

CRISTINA COLET

Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935): A Silent diva, a Model for Modern Girls (modeng nüxing) and New Women (xin nüxing)

Ruan Lingyu is considered one of the leading figures of diva in Chinese cinema of the 1930s. Since she was sixteen until her death¹ at the age of twenty-four, she starred in almost thirty movies, becoming very popular for Chinese audience who renamed her as the “Queen of melodrama”². As a movie icon of Chinese silent cinema Ruan Lingyu has been beloved not only by Chinese audience but also by that one in Hong Kong, where she is still considered one of the most important silent diva. In this essay we will take in analysis some Ruan Lingyu’s main roles to underline her acting style presenting different female models in Chinese movie production in early ‘30s. In the first part we will map her career, pinpointing among her roles the most significant, with a nod to the different film genres in which she took part and a reflection on the different female models she proposed; in the second part we will trace her style and way of performing, taking into account her divistic role in Chinese productions during 1930s.

Unfortunately, only few movies are still available today and nothing about her first period at Mingxing Studio («Star Film Company», 1926-28)³ or at Da Zhonghua Baihe Studio (1928-30)⁴ is survived. Even if Ruan Lingyu acted for many different genres, passing from comedy to melodrama, experimenting also *wuxia pian* («knight errants movies»), currently it is only possible to analyze her melodramatic roles covering all the early 1930s.

¹Ruan Lingyu’s life became over the years one of the favored subjects for scriptwriters and directors; many movies, TV series, theatre adaptations and books were realized from her death on. For this reason, as it commonly happens for movie icons, many episodes about her private life and career were romanced and nothing is really certain. In particular during 90s Hong Kong TV realized a TV series about Ruan Lingyu’s life (starring Huang Xingxiu) and career in twenty episodes that was very successful. Yazhou dianshe youxian gongxi produced the series that was entirely shot in Hong Kong. See STAFUTTI (2005, 113-21). For an in-depth analysis about her biography: MEYER (2005); JIAN (1997).

² During 1930s Mingxing announced through its magazine a contest to decide who was the favorite actress for Chinese audience. The winner was Hu Die, elected as “Movie Queen” in 1933 with 21334 votes. Ruan Linyu placed in third position. For her success in melodrama genre and her great skills of acting, Chinese audience renamed her as the “Queen of Melodrama”.

³ Mingxing Studio was found in 1922 by Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhenqiu who had some previous experiences as entrepreneurs, directors, scriptwriters for theatre and movie productions. Great success for the production of *Orphan Saves His Grandpa* (*Gu er jiu zu ji*, by Zhang Zhenqiu, 1923) concerned social morals, but Mingxing productions also included comic genre, as *Laborer’s Love* (*Laogong zhi Aiqing*, by Zhang Shichuan, 1922), crime stories, as *Zhang Xinsheng* (by Zhang Shichuan, 1922) inspired by a news story, martial art serial, realizing eighteen episodes of the popular series of the *Burning Lotus* at the end of 1920s, and social themes as female emancipation, arranged marriages and family dramas. During 1930s for the terrible period of the wars (civil war between Communists and Guomintang, the National Party, from 1927 until the foundation of People’s Republic only with some break, and the Japanese invasion, 1931-1937), Mingxing production became more interested in political and social themes. In 1931 it realized the first Chinese talky, *The Singing Girl Red Peony* (*Genü Hong Mudan*, by Zhang Shichuan). See QUIQUEMELLE – PASSEK (1985, 45-60).

⁴ Founded in 1925 as the result of the fusion between two previous production houses, the Da Zhonghua and the Baihe, many important directors, scriptwriters, actors and actresses worked for this film company, producing over than fifty movies including every kind of genre. At the beginning of 1930s there was another fusion with other film Studios, like Min Xin and Huabei, founding Lianhua Studio in 1930. Cf. ZHANG et al. (1995, 153).

In her career we can distinguish three main periods, related to her engages in the three studios (Mingxing, 1927-1928, Da Zhonghua Baihe, 1928-1930, and Lianhua, 1931-35)⁵, each of which is characterized by specific roles.

