai; the film's narrative sources, publicity, directorial script, and iconography; the manner in which it was exhibited and received among contemporary audiences; and Ruan Lingyu's own actions and role in the media circulation of her star image. These factors all came together in an incident that exposed the shifting status of women and the media in the political economy of urban China.

• Cai Chusheng and the Politics of the Image

Cai Chusheng and his scriptwriter, Sun Shiyi, based the plot of *The New Woman* on the life and death of Ai Xia. Earlier in 1934, this fledgling Shanghai actress had committed suicide shortly after starring in a movie she had also written, *A Modern Woman* (Xiandai yi nüxing).⁹ Taking off from the question of woman and modernity posed by Ai Xia's film and suicide, *The New Woman* was initially conceived as a twofold critique. Cai and Sun targeted traditional constraints on women and the mistreatment of women in mass media and urban society. But while depicting the precarious position of women in contemporary China on the cusp of modernity, they also inflected the film with a sense of national urgency. Only a year earlier, the twenty-seven-year-old Cai had become acquainted with a group of young left-wing film critics and joined their patriotic Association for Film Culture as an administrative member. The association had been organized in solidarity against the Japanese invasion of Rehe that February, and it opposed the Nanjing government's policy of targeting domestic "enemies" rather than external ones. As its manifesto proclaimed, "we are being invaded from the outside and oppressed on the inside."¹⁰

Following the association's call for national salvation, Cai published an essay denouncing his own earlier filmmaking style prior to 1933 as "divorced from reality."¹¹ Dedicating himself to "facing the strong morning light" and "starting a new future," he made a tragedy about the fate of small town villagers forced to scrape out a living in modern Shanghai, *Song of the Iron Men* (Yu guang qu). This film broke local box-office records with a run of eighty-four days in 1934, and in Moscow it earned China's first international festival prize. Cai planned a study trip to the USSR immediately after completing *The New Woman*, but censorship complications with this movie prevented him from going.

Viewed in the context of growing film censorship under the Nanjing government's Central Propaganda Committee, a key theme in *The New Woman* is the (im)possibility of public voice. Wei Ming is an aspiring author, and the film calls attention to her as an enunciative subject through psychological flashback sequences and point-of-view structures. The spatial and visual articulations that constitute this silent film's narrative "voice" belong primarily to its female characters—Wei Ming, her sister, and her aunt Li Aying. These women possess privileged narratorial knowledge in the film, and they initiate nearly all the subjective point-of-view shots and flashbacks.

The possibility for a strong female narrative voice exists in *The New Woman*, even though in many respects the main protagonist appears

defined and silenced. For instance, she is cinematically circumscribed by a series of flat, one-dimensional images. In the set design, Wei Ming's own apartment walls are decorated by mirrors and photographs of herself. Does this confirm contemporary presumptions that New Women were just modern ornaments, shallow image-conscious narcissists? The excess of recurring images in the mise-en-scène do prompt the spectator to see Wei Ming as a kind of star and, by extension, to identify the fictional character with the star *playing* her, Ruan Lingyu. Like the commodified image of a star, Wei Ming is vulnerable to and even complicit in a kind of voyeuristic look.

But unlike her flashy former classmate, Zhang Xiuzhen (another kind of New Woman in the film), Wei Ming's daily life is modest and mundanely familiar. She ordinarily wears a somber black *qipao* dress and rides rickshaws instead of automobiles. In this way, the film resists categorizing Wei Ming as wholly alien. Instead, her neutral silent image (cinematic, photographic, or mirrored) is a kind of tabula rasa that will be charged with meaning only after it has been appropriated by others. Wei Ming submits a manuscript to a publisher who only accepts it after he sees the author's photograph. He uses the picture without Wei Ming's consent to publicize her book as the work of an attractive young woman writer. The image serves to transform this young schoolteacher into a best-seller author, a star. The figure of Wei Ming is thus split between agency and passivity, between critical distance and emotional intimacy, between object and subject.

The tension between external, objective images of the protagonist and her internal subjectivity gradually erupts in a series of startling visual effects. Halfway through *The New Woman*, Wei Ming becomes unemployed and momentarily considers prostitution to support her daughter, Xiao Hong. As she is being adorned with makeup and jewels in front of a mirror, the camera zooms in on her distraught reflection and then suddenly exchanges places with the mirror in a reverse shot. This effectively positions the spectator within the film in a dual capacity: we are invited, on the one hand, to identify sympathetically with Wei Ming's visual perspective and emotional state, and on the other, to stand in the place of an objective mirror or camera, reflecting on the image of this fictional character. The mirror allows Cai Chusheng to self-consciously invest the silent, visual image with double significance. On the one hand, it reflects the female protagonist's confinement and commodification as image; on the other hand, the mirror disrupts and unsettles that image.

Xiao Hong, a kind of double for Wei Ming, experiences a similar transformative encounter through the image. The child sees a photograph of her father and learns about her absent father from her aunt (Wei Ming's mother). The aunt's explanation dissolves into a montage of brief narrative

scenes, which display for Xiao Hong (and the film viewer) her mother's romance and elopement with a college sweetheart, their simple home, and the father's dissatisfied abandonment of mother and child. The flashback appears to be a morality tale about the pitfalls of modern love. But it also demonstrates that the young woman's passionate defiance is also the source of strength that enables her to endure; in that same rebellious vein, the disillusioned daughter now takes the image of her father in the photograph and destroys it.

In two sequences, Cai's composition of highly subjective flashbacks and point-of-view shots compel a spectator to participate emotionally, and also critically, in Wei Ming's "split" subjectivity. The first occurs early in the film when the manipulative, wealthy school director, Dr. Wang, persuades Wei Ming to accompany him to a dance hall cabaret. As Wei Ming sits in the back seat of his car, she gazes sadly through the frame of the window. Over her shoulder we watch a landscape of poverty pass by—a landscape that serves both to illustrate the impoverished condition of the city (in contrast to the luxurious car) and to express metaphorically Wei Ming's own sense of dislocation and bankruptcy.

Through the car window, a restaurant facade appears, and then suddenly a scene of Wei Ming herself at a party inside the restaurant. Once again, Chusheng makes use of the tension between surface images and contrasting content: the lush decor and Wei Ming's attractive dress seem to suggest a certain decadence, but the school principal is introducing Wei Ming to Dr. Wang as a respected music teacher, not a prospective dance hall date. Wei Ming now watches her own memory being projected in the car window and shakes her head regretfully. The memory dissolves to the passing city and city lights, and Wei Ming glares angrily at Wang.

Essentially the car window has become another mirror, or a screen for the film within a film which reflects and replays a dramatic moment from Wei Ming's memory. She becomes, in effect, a spectator within the movie, watching herself critically. The camera aligns our perspective with Wei Ming's, as if to encourage us to identify with the protagonist, but the transformation of the car window is disorienting enough to interrupt that identification. This produces a double Brechtian alienation effect, creating an ironic distance between the character's past expectations and her present situation, as well as between the objective spectator and the character's pathos.

This tension between the cathartic and the didactic was often present in the left-wing Chinese cinema of the 1930s. A second illustration is the dance hall cabaret sequence. Seated at a table, Wei Ming and Wang are the

audience for two dance shows performed by Caucasians. In one show, a man dressed as a cowboy whips his female partner during a theatrical burlesque. Wei Ming flinches in pain, while Wang breaks into applause. In the following show, a woman dressed in a stylized striped prisoner's uniform saunters among the tables until she drops to the floor while looking up at Wei Ming. Her eyes meet Wei Ming's, and ours, and suddenly, we see the enthralled Wei Ming on the floor, now dressed in the prisoner's costume. Instantly this image of Wei Ming on the floor is replaced with that of the dancer. Dizzied, Wei Ming stands, knocks over a glass, and leaves the table, pushing Wang aside.

The vertigo of this sequence is even more unsettling than the previous example. The seductive glow of neon lights and the fascinating performance enacted on stage (and on film) are mesmerizing. Then, sudden alarming distortions and the sheer perversity of the show—with its mock subversion of the colonial and patriarchal gaze—disengage and alienate the viewer from the stylized spectacle. The image of shackles was a stock metaphor in early twentieth-century Chinese feminism and literature, illustrating the oppression of women and even the nation.

As in the car scene, dislocating cinematic techniques again complicate the film spectator's identification with the protagonist's psychological preoccupations—her social enslavement to a controlling employer. Here, in place of a reflective window on her past, Wei Ming transposes her anxiety into a much more immediate and active presence, the dancer-as-prisoner performing directly before her. Yet immanent though that presence may be, it is also a charade. Wei Ming looks back only to see the swaggering "prisoner" pull off her manacles and break into a jitterbug. Wang tries to excuse the incident by proposing to her, though in fact he is already married—to her former classmate Xiuzhen. In the wake of their contrasting reactions to the performance, his facetiousness is all the more glaring. With a new sense of clarity and rage Wei Ming retorts, "What can marriage give me? 'Lifelong companionship'?—just a lifetime of slavery!" (Dr. Wang later retaliates against her resistance with blackmail and gets Wei Ming fired.)

Wei Ming sees that she has identified with a figure in a masquerade of extremes, but she maintains the insights of this new perspective. The stunning artifice of the stage show, with its grotesque overlay of pleasure and pain, only seems to have sharpened Wei Ming's own sense of "impersonation." She watches herself perform the role of a woman subjugated to social conventions—just as the film, with its mixture of pathos and edification, encourages the spectator to do.

• "True Reflections"

A series of encounters with hospitals, doctors, and journalists emphasizes the pathology of Wei Ming's professional and private dissolution, from teacher, author, and mother to unemployment and near prostitution. She is unable to pay a medical doctor to cure her ailing daughter and cannot bear raising the cash as a call girl after discovering that the proposed client is Dr. Wang. Xiao Hong lies dying, and the broken, grieving mother consumes a handful of sleeping pills.

The film culminates in the melodramatic crisis of Wei Ming's suicide, after friends rush her to the hospital. While she is confined to bed, a reporter stands in the wings making notes for sensational stories and then conspires with her book publisher and Dr. Wang to capitalize on her death. The publisher exclaims, "Such a shame we didn't have her write two novels. Why don't we have a memorial service for her?! Not that we really care anything for her. It just makes sense—it'll stir up a little news material." Until this juncture, the film has allied the viewer's visual perspective with Wei Ming's. But now that Wei Ming has attempted suicide and fallen unconscious, she loses the power of representation: the authority of her vision is qualified, and it no longer guides the viewer. The female character's enunciative position in the film is now displaced with various male figures of authority associated with the publicity and (mis)information of the journalistic print media.

Wei Ming's friends wake her from this unconscious state and force her to confront the media distortions by showing her an array of newspaper columns, which are also displayed for us as close-up inserts—among them:

THE SUICIDE OF WOMAN WRITER WEI MING
The Decline of the Romantic Woman [*langman nüzi*]
The True Reflection of the Modern Girl [*modeng guniang*]

BIG REVELATION: HER SECRET LIFE
A Fallen Woman and Unwed Mother

A CRITIQUE OF WEI MING'S SUICIDE
Women Really are Weak

Each viewing of these headlines alternates with a close-up of Wei Ming's anxious reaction, until she sits up and exclaims, "I want revenge!"

As in earlier scenes, Wei Ming and the spectator witness the ironic details of her life from a disembodied distance, projected onto scenes passing before

her. Here, she recognizes herself as different and separate from the journalists' representation of her in print—and this recognition is amplified in a haunting death scene. Wei Ming struggles to sit up in the hospital bed and directly confronts the camera and spectator, exclaiming, "Save me! I want to live!"

Each instance of despair in the film has been characterized by a visual, specular event (her view of herself as a prostitute in the mirror, her reading of the newspapers' representation of her suicide, even her daughter's "glimpse" of scenes from her own past). These events are constructed through objective shots of the protagonist intercut with subjective views of things she is told about, shown, or remembers, from her own perspective. The content of the subjective images is unsettling, and in form they appear as inserts, flashbacks, and mirror images that interrupt the continuous flow of action. Here, in the last act, that disruption is taken one step further. The imaginary "wall" dividing the audience from the world of the film breaks down, and the film becomes self-consciously theatrical—acknowledging the presence of an audience and allowing the protagonist to appeal to that audience in a bold confrontation. Since the film is silent, the confrontation is all the more arresting when her words "I want to live!" emerge not as intertitles but as animation superimposed directly on the screen, "growing" straight from Wei Ming's mouth.

Cai Chusheng opens up a number of spaces for progressive possibility beyond Wei Ming's suicide. Parallel editing, for instance, emphasizes the simultaneous yet contrasting experience of Wei Ming's teaching colleague, Li Aying, who composes her own class-conscious adaptations of popular songs to teach workers in a labor union night school. The scene of Wei Ming at the dance hall listening to the big-band tune "Peach Blossom River" is crosscut with one of Li Aying in the classroom teaching "Huangpu River," her overtly political version of the same song. Just as Li teaches a lesson through subversive mimicry of mainstream entertainment songs, the film's use of a polished Hollywood-style surface and familiar silent "star" image for its protagonist Wei Ming served a similarly covert, instructive purpose in the film at a time when openly dissenting images and speech were being regulated. Although "Huangpu River" was cut from the film in order to pass the government's censors, one other song, at the end of the film, survived.