The first is characterized by her period at Mingxing Studio, where she specialized in “huaping”⁶ roles which means «decorative», depending exclusively on actress’ beauty; even if she personified main characters, all these roles are not based on her acting skills. It’s the case, for example, of her debut in *Couple in Name* (*Guaming de Fuqi*, by Bu Wancang, 1927), where she faced the problem of arranged marriage, playing a young girl forced by her family to marry a man she doesn’t love⁷. In this movie Ruan Lingyu says out a single line; what it’s important is her beautiful appearance, the same reason why she has been chosen by the director, Bu Wancang. This image, also proposed by the majority of Chinese movie at that time, is related to the Chinese patriarchal society which didn’t let to Chinese woman to express her thoughts or desires. In this sense the fact that women appeared on the screen was already a great achievement⁸, but they were not there to give voice to themselves, but rather to entertain the male audience. With her *huaping* roles Ruan Lingyu transfers on screen all male desires. As Laura Mulvey affirmed: «Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out this phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning»⁹. This is true also for the following productions during 1930s where scriptwriters and directors used the female image to talk about the weak condition of the country and the female passiveness symbolized China invaded by Japanese enemy¹⁰.

The second one is at Da Zhonghua Baihe Studio, where she took part to love story and *nüxia* production¹¹; the last one is her period at Lianhua Studio, where she became an icon of the left-

⁵ The Lianhua Film (also known as United Film Company or United Photoplay Service) company is considered one of the major studio production in China during 1930s. It’s the result of the fusion of many movie industries, like Min Xin, Huabei, Da Zhonghua Baihe. Founded in 1930 by Luo Mingyou and Li Minwei, the Lianhua Film was specialized in producing left-wing movies (many of them were banned by National Party censorship bureau), comedies and melodrama.

⁶ Similar to the “eye candy” in Hollywood production.

⁷ This theme was one of the favorite subjects during 1910s in China, in particularly for *wenming xi* («civilized drama»), a kind of prose coming in China from Japan (*shimpai geki*) and influenced by Western theatre which was about social problems, like for example the arranged marriages. Many scriptwriters who worked for theatre then during 1920s moved to movie productions, for this reason the problem of arranged marriages became a theme very popular on silver screen and also because it afflicted China yet. For more information LEYDA (1972).

⁸ Chinese actresses appeared on silver screen relatively late in 1912 and covering marginal roles. For a history of Chinese silent film productions see: LI – HU (1996).

⁹ MULVEY (1988, 58).

¹⁰ Very interesting the theory proposed by Tani E. Barlow about the construction of woman (*funü*) based on the binomial/state (*guojia*). See BARLOW (1994, 253-90).

¹¹ A subgenre of *wuxia* with female characters, becoming later very popular during Hong Kong productions’ golden age, for example with an important title as *A touch of Zen* (*Xianü* by King Hu, 1971).

wing cinema. During these five years she improved her acting style, specializing in melodramatic roles, portraying the difficult woman's condition, the opposition between country and city life, the tradition of China and the threat of Western influence on it¹². As asserted before, women in Chinese movies represented from one side man's desire and on the other side they symbolized China. In particular left-wing movies assume this solution to create a sort of *woman's film*, in order to raise awareness to the masses that it was necessary to react to the condition of passivity in which they lived, fighting Japanese enemy and Guomindang (the Nationalist Party led by Jiang Jieshi). These movies proposed different models of women in which the female audience often was identified. The term *woman's film* here not represents as in Doane or Basinger's analysis female desire, but rather the need to find a subject through which focusing on critical issues for the future of the country and women through melodrama were the most suitable for this purpose. In a certain extent these movies proposed a "genderification" of the country and cities through female heroines¹³.

As Miriam Bratu Hansen pointed out: «What makes the heroines of Shanghai silent films so memorable is that they oscillate among different types and incompatible identities; that they struggle against an oppressive patriarchal economy; and that they are who they are or become who society thinks they are as much by circumstance and chance as by "character"»¹⁴. From the image of a lovely mother and caring wife (*xiangqi liangmu*) to that of a perturbing *femme fatale*, from a young activist who fights to build a New China to a fashionable *modeng nüxing* («modern girl»)¹⁵, Chinese actresses in 1930s personified "a not-realistic woman" that with her desire of independence represents the need of modernity for the whole country. Ruan Lingyu personified many of these female models, standing out as an eclectic actress, an example for her colleagues like Li Lili (1915-2005), Wang Renmei (1914-1987), Chen Yanyan (1916-1999), other very popular actresses during 1930s. As a lovely mother (*xiangqi liangmu*) she embodied the ancient and Confucian values trying to bring a little Chinese specificity in that productions often influenced by Hollywood style, on the contrary as a modern girl (*modeng nüxing*) she represents the superficial need of modernity. In some cases we assist to a sort of negotiation of these two roles, it's the case of *The Goddess* (*Shennü*, by Wu Yonggang, 1934) where a young mother (played by Ruan Lingyu) sacrifices herself becoming a prostitute in order to ensure a future for her child. Here the lovely mother is combined

¹² For an in-depth analysis about left-wing productions see also: SHEN (2005).

¹³ Very interesting the reflection proposed by Yingjin Zhang about the binomial women ("we" in Chinese language) and the English term, underlying how in China both literature and movie consider women a sort of symbolic representation of all Chinese people for the cause of the New China. Cf. ZHANG (1994, 603-28).

¹⁴ BRATU HANSEN (2000, 16).

¹⁵ About all these models of woman see EDWARDS (2000, 115-47); OUFAN LEE (1999); ZHANG (1996).

with the image of the *femme fatale*/prostitute who seduces men because she has no other choice to take care of her child, appearing as a victim of Chinese society¹⁶.

As asserted Yingjin Zhang in his essay *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* during Chinese movie production of 1930s we can find four typologies of women that Ruan Lingyu embodied: «Women who are mother and comprehensive wife and trace out Confucian values, women who pursue a dream and leave the country for the city to become famous, women devoted to become emancipated through their career, and women involved in the cause to build the nation, becoming a model for Chinese left-wing movies»¹⁷.

In particular the maternal figure represents a sort of leitmotif during 1930s. As mentioned before, to represent mother country scriptwriters and directors used often the image of mothers following the Soviet lesson (i.e. *Mother, Mat, Мать*, by Vsevolod Illarionovič Pudovkin, 1926) showing the mothers' pains as the symbol of the collapse of the nation¹⁸.

Also the role of the mother played by Ruan Lingyu in *Little Toys (Xiao Wanyi)*, by Sun Yu, 1933¹⁹, or by Wang Renmen in *Wild Rose (Ye Meigui)*, by Sun Yu, 1932), was particularly meaningful in this sense.

If for Western countries China was considered the Sick man of Asia (*Dongya bingfu*), due to various defeats (consider for example the opium wars, 1839-1860, apart from the loss of many territories like Hong Kong), and the Japanese invasion during the 1930s contributed to strengthen that image of a weakened nation, in China these weakness was associated with a female image²⁰. China, in its research of becoming a modern country, was often compared by Chinese writers and directors to modern women who fought to obtain independence from the patriarchal and Confucian society, alternating weak and strong attitudes²¹.

In this context, this image of weak woman was particularly personified by Ruan Lingyu's roles, whose permanent feature was the heroine's sacrifice, and in the widest sense of the word the sacrifice of the whole country. Her characters sacrifice themselves for family, nation, lovers, and

¹⁶ For more information see the interesting analysis between virgin mother and metropolitan vamp in SHEN (2005).

¹⁷ ZHANG (1996, 203). Also Wang Zhimin asserted that Ruan Lingyu represented many different women: «girls from the countryside, maids, women workers, sex workers, beggars, Buddhist nuns, and female students» (WANG 1996, 294).

¹⁸ For an analysis in depth of woman condition during that period see STEVENS (2003, 82-103); GOODMAN (2005, 67-101).

¹⁹ This is not the only movie where Ruan Lingyu plays a mother but in this case there is a political cause for which she struggles for.

²⁰ For more information about the idea of China like a Sick man of Asia and the creation of stereotypes related to Chinese people who lived abroad see COLET (2013). There is an ample literature about the argument, among these see for example: WONG (1978); SAID (1978); MARCHETTI (1993, 14-27).

²¹ Cf. CHOW (1991).

rarely, indeed, they win their struggle against the patriarchal society; even her death (she committed suicide at the age of twenty-five) can be interpreted as her personal defeat against Chinese society²².