This single recorded sound sequence was crosscut into the death scene of Wei Ming and presents us with a stark contrast to her mute "voice" appearance on screen. Outside the hospital, women workers emerge from a factory and flood the streets with their triumphant voices singing out the proletarian

"Song of the New Woman," composed for the film by Nie Er, a young musician who also wrote the melody later chosen for the national anthem of the People's Republic of China. Describing the toiling life of a woman factory worker, the song culminates in a revolutionary verse which envisions the simultaneous dissolution of class and gender divisions:

New women are the masses of women producers;
New women are the labor of society;
New women are the vanguard in constructing a new society;
New women want to roll forth the stormwinds of the times together
with men!
The stormwinds! We must use them to awaken the nation's people
from their comfortable elusions!
The stormwinds! We must use them for the glory of women!
We won't be slaves,
This earth is for all of us!
No divisions between men and women,
A great world unity!
New women, bravely charge forth;
New women, bravely charge forth!

The only sound in the film is synchronized to the collective voices of these anonymous urban working women marching forth combatively as they sing. The silent written cry "I want to live!" uttered by the music teacher and fallen literary celebrity indoors is starkly different from the unison of sound and action outdoors.¹² Sound is used to a contrapuntal effect here, implying that the problems posed by "the woman question" and the force of class revolution are at odds with one another—and even that the "I" of Wei Ming's subject position, a despairing individual new woman, has been eclipsed by the collective "we" of utopian new women who will destroy "divisions between men and women" and build a "great world unity." At the same time, the two simultaneous episodes are edited together into a frenzied exhibit of sound and words, binding the women outside with the woman inside: slanderous castaway tabloids about Wei Ming litter the streets, trampled under the workers' feet as if in victory over the injustice and tragedy of her death. Through shifting point-of-view structures and crosscutting at key moments of crisis, Cai Chusheng created an equivocal split female subject that masked the film's political content. This ambiguity extended beyond the limits of the film itself to fuel intense debates in the press and public opinion over the film, its star, and the category of New Woman.

• "After the Chinese Nora Leaves Home"

Newspapers and audiences were consumed by the debate over which of the three female leads might be considered a real New Woman and whether Wei Ming's suicide was a "correct" ending for a film called *The New Woman*. The term New Woman itself evoked an imported concept that had first been translated into Chinese during the May 4th period. During this period, a "New Culture Movement" began in 1917 among young urban intellectuals who sought to strengthen the new republic and its people by defining the freedoms, rights, and responsibilities of men and women in China. Their ideas about independence, novelty, and identity eventually extended into popular culture, with gender and sexuality in the foreground. "The woman question," or *funü wenti*, centered on love, marriage, education, and employment for women but also developed into a potent symbol for modernist discourse in China. Key modern thinkers and authors such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun looked to Europe and the United States for examples of independence and found the New Woman, which they translated as *xin nǚxing* or *xin funü*.¹³ In 1918, Hu Shi wrote,

"New Woman" is a new word, and it designates a new sort of woman [*xin pai de funü*] who is very intense in her speech, who tends towards the extreme in her actions, who doesn't believe in religion or adhere to rules of conduct [*lifa*], yet who is also a very good thinker and has very high morals. Of course amongst them there are plenty of fake New Women. Their words don't match their intentions: what they do is completely at odds with what they say. But among New Women there are some who really are very good thinkers and have very high morals. . . . Although there aren't many [true New Women] in America, they best express one of the recent directions for American women.¹⁴

In the United States, European nations, and Japan during the 1890s, "New Woman" at first referred primarily to educated, politically active public women with women's rights agendas such as suffrage, labor, or birth control. This definition was blurred by the popularization of the New Woman's marital and financial freedoms, so that successive generations entered the cultural vocabulary as "Gibson Girls," "flappers," "gold diggers," and "modern girls" (or *moga* in Japan) during the following three decades. These subsequent generations came to be characterized by their apolitical image and function in consumer society—short hair, modern fashion, and free love—but "New Woman" did retain the distinct connotation of politically vocal feminism.¹⁵

Even though “New Woman” was an imported term in China that precluded strict nativist definitions, the appearance of the New Woman in contemporary Chinese discourse on “the woman question” did have its own chronology and significance. The New Woman Hu Shi introduced to his Chinese audience in 1918 was not a woman with political goals but someone who could maintain her positive “extremes” of independence and selfhood (*zili*) in marriage. A translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* had appeared earlier that year under the title *Nora (Nala)* in the May 4th flagship magazine *New Youth (Xin qingnian)*, underscoring the way concepts of marriage freedom and equality (and reactions to that freedom) played a large role in shaping the definition of the New Woman in China during the 1920s. The riddle of closure in *A Doll’s House* had prompted Lu Xun to speculate, in a 1923 address to a women’s college, “what would become of the Chinese Nora after she leaves home?”¹⁶ In contrast to the romantic ideal Hu Shi had described a few years earlier, Lu Xun considered the prerequisites for a woman’s independence once she was out on her own and spoke in economic terms: instead of “dreams,” Lu Xun argued, “what she needs is money.” Lu Xun’s approach laid the groundwork for later class-based formulations like *The New Woman*.

Beyond an independent spirit, education, and financial resources, Cai Chusheng and Sun Shiyi added a further necessity for the New Woman: social conscience in the form of proletarian politics. This recent addition to the New Woman formula derived from the urban left wing’s approach to feminism that had developed after the May Thirtieth Labor Movement of 1925, where the emphasis was shifted from the category of gender to that of class. By the mid-1930s, well-known filmmakers like Xia Yan (a founding member of the League of Left-Wing Writers) were voicing their concern for women working in factories—for example, in Xia’s reportage on female contract laborers.¹⁷ Cai Chusheng explored the new variety of confusing social meanings “New Woman” could invoke in China during this period by incorporating three very different female leads into a visual narrative, each representing a different image of the New Woman.