Ruan Lingyu with her nervous gesture which particularly characterized her way of acting, and her posture, highlights woman's subordination to man, whether they are fathers, husbands, or pimps. This state of subordination is particularly marked by camera which relegates her at the border of the frame, because of her voiceless condition that in the widest sense of the world symbolizes the woman's inability to make a resolution, also in regards to arranged marriages²³. Alternating roles of strong and weak women at the same time she tried to make her contribution to the cause of Chinese women of her time, becoming a model for young generation becoming independent with employments and education.

In order to have a more definite idea of her styles and the type of roles she acted for we'll take in analysis some relevant scenes of her most meaningful movies: *The Peach Girl* (*Taohua Qi Xue Ji*, by Bu Wancang, 1931), *Little Toys* (*Xiao Wanyi*, by Sun Yu, 1933), *The Goddess* (*Shennü*, by Wu Yonggang, 1934), *National Customs* (*Guofeng*, by Luo Migu and Zhu Shilin, 1935) and *New Woman* (*Xin Nüxing*, by Cai Chusheng, 1934).

In *The Peach Girl*²⁴, her condition of a voiceless and pure girl is underlined by the presence of the peach flower that symbolizes her country girl's virtue. When she moves to the city, indeed, she leaves the flower for her new city girl's look. Her country robe and her headscarf, that characterized for the first part of the movie her peasant condition, are also replaced by a close fitting *qibao* (Chinese vest), her modesty is replaced by cunning gestures that highlight her sensuality and contribute to seduce her partner. The *peach girl* is at the same time a conscious and an unconscious prey. Like many others female characters, she is always an object of desire, we never see her viewpoint, her close-ups, often characterized by flou effect which confers her a noble contour, are often male character's subjectives; about her perspective we can only see her suffering for other's

²² To read more see COLET (2009-2010, 225-52).

²³ It was often said that that many roles that Ruan Lingyu played had a lot of thing in common with her private life, for us this is the representation of a particular period where women fought to be modern and to conquer rights, but Ruan Lingyu, like many of her heroines, was subdued by men's manipulation and will, not succeeding in getting free. Even if she didn't marry she had a long relationship with a man who threatened her many times forcing her to commit suicide. See STAFUTTI (2005, 113-21); MEYER (2005).

²⁴ It's the story of a young poor girl (Lin called "the peach girl" because the peach flower symbolizes purity) from the countryside who falls in love with a gentry boy (De'en) who lives in the city. When she decides to leave her family to follow him to the city she changes her way of living. Wearing sensual clothes as a common city girl, she leaves her pureness which characterizes her in the first part of the movie. Nevertheless their parents (Lin and De'en's) don't agree with their relationship because they belong to different social classes, in particular De'en isn't able to disobey to her mother's will to marry a city girl. The *peach girl*, very angry with De'en, decides to come back home where she discovers to be pregnant. Some months pass, for her poor peasant condition she falls ill and dies, after having entrusted her baby to De'en. As in many Hollywood movies, like *City Girl* (by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1930) or *Sunrise: A song of Two Humans* (by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1927), also in China many directors reflected on the problem of corruption related to the city in contrast with the wealthy and pureness condition of the countryside.

resolutions. Even if she changes her way of life, leaving country and going to the city, she always depends of male's will and desire. In particular sometimes she exists only through male gaze, as Laura Mulvey has asserted:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness²⁵.

This condition of being "looked at and display" is particularly evident in the scene when the *peach girl* looks in the mirror (46'31''), when the camera moves from low to high framing first her naked leg highlighted by the split of her vest, this camera movement underlines her sensual attitude in contrast with her peasant condition. Then she goes in front of De'en to show him her new look and her sensuality using some seductive movements and swinging her hips. From the first scene when she lived in the countryside she is particularly changed, now she is very similar to all the other city girls and it's evident that the space plays a determinant role in her change. When she finds herself in her natural environment, the countryside, she is protected by her peach flower and the other natural elements (by the peach garden, and also by animals) and her pureness is highlighted; on the contrary in the city, symbol of decadence, everything corrupts her manners. Her robes, makeup, hairstyle, no less than her gesture corrupt so much her virtues, that her father has difficulty recognizing her when he comes in the city to take her back home. Besides, it's not a case that she becomes pregnant losing her innocence in the city and not when she lived in the countryside. The strong relationship between her and nature, underlined by the combination of many close-ups on her face set next to natural elements, like flowers, animals, reaffirms her sense of membership to that place. As Paul G. Pickowitz asserted: «The helpless young woman is China. Her innocent and childlike beauty is natural; she is a virgin; and she has never left the womb of the unspoiled countryside. But, like pure and innocent maidens everywhere, she is vulnerable and naive»²⁶.

As De'en said, the *peach girl* is different from the other city girl, because of her strong relationship with the country that represents her natural habitat. This is the reason why she can't live in the city, coming back to her family. Many close-ups are used with Griffith's purpose to highlight his heroines' purity and virtues always accompanied by noble atmosphere. It's her sense

²⁵ MULVEY (2009, 19). As many consider Laura Mulvey's feminist position in this essay not appropriate to analyze Chinese production we think that this could be true for Chinese movies after 1949, but for the production during 1920s and 1930s that in many cases is influenced by Hollywood style her point of view in some cases it's really meaningful and representative. For a a meaningful analysis of determinant male gaze see also BERRY – FARQUHAR (2006, 118-24).

²⁶ PICKOWITZ (1991, 43).

of duty toward her family (according to the traditional Confucian value of a lovely mother and a faithful daughter, *xiangqi liangmu*) to compel her sacrificing herself. As her American colleagues Ruan Lingyu adopted a very sober gesture, avoiding bombastic expressions which are present in other Chinese actresses. Like Lillian Gish in many Griffith's movies she favors a thrifty expressiveness to underline the different woman's state of mind and suffering condition. Her acting style is characterized by subtraction and gestural "economy". For this reason, we can consider her acting style very new and modern²⁷.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1-2 A comparison between the two kind of women acted by Lin, from one side (Fig. 1) the city girl, here the gesture and her body posture suggest a frivolous aspect, underlined by the wearing of *qipao* and her sensual way of moving, on the contrary in the countryside dimension (Fig. 2) Lin represents the typical Confucian woman who follows values and moral habits.

Now we analyze three different glances at the camera taken from four different movies, *Little Toys*, *The Goddess*, *National Customs* and *New Woman* to talk about warning, fragility and provocation.

After the Shanghai's bombardment in 1932, *huaping* roles, very popular in the 1920s, gave way to social roles, particularly those involved in the national cause. Also Ruan Lingyu personified some heroines who fought for popular cause, one of them is certainly Zhou Shuzhen in *Three Modern Women* (*Sange Modeng Nixing*, Bu Wancang, 1933), considered the bulwark of Chinese left-wing cinema (*zuoyi dianying*)²⁸, another one is Ye Dasao in *Little Toys*. In these two cases the sacrifice is related to the national cause, particularly in *Little Toys*²⁹ where Ye Dasao is a "mother courage" who sacrifices herself for people who live with her and her family, trying to support them

²⁷ For an attentive analysis of the change of acting in the United States (which influenced very much Chinese actresses) see PEARSON (1992).

²⁸ For an analysis in depth about left-wing movies see also PANG (2002).

²⁹ Set during the invasion of China from Japanese army, the plot talks about a young and strong woman who makes toys to survive, with her income she sustains her family (a husband and two children) and takes care of many people of the village where she lives. She is reference point from her people because of her strong nature. When she falls in love of a young student, instead of leaving her family and her people to follow him she prefers to sacrifice her love to help her country and do her best to sustain her village. After the death of her husband and the kidnapping of her child she leaves the village with the other people to make their fortune in the city. But the bombing has destroyed everything and there is little hope to survive. When also her young daughter dies for the bombing, she becomes mad wandering in the street of Shanghai.

during hard time but, after her sons and husband's loss, she wanders in Shanghai streets like a fool. If the *peach girl* was the object of desire, on the contrary Ye Dasao is a reference point³⁰. For example, in one of the most meaningful scene of the movie, she points her finger against people who surround her, gazing and warning them about their corrupted habits. Here we see her subjectives toward people who surround her (99'). Her glance to the camera, that breaks all the cinema rules, and her plea to Chinese people in order to fight against Japanese enemy represent her strong advice to Chinese people and to the audience who prefers watching soft movies (*ruan pian*)³¹, instead of fighting for the national cause. That glance to the camera provokes an *estrangement effect* (what Bertold Brecht called *Verfremdungseffekt*) highlighted by Ye Dasao's finger that moves against people who only care to amuse themselves. That gesture could be read as a *social gesture*, that Baudelaire defined «la vérité emphatique du gest dans les grandes circonstances de la vie»³², to further future fights, bringing forward what is considered the social gesture *par excellence*: the fist, symbol of the class struggle. This character, opposite of the *peach girl*, even if sacrifices herself tries always to react giving a positive message to people. The actress, Ruan Lingyu in this case, brings here a message and she becomes a tool of propaganda for the masses. Following director Pudovkin's lesson actors are rough material who needs to be shaped and used to produce a pointed meaning to make people reflect on society³³.