Film reviewers in Shanghai’s press dissected these various possibilities for the New Woman. For example, left-wing critic Tang Na saw the three main female characters as New Women at different developmental stages, following a historical progression from feudalism, through capitalism, to socialism. First, there is the school director Wang’s wife, Zhang Xiuzhen (a rather minor character in the narrative). Tang Na believed that she was “the ‘new style’ of educated woman, the wife of a compradore and a capitalist woman poised to enjoy a life full of all kinds of pleasures” and represented the “feudal woman who seems to be a New Woman.” Then there is Wei

Ming, “the petty bourgeois New Woman [who] opposes the power of this ancient feudalism—a Nora who has left home.” The dialectic progression of characters culminates in a third educated woman who uses her skills and independence to benefit the proletariat: “Finally, it goes without saying: the intellectual Li Aying among workers is the real New Woman.”¹⁸

Wei Ming’s escape from an arranged marriage and, more symbolically, the iconic “woman who never falls” (*budao niuxing*) doll she has bought for Xiao Hong, which presides over her apartment, prompted reviewers to cite *A Doll’s House* and call Wei Ming a “Chinese Nora who has left home.”¹⁹ The play also presented itself for convenient and timely comparison since that very spring a stage production of *Nora* at the Golden City Theater (Jincheng daxiyuan) was getting a fair amount of press attention (in part thanks to the efforts of Tang Na, who was dating the actress playing Nora, Lan Ping—or Jiang Qing, a future wife of Mao Zedong). *A Doll’s House* was so ubiquitous in 1935 that the year of the New Woman Incident was also known in theatrical circles as “The Year of Nora.”²⁰ Even attacks on women’s liberation would take *A Doll’s House* as their starting point. Articles like “The Woman Question in China,” published some months earlier in *The New Life Weekly*, made liberal use of the vocabulary of Marxist class analysis, but in the service of a conclusion—that women should remain in the sheltered space of the home rather than face commodification under capitalism—more analogous to the rhetoric of National Socialism in Germany at the time:

Mr. Ibsen didn’t point out very clearly what happens to Nora after she’s left home. . . . Actually, Nora is still a doll; the doll has just changed its style and name. Before she may have been a personal doll for her husband in the home, but now she has become a doll for all society—no, she is, directly or indirectly, a doll for capitalists. This is because the society into which Nora has stepped is a capitalist formation where she, and anyone else, will be sold as a commodity.²¹

Critics and audiences of *The New Woman* were speculating on Wei Ming’s options within the framework Lu Xun had proposed a decade earlier when he determined that, “By logical deduction, Nora actually has two alternatives only: to go to the bad or to return to her husband.”²² Unless, he added, she had the tenacity to attain economic freedom that would enable her to move forward. What shocked some audiences of *The New Woman* was that, unlike Nora, the character Wei Ming *does* (however briefly or marginally) attain the economic independence to move forward, but then she does not fulfill this promise. Another movie critic, Chen Wu, argued that none of the film’s characters were real “New Women,” although Li Aying could

qualify to be the New Woman of the film's title if she had been featured more prominently. Chen Wu believed that neither a Wei Ming nor a Nora qualified for the name New Woman:

This so-called "China's Nora after she has left home" is the most vexing group of our times. This sort of woman is born in the capitalist middle class and then begins to vacillate. She has been subjected to all kinds of pain by capitalist society, yet . . . she has no way of reforming the very society that gives her so much misery.²³

Even the viewer from Guizhou reported,

After seeing the film, [my date] said to me dejectedly: "How can a person like Wei Ming qualify to be called a New Woman? She's simply a weak girl! A New Woman would surely never have died except for a cause. Nor would she ever have dealt with an issue by merely saying 'I want to live.'"²⁴

Similarly Chen Wu wrote, "Instead of committing suicide, Wei Ming could have moved forward or 'sold her soul'; it's inconceivable that she would go back home."²⁵ Of course, Wei Ming nearly "goes to the bad," as Lu Xun put it; but when she refuses to go through with "selling her soul," she transgresses even that taboo by committing suicide.

If critics conceived of Wei Ming's status as a New Woman within the framework of the "Chinese Nora" (a desire for independence from authority, rather than any particular feminist goals per se), they were also disturbed by her symbolic victimhood and her inability as an intellectual to change society. In debating the significance of Wei Ming's suicide, literary film critics worried that the death of the film's protagonist—as a young teacher—"advocates that the only ending for intellectuals is suicide."²⁶ The intensity of their uneasiness becomes all the more poignant when we recall that many prominent May 4th writers, including Mao Dun and Yu Dafu, had imagined a New Woman position from which to iterate their own desire for emancipation.²⁷ Wei Ming's suicide was a disquieting demerit to a drama of complicated victims and villains, accompanied by gender and class struggles. By resisting closure and an easy moral, *The New Woman* had kindled a wide range of critical responses.

• Public Spectacle and the Modern Woman

The New Woman was a silent picture made at a time when movies in China were being politically censored and morally censured. Cai Chusheng consciously advanced an alternative silent visual "show" as a kind of para-

mime with moral or didactic potential. The film's visual composition managed to insinuate a subversive challenge to the social order that had driven Wei Ming to suicide, and its ambivalent open ending also dramatized the potential contradictions for a left-wing filmmaker—aspiring to speak for the oppressed underclass through a mass medium generated by capitalism.

The conflicts surfaced when the film opened in Shanghai. The commercial press took the film's narrative to task for depicting the news media as slanderous and the potential New Woman as suicidal. The Journalists' Union loudly protested the dismal characterization of their trade and the specter of negative publicity coaxed Lianhua studio into making an open apology, much to the director's chagrin.²⁸ Second, in an attempt to clear away accusations that the movie was "condoning" the suicide of New Women, the producers made a public relations show of their virtue by agreeing to screen the film at a fundraiser for a women's educational center on International Women's Day, March 8th.²⁹ But on the day *The New Woman* was to be presented at the Women's Day festival, the actress Ruan Lingyu herself took an overdose of sleeping pills and died.

Not only did Ruan's suicide add a layer of meaning to the film's reception, apparently duplicating the death of the fictional character she had played, but it was also immediately transformed into a citywide spectacle which exhibited—to borrow a phrase from Thomas Pynchon—"an extended capacity for convolution." Five kilometers of mourners—one hundred thousand people, almost a tenth of inner Shanghai's population—followed her funeral cortege through the metropolis on March 11, 1935.

Tributes from the press, the film studio, government representatives, and colleagues were followed by souvenir memorial books, storytellers' songs, even a lucrative stage show. Cinemas ran retrospectives of her work for at least another year. Precisely because the compelling intimate details are at once so accessible and yet so contradictory, the mythmaking continues even today with a steady flow of biographical novels, television shows, and movies. All this fictionalization and theatricalization teased out the enigma of, as one headline put it, "Who Killed Ruan Lingyu."³⁰ This articulated the same fascination with the question of who had killed Wei Ming—the character Ruan had embodied on film—and with the riddle of "what would become of the Chinese Nora after she leaves home."