³⁰ Even if she is a leading figure in the first part of the movie she becomes the young student's object of desire, but instead of being passive of this attention she prefers to reject the man's proposal to escape together to stay close to her people and support them. With this decision she passes from a passive to an active position. This could be interpreted in the sense of what Miriam Hansen argued, that is to say that "oscillating movement" that characterized Chinese heroines of 1930s productions creating incompatible identities (see n. 14) and personified in three main models of woman: modern girl (where modern is related to trend and fashion), lovely mother and wife and new woman (woman who struggles for emancipation and Chinese political cause that in the production post 1949 converges in the role of the Communist female activist).

³¹ At the beginning of 1930s in China there was a biting controversy about what was concerned to "soft" (in Chinese *ruan*) and "hard" (*ying*) movies. This polemic was led by Liu Na'ou (1900-1939), an important Chinese writer and cinematographic critic who first criticized left-wing movies because they focused too much on political issues. From that moment cinema critics began to divide movies in these two categories, considering "soft" all the movies related to entertainment and "hard", that kind of movies related to civil and social themes, as the left-wing movies which were influenced by Marxist ideology. Very meaningful in this sense the two articles by HUANG (1993a; 1993b). This critical position reflected about what could be considered art and in particular if left-wing movies focused on political issues could be artistic movies or something related exclusively to propaganda. On the contrary left-wing scriptwriters, like Xia Yan, Tang Na, Chen Wu, answered back that producing soft movies Chinese audience was excused by reflecting on the plight of the country. It's presumable that the critic soft vs. hard movies had the aim to discredit left-wing scriptwriters and introduce "soft" scriptwriters in Chinese 1930s productions. For more information see ZHANG (2005, 267-74); see also PANG (2002, 50ff.).

³² BARTHES (1980, 44).

³³ PUDOVKIN (1958, 105-19).



Fig. 3

Ye Dasao glancing at the camera (producing an *estrangement effect*) points her finger to audience spurring on taking part to the Chinese cause for freedom.

The social gesture, shown at the end of *Little Toys* is similar for the same intention to that of the *shennü* («prostitute») in *The Goddess*³⁴, when looking at the camera lifts her arm to beat her pimp with a bottle (65'53''): «As she smashes the bottle against the camera lens, Wu Yonggang's brief shot shatters the film spectator's gaze upon the action, single-handedly positioning its audience as complicit in the power structure»³⁵. As in *Little Toys*, that threatening glance to the camera is directed to an audience and to a patriarchal society that don't give the young woman any alternatives to survive in the metropolis but for prostitution. The camera stays in front of Ruan Lingyu/*shennü* translating the collision between the world of *shennü* and what is on the other side of the camera, not only physically, but also in a figurative perspective. *Shennü* represents a type, her gesture is the sum of all women's action who try to rebel from male's attitude and Confucian morality. Her arm is charged of all the hate for abuse and oppression that many Chinese women had to suffer.



Fig. 4

The glance of revenge, a direct attack against bias, man's attitude and Confucian moral.

³⁴ A young mother, who becomes a streetwalker to sustain her child, is victim of her pimp who forces her to whore, keeping all the money. The woman, who has no name because she represents a type, is a *shennü* («goddess»), a name very common in that here in Shanghai to delineate young girl arrived from the countryside to make fortune and becoming prostitute to survive. The only reason why she whores is to safeguard her child and giving him a good instruction. So she tries to put aside her earnings (unknown to her pimp) to assure him a future. When the pimp discovers it he steals the money and goes to gamble. Coming back home, the *shennü* doesn't find her earnings and goes to a dive to square off the pimp. In the fight she beats him with a bottle and he dies. The *shennü* goes to prison asking to the dean to take care of her child.

³⁵ HARRIS (2003², 116).

It's very different in *National Custom*³⁶ Lan's glance at the camera (09'46''). During her conversation with her sister Tao, who confesses her to be fond of the same man that also Lan loves, Lan, who is a protective sister and wants the best for her sister, glances at the camera searching some comfort from the audience, the only one who knows her feeling, because of the previous scene when Lan had her last meeting with the man where they own up their feelings. That glance to the audience isn't a warning or a provocation, but a way to console herself from a big delusion that she decides to not express to her sister for not trouble her. Another sacrifice, that Ruan Lingyu shows through her eyes with a series of «microgestures» or «microexpressions» that close-ups highlighted as Balász pointed out³⁷.



Fig. 5

The glance at the camera as a way to get some comfort from the audience, underlining the strong relationship that characters/actors/stars had with common people.

Her attention is concentrated on the face through some few undetectable and rapid movements of the eyebrows, the economy of gesture underlines a sober attitude, symbolizing her victim's condition in front of society. Her face becomes a mask of suffering for all women who be subjected to injustice and deprivation. Talking about the difference between masks and faces Barthes said:

Pourtant dans ce visage déifié, quelque chose de plus aigu qu'un masque se dessine: une sorte de rapport volontaire et donc humain entre la courbure des narines et l'arcade des sourcils, une fonction rare, individuelle, entre deux zones de la figure; le masque n'est qu'addition de lignes, le visage, lui, est avant tout rappel thématique des unes aux autres³⁸.

³⁶ Two sisters (Ruan Lingyu and Li Lili), Lan and Tao fall in love of their cousin, but the first one decides to sacrifice herself, letting to her sister to marry the man, but for Tao this isn't true love, but a childish caprice. When they go to study to University and leave the countryside, Lan is a meticulous student and represents all the moral characteristics of New Life Movement, promoted by National Party, on the contrary for Tao going to the city becomes an occasion to live a modern life like a flapper. Lan many times sacrifices herself for her sister so as she doesn't lose face for her bad behavior with men (with whom Tao flirts), but in the end Tao has to learn to live with her own force.

³⁷ BALÁZS (2010, 104).

³⁸ BARTHES (1957, 70f.).

Ruan Lingyu is first of all a face and body of suffering who fight her cause and often is crushed by her physical pains. A close-up allows us to touch the feelings and to perceive in depth. In this sense like for Griffith's lesson the massive use of close-up was due to the necessity of creating empathy with female characters. In particular for Ruan Lingyu the use of close-up combined with melodramatic genre was a way that facilitates the process of identification of the audience with her roles. It could be interesting also consider how the close-ups in Ruan Lingyu's case are useful to create a female model of representation of suffering and how female viewers through it were facilitated to identify with her.

But feelings for Ruan Lingyu pass also through the objects that she holds in her hand to let off her frustration and torment. As James Naremore observed:

Pudovkin called this category of things "expressive objects" [...] in *Holiday*, for example, when Katharine Hepburn grows depressed and contemplates getting drunk, she grasps the stem of a champagne glass tightly, wrapping her hand around it and making a fist; thus the prop helps her to signal "repressed" anger³⁹.

Also for Ruan Lingyu using object is a way to express her feelings, that it be a flower or a handkerchief, she transfers on it her anger, dissatisfaction, fear, or love.

The last case we take in consideration here is *New Woman*⁴⁰, where Ruan Lingyu plays one of the roles who much more represent the swinging condition of women during the 1930s, whom Miriam Bratu Hansen talked about:

[...] women function as metonymies, if not allegories of urban modernity, figuring the city in its allure, instability, anonymity, and illegibility, which is often suggested through juxtapositions of women's faces and bodies with the lights of Shanghai, abstracted into hieroglyphics. In more narrative terms, female protagonists serve as the focus of social injustice and oppression; rape, thwarted romantic love, rejection, sacrifice, prostitution function as metaphors of a civilization in crisis⁴¹.

The movie as the previous *Three Modern Women*, identifies three typologies of women, the intellectual, the political activist and a frivolous woman, asking which one of these could really be

³⁹ NAREMORE (1988, 85).

⁴⁰ The