To cite but a few powerful examples, one Shanghai storyteller's *kaipian* sung in the Wu style opened with the stark lines "When the shocking news arrived, it startled the nation: / Lingyu of the Ruan family had suddenly committed suicide." The song melodramatically conveyed the details of Ruan's background—a misguided youthful love for Zhang Damin and a true devotion to her acting career and Tang Jishan—and continued,



Fig. 27. Ruan Lingyu in *The New Woman* (*Xin nüxing*), directed by Cai Chusheng, Lianhua Studio, 1934.

Recently she appeared in *The New Woman*,
 It only exacerbated her feelings and brought what years she had
 a close.
 To calm her spirit she took three bottles of sleeping pills,
 And spelled out her hatred for Damin.

This rendition of Ruan Lingyu's suicide concludes with the admonition that "Love and social relations are truly fearsome / Young men and ladies must take care / Getting into this kind of trouble ends in suicide."³¹ Another souvenir booklet also saw the root of Ruan's problem in her marriage dispute and devoted more than thirty-five pages to topics ranging from the pseudo-analytical to the unabashedly voyeuristic—among them: "The Social Significance of Ruan Lingyu's Suicide," "Marriage Issues under D-

ussion since Ruan Lingyu's Suicide," "Ruan Lingyu Died Because of the Philandering and Coercion of Others," and "A Look Inside the Funeral Home."³²

The studio and press coverage of the funeral accentuated the circle of correspondences between the star's personal life and her roles. Where the film's opening scene had enmeshed Wei Ming in the spectacular and mechanized infrastructure of the modern city as she rides a streetcar home from downtown Shanghai, the same urban landscape of Nanjing Road served as the stage for Ruan Lingyu's elaborate funeral cortege. But now the audience, as mourners, became actors in this public theater staged by the same studio that had produced the film. Even as Lianhua proclaimed that it would not capitalize on the star's death to sell tickets, within weeks the respectful promises were evidently forgotten and her entire oeuvre began to resurface in venues across the nation.

The theatricality of the funeral was intensified by the use of the same photograph of Ruan Lingyu that had circumscribed Wei Ming and represented her rise to fame in *The New Woman*. Newspaper articles asking "Who Killed Ruan Lingyu?" echoed the headlines in *The New Woman* that Wei Ming reads about herself as she is dying; at the same time, they self-referentially called attention to the journalistic excess within, and surrounding, both the film and its star. And finally, the photographs of Ruan's wake were taken from the same angles used to shoot Wei Ming's death in the film. Ruan's act of suicide appeared to duplicate *The New Woman's* final refusal to gratify with a happy ending. In this sense she had posed a transgressive threat to the order of the fictional and the real—a threat that was simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed through the exaggerated scale of the obsequies. The fetishized spectacle served as a form of containment and control, with the materiality of the funeral ritual reifying certain correspondences between the star and the roles she played, and finally enforcing a sense of closure. Exorcised, the star could be returned to a realm of harmless, tragically passive figures. The film's director, scenarist, and star all played their parts in blurring the line between the real world and the fictional one of the film. As mentioned earlier, Cai Chusheng and Sun Shiyi had based *The New Woman* on the story of *A Modern Woman's* author and actress, Ai Xia. Publicity profiles for that film and its star had emphasized its autobiographical quality, saying that from it, "readers will have no trouble seeing that she's a modern woman."³³ Likewise, before Ruan Lingyu's death the press depicted her not so much as a New Woman in the feminist sense but as a somewhat threatening *modeng nüxing* or *modeng guniang* (modern woman). Ruan was separated from her common-law husband, Zhang Damin, had adopted a little girl on her own, and was living with a different

man. By 1935, she had already arranged for a legal separation from Zhang and paid him alimony for two years, but a month before the payments were to conclude, Zhang sold a story to the press accusing Ruan of adultery. Even established newspapers like *Shi bao* and *Shen bao* bought the scandal, printing columns without bylines titled “A Page from Ruan Lingyu’s Life Story” and “I Lived with Ruan Lingyu for Eight Years,” framed by print disclaimers like “in Zhang Damin’s own words” and “the defendant has already discussed the issues of the lawsuit with their lawyers and denied the plaintiff’s allegations.”³⁴

Since Ruan Lingyu had starred as a Shanghai telephone operator escaping an arranged marriage in a film called *Three Modern Women* only two years earlier, *Shi bao* featured a jocular article titled “Three Modern Women” in which Ruan’s own rift with Zhang Damin was revealed. The terms for “New Woman” (*xin nüxing*) and “Modern Woman” (*modeng nüxing* or *modeng gūniang*) were occasionally used interchangeably in 1930s China. But “Modern Woman” more often carried additional negative associations of superstition, Westernization, hedonism, even avarice—similar to the cunning “gold digger,” or *wajin guniang*, described by Lin Yutang, or the “so-called *mogaru* [or *moga*] types” in Taisho Japan, who, according to Barbara H. Steinbock Sato’s quotation from one 1926 women’s magazine, were “just shallow ‘bean brains’ who have been influenced by American motion pictures.” The *Shi bao* article “Three Modern Women” depicts the film’s heroines shrewdly arranging for the dissolution of their own marriages and calls them *modeng*—something in a realm entirely beyond the familiar. “Modeng means ‘MODERN.’ But in China, the definition of *modeng* is sometimes even broader than the word ‘that’ [neige]. . . . My dictionary defines *modeng* as inscrutable [*moming qimiao*] and abnormal [*fanchang*].” The actresses may have been exercising the tenacity and economic rights that Lu Xun had once commended to the “Chinese Nora,” but this column depicts them buying off discarded husbands. He banishes them to the outside margins of *modeng*, concluding with the exasperated diagnosis of the women: “Now that’s just far-TOO-mod-ern [*mo-TAI-deng-le!*]”³⁶ Another column in *Shi bao*, “Even Women Movie Stars’ Love Accounts Don’t Add Up,” chastised the actress for privately hiring a modern lawyer to settle her marriage dispute, lamenting the entry of women into the rationalized world of legal self-defense and claiming that’s “not like the old days; now days it’s all plaintiff and defendant.”³⁷

After Ruan Lingyu’s suicide one detects a certain tone of relief. The eulogaries, whether by critics or by supporters, almost unanimously represented the actress (like her character Wei Ming) as helpless and weak.³⁸ Ruan’s “modern” legal efforts were eclipsed by her public reticence about



Fig. 28. Ruan Lingyu in *The Goddess* (*Shennü*), directed by Wu Yonggang, Lianhua Studio, 1934.

wander. In the tabloids and other popular interpretations, her reluctance to address the press directly was read as passivity, or even guilt. Suicide in the face of ignominy also fit neatly with traditional expectations of how a humiliated wife should properly assert her virtue—wronged spirits were thought to possess the power to return and wreak vengeance. It was in this framework of traditional mores, rather than more recent ones, that Ruan’s defenders chose to reclaim her from the kind of accusations of self-pity and modern immorality leveled against the character she had played in *The New Woman*. Lu Xun and Cai Chusheng both remembered Ruan as a silent and powerless victim of gossip and unjust persecution.

Ruan Lingyu’s star persona was based on the expressive, tragic roles she played, and her very livelihood was, for better or for worse, predicated on

her silent image. When the Shanghai "talkies" adopted *putonghua* (standard Mandarin) as their standard, this Cantonese native was thrown into a competition with popular actresses like Hu Die who were already fluent in Mandarin. When at last Ruan did "speak" out, hers was a disembodied, posthumous "voice." She wrote three letters before committing suicide, one of which was an open statement "to society" in which she repudiated the spoken word and reiterated the film's challenge to the press. Using the telling phrase *renyan kewei* (commonly translated as "gossip is a fearful thing," but *renyan* also evokes, more broadly, "things people say" or "talk"), Ruan condemned Zhang Damin for selling calumnious stories about her to the press. In the same stroke, she described the indirect pressure of gossip that had instigated, lamenting, "You may not have killed me with your own hands, but I have died because of you."³⁹ Condemning the unaccountability of her lovers' talk, Ruan's suicide note effectively supplies a plot for the novel penned by the silent film protagonist, titled *Lian'ai de femu* (The woman of love).

Lu Xun later went on to make the phrase "gossip is a fearful thing" famous in his memoir of Ruan when he issued a battle cry against the kind of "gossip" or "talk" journalism that had victimized Ruan Lingyu and her character Wei Ming. Lu Xun (along with others) condemned columnists who manipulated the print media's power of representation to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of others, particularly women:

The "society news" articles in Shanghai's newspapers and tabloids are simply cases digested by the authorities and turned over to the public for safety and works ministries. But there is a bad tendency to exaggerate some description, especially of women; since this kind of case does not involve great gentlemen or high ministers, it's even more susceptible to added description. In a given case, the age and appearance of a man are generally described honestly, but as soon as we come across a woman, the embellishment comes into full play.⁴⁰

His attack on the "talk" press was ostensibly prompted by his defense of Ruan but may also be traced further back to May 4th intellectuals' distrust for the "black curtain" (*heimu*) scandal exposés popular since the late Qing. This strain persisted through the Republican period, until we see the "progressive cinema's" cast of supporting intellectuals on the one hand (authors like Lu Xun and film critics like Chen Wu) and the circulation-conscious commercial press on the other, polarized over public opinion-making in the case of *The New Woman* and Ruan Lingyu's suicide.

The film's scenarist, Sun Shiyi, had already questioned the role

responsibilities of the media, including cinema, in society. Some years earlier Sun had explored the social significance of the cinema in a magazine article, quoting American sociologists on the "destructive and constructive power of indirect suggestion" in the movies.⁴² His work with Cai Chuansheng on *The New Woman* further refined this concept. In the film, cinematic devices such as point-of-view structures fortify the constructive "power of indirect suggestion," while the journalistic medium is explicitly relegated to the destructive end of this continuum.

The film does put the print media on trial, indicting journalists as ruthless and libelous. But *The New Woman* works within left-wing Chinese filmmaking practices, quietly using a commercial medium to undermine that very commodified culture of privilege in contemporary urban China. The motion picture and Ruan Lingyu's suicide both privilege the silent visual gesture of cinematic and theatrical "showing" as more reliably authentic than the journalistic "telling" of gossip and public opinion. The actress, like the final character she played, spoke publicly through the cinematic image and gesture. Just as the silent, written characters *Wo yao huo*, "I want to die," must serve as Wei Ming's final utterance, the voice Ruan Lingyu's Shanghai audiences heard was her silent performance enacted on celluloid.

This "silent speech" emerged as a useful strategy, born of necessity, for left-wing filmmakers in Republican China of the 1930s.⁴³ On a purely narrative level, the disillusionment and tragic death of an isolated young woman at the "Tomb of Love" could not have been more clearly melodramatic. But cinematically, the enunciative subject of the film is full of complex ambiguities. Cai constructed the *New Woman* as equivocally split between word and image, speech and silence, class and gender, subject and object. These clefts leave open the possibility for alternative, subversive interpretations of the narrative, especially during the concluding proletarian "Song of the New Woman." The *New Woman* may be a victim of the status quo, or a threat to it; she may be silent by necessity, or by choice; she may speak out as an individual woman or as a member of a class. In its open ending, the film articulated the kind of plurality that became increasingly untenable under the Nationalist government's "unification" policies.

The *New Woman* Incident that erupted in 1935 persists as legend in China more than fifty years later. It symbolizes something approaching an irrecoverable loss of public innocence. On a local level, this was an instant of recognition that the press, film studio, star, and audience were mutually implicated in the production and circulation of images—a process of commodification and consumption that could strip away or reconfigure whatever fragile boundaries exist between artifice and nature, romantic and real,

public image and private life. For Mainland Chinese of the 1980s and 1990s, the disillusionment defining the New Woman Incident may strike a familiar chord for anyone who experienced a sense of being duped by, and yet complicit in, the larger national-scale publicity machine behind the Cultural Revolution. In the late twentieth century, economic liberalization policies have fed the popular revival of interest in a prior golden age of Shanghai consumer culture. The recovery of Ruan Lingyu has come mainly in the form of biographical novels, a genre whose turbid lines between fact and fiction manage to accommodate the mythology of this actress particularly well.⁴⁴

In Hong Kong, the attraction of prewar Shanghai culture has taken on a special meaning. Growing economic ties between the two ports are an obvious factor. On a psychic level, the splendor and fear of 1930s semicolonial Shanghai on the eve of war match the sense of fin-de-siècle uncertainty accompanying the British colony's imminent reunification with Mainland China. Will Hong Kong's energetic local film industry, which has thrived on commodified stars and all manner of action, romance, and fantasy since 1949, perish under unfamiliar new censorship regulations? The death of Ruan Lingyu in the New Woman Incident has become a site where these apprehensions have crystallized for Hong Kong film critics and filmmakers such as Shu Qi and Guan Jinpeng.

In early 1988, the Hong Kong Arts Centre conferred international star status on Ruan in a series called "Three Goddesses of the Silver Screen from the Thirties," bringing together major works of Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Ruan Lingyu. The series inspired Guan Jinpeng's documentary, semifictional film *Ruan Lingyu* (a.k.a. *Centre Stage*), a reflexive attempt to sort out and preserve the legacy of two golden ages of world-class Chinese cinema—early twentieth-century Shanghai and late twentieth-century Hong Kong. A sense of transience pervades Guan's film from the intentional inclusion of disintegrating footage to the intertextuality with octogenarian stars of the 1930s; from the manic repetitions and reenactments of Ruan playing a New Woman crying "I want to live" as she is dying to the closing shot of decaying rubble where the Lianhua film production studio once stood. *Ruan Lingyu/Centre Stage* suggests that the Cantonese actress' silent death was partly a result of her frustrated attempt to speak in Mandarin for Shanghai cinema; Guan's documentary lament is shot in Cantonese, accentuating a bleak parallel with the fate of contemporary local filmmakers as they confront a Mainland Chinese film industry dominated by Mandarin and Beijing. Today, as in 1935, the New Woman Incident invokes the dramatic memory of an individual and a community perilously positioned on a line between the new and extinction.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter, titled "The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture," appeared in *Republican China* 20, no. 2 (1995): 55–79.

1. *Shishi xinbao* review reprinted in *Lianhua huabao* 5, no. 5 (1935).

2. *Xin nüxing* publicity sheet (Lianhua studios, n.d.).

3. Huang Ming, "Seeing *New Woman*," in *One Day in China: May 21, 1936*, trans. and ed. Sherman Cochran and Andrew C. K. Hsieh, with Janis Cochran (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 64–66.

4. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4. Doane's examples include *Mildred Pierce*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Ann Foyle*, *Daisy Kenyon*, and *Rebecca*.

5. The term in Chinese is *xin nüxing shijian*. Cai Hongsheng, *Cai Chusheng de chuangzuo daolu* [Cai Chusheng's creative path] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1982), 33.

6. Cai Hongsheng, *Cai Chusheng*. Cai Chusheng (1906–1968) became an apprentice to the seasoned director Zheng Zhengqiu at the age of twenty-three and worked on nine films at Mingxing, China's largest film company at the time. In 1931, he moved to the newly formed Lianhua, where a number of "left-wing" filmmakers had congregated. There he made six more films before release of *The New Woman*. During the Second World War Cai continued working in Hong Kong and returned to the Mainland in 1945 to make one more major film, the box-office hit *A Spring River Flows East* (*Yijiang chunshui xiang dong liu*). Although his films were popular and often patriotic (many of them enjoying success abroad), Cai's position in PRC film history has been an uneasy one. He entered the Chinese Communist Party fairly late, in 1956, and died during the Cultural Revolution.

7. Like Cai Chusheng, Ruan Lingyu (Ruan Fenggen, 1910–1935) was born in Shanghai of working-class Cantonese parents. Newspaper accounts, obituaries, and popular "biographies" disagree on many details of her life, but the following narrative is common to them all: Shortly after the early death of her father, she and her mother lived with another Cantonese family named Zhang, as servants. By the age of sixteen, the Zhangs were on the decline, and Ruan was withdrawn from school to become the common-law wife of their fourth son, Zhang Damin. A year later, she quietly screen-tested into Mingxing studios and began a decade of steady work there and at Lianhua studios, making nearly thirty films before her suicide in 1935. In counterpoint to the consistency and success of her working life, Ruan's turbulent relationship with Zhang forced her to change addresses annually, or even twice a year. One attempt at separation had culminated in a failed suicide attempt at the age of nineteen. Only at the height of her popularity, in 1933, was Ruan able to formalize the separation through a lawyer, and a few months later she moved in with

another man, Tang Jishan. But when Tang and Zhang began suing each other over property division and slander, the press placed Ruan at the center of the scandal, driving her to a suicide that seemed to reenact the narrative of the film she had just completed, *The New Woman*. See, for instance, the chronological appendix to Huang Weijun, *Ruan Lingyu zhuan* [Biography of Ruan Lingyu] (Changchun: Beifang chubanshe, 1986), 243–247.

8. While acknowledging the momentous contribution that psychoanalytic theory has made to the way we think about the spectator, gender, and the cinematic medium—see, for example, the essays in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990)—my overall approach here owes a debt to recent work on women and stars by historians of early cinema such as Janet Staiger, Lea Jacobs, and Richard deCordova.

9. This film is no longer extant.

10. “Dianying wenhua xiehui jiji jinxing” [The Film Culture Association energetically moves forward], *Chen bao*, March 26, 1933.

11. Cai Chusheng, “Zhaoguang” [Morning light], *Xiandai dianying* 1 (1933), quoted in Cai Hongsheng, *Cai Chusheng*.

12. The original film was silent but included this one recorded song. However, the extant film also includes voice dialogue dubbed over the images and intertitles. This latter dubbing project was carried out under Cai Chusheng’s supervision during the 1960s. Chen Ye, *Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu, dianyingji* [Great Chinese encyclopedia, film volume] (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikē quanshu chubanshe, 1991), 429.

13. For example, Hu Shi, “Meiguo de furen” [American ladies], *Xin qingnian* 5 (1918): 213–224.

14. Hu, “Meiguo de furen,” 222–223.

15. On the New Woman in the United States, Europe, and Japan: Kate Flint, *The New Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994); Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Atina Grossmann, “The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 153–171; Barbara Hamill Sato, “The Moga Sensation: Perceptions of the *Modan Garu* in Japanese Intellectual Circles during the 1920s,” *Gender and History* 5, no. 3 (1993), 363–381; Laura Rasplia Rodd, “Yosano Akiko and the Taisho Debate over the ‘New Woman,’” in *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945*, ed. Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 175–198.

16. Lu Xun, “Nala zouhou zenyang” (December 26, 1923), translated as “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?” in *Silent China: Selected Writings of Lu Xun*, trans. Gladys Yang (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). On *A Doll’s House* and New 4th feminism in China, see Kazuko Ono, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution*

1850–1950 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989 [1978]), 97–100, and Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 87.

17. “Baoshengong” [Indentured laborers] (1936), in *Xia Yan xuanji* [Selected works of Xia Yan] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980). A number of studies on the relationship between feminism and socialism in China have examined the broader implications of the subordination of gender to class in Chinese Communist Party policy—for example, Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and, more recently, Christina Kelley Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

18. Tang Na, “Guanyu jixielun: Xianshi zhuyi yu Xin nüxing” [On mechanism: Realism and *The New Woman*], *Zhonghua ribao*, March 2, 1935.

19. For example, Tang, “Guanyu jixielun”; Chen Wu, “Guanyu Xin nüxing de yingpian, piping, ji qita” [On the film *The New Woman*, criticism, and beyond], *Zhonghua ribao*, March 2, 1935. The title for *A Doll’s House* was often rendered in Chinese simply as *Nala* (Nora) but also translated more literally as *Wan’ou zhijia*.

20. Ye Yonglie, *Jiang Qing shilu* [The real Jiang Qing] (Hong Kong: Liwen, 1993), 59.

21. Tie Xin, “Zhongguo funü wenti” [China’s women’s issues], *Xinsheng zhoukan* 1, no. 20 (1934): 386–387.

22. Lu Xun (1923) in Yang, *Silent China*, 149.

23. Chen, “Guanyu Xin nüxing de yingpian, piping, ji qita.”

24. Huang, “Seeing *New Woman*,” 64–66.

25. Chen, “Guanyu Xin nüxing de yingpian, piping, ji qita.”

26. Tang, “Guanyu jixielun”; Chen, “Guanyu Xin nüxing de yingpian, piping, ji qita.”

27. For one recent treatment of this topic in literature, see Ching-kiu Stephen Chan, “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the ‘New Woman’ by May Fourth Writers,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 13–33.

28. Cai Chusheng, “Xi ru rensheng” [Art imitates life], *Zhongguo dianying* 2 (1957). In the PRC film history narrative, the Journalists Union was an arm of “reactionary rule” and Lianhua’s studio head, Luo Mingyou, being at best a fellow-traveler, acted in his own capitalist interests and in collusion with the journalists when the studio issued the formal apology.

29. “San ba’ guoji funü laodong jie: Xin nüxing canjia nüjiaoguan kaimu dianli” [International Women’s Labor Day, March 8: *The New Woman* takes part in the opening ceremony for a women’s education center], *Lianhua huabao* 5, no. 6 (1935): 15.

30. “Shei shahaile Ruan Lingyu?” *Zhonghua ribao*, March 16, 1935.

Gendered Perspective
The Construction and Representation of Subjectivity
and Sexuality in *Ju Dou*

Shuqin Cui

31. Li Taiyan, *Li Taiyan kaipian ji* [Collected *kaipian* of Li Taiyan] (Shanghai: Li Taiyan, 1937), 2. I would like to thank Carlton Benson for bringing this *kaipian* to my attention.

32. Anonymous souvenir booklet (n.p., n.d., ca. March 1935), 36 pp. Princeton University collection, China.

33. "Ai Xia," *Mingxing yuekan* 1, no. 2 (1933).

34. *Shi bao*, January II, February 15, 1935; *Shen bao*, January II, 1935.

35. Lin Yütang, "Wajin guniang" [The gold-digger girl], reprinted in *Ai yu tong* [Love and satire] (Taipei: Jinlan wenhua chubanshe, 1984), 176-180; Sato, "The Moga Sensation," 373.

36. "San'ge modeng nüxing" [Three modern women], *Shi bao*, January 17, 1935.

37. "Nü mingxing de lian'ai zhang ye suan bu qing" [Even the stars' love accounts don't add up], *Shi bao*, January 17, 1935.

38. Cai Chusheng, "Xi ru rensheng"; Lu Xun, "Lun renyan kewe" [On gossip being a fearful thing], *Taipei banyue kan*, May 20, 1935, reprinted in *Lu Xun shuo* [Complete works of Lu Xun], vol. 6 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 331-334.

39. Ruan Lingyu's letters addressed to Tang Jishan and to society, all dated March 7, 1935, and reproduced on pp. 21-22 of the anonymous souvenir booklet cited above.

40. Lu Xun, "Lun renyan kewe," 331-334.

41. For description in English of *heimu*, see Leo Ou-fan Lee and Andrew Nathan, "The Beginnings of Mass Culture: Journalism and Fiction in the 1920s: Ch'ing and Beyond," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 383.

42. Sun Shiyi, "Yingju zhi yishu jiazhi yu shehui jiazhi" [The artistic and social value of film drama], *Guoguang tekan* 2 (January 1926).

43. "Silent speech," the Shanghai star system, and the actress as modern woman are the central topics of my current book project, based on my Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 1997).

44. One might also say that the blurred lines of this genre appear as an antidote to the Manichean division of subjectivity and objectivity during the Cultural Revolution and that after a decade of glorifying the heroic collective, these biographical novels also work to recuperate the individual psyche.

Since its release in 1990, Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* has drawn intense interest from film critics, academic scholars, and general audiences. Reading *Ju Dou* against the difficulties and errors that often occur in cross-cultural interpretations of non-Western texts, Jenny Lau finds qualities of "Chineseness" fundamental to the film's textual and conceptual meanings, especially as inherent in the cultural notions of *yin* (excessive eroticism) and *xiao* (filial piety).¹ W. A. Callahan, by contrast, reads *Ju Dou* as a political allegory invoking both communism and Confucianism. These systems of patriarchal domination, he argues, define the film narrative as a "woman's struggle against her social placement" and as a father-son embodiment of Confucian ideology.² The image of *Ju Dou* has become iconographic in Chinese film criticism: a still of an impassioned Gong Li dominates the cover of Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions*. Chow describes *Ju Dou* as "the sign of a cross-cultural commodity fetishism," and, indeed, the appetite for viewing—and writing about—new Chinese cinema is strong. One can, as Chow does, see the director in the role of exhibitionist, displaying his "exotic" female protagonist, and thus engaging in the "Oriental's orientalism."³

This article supplements the growing body of broadly cultural and political analyses of *Ju Dou* by concentrating on cinematic analysis to show how the film produces meaning—more specifically, gendered meanings. As the central image in the film, the figure of *Ju Dou* exposes the oppressions that issue from social traditions. But behind her entrancing visibility lies the shadow of a patriarchal unconscious. In other words, a hidden male subjectivity is projected onto the sexualized heroine of the film, which throws open the question of whose subjectivity and sexuality is being represented. To address this question, I rely first on a textual analysis of the meanings embedded in cinematic language and, second, on how the representation of a woman occurs through gendered perspectives. Finally, I argue that represen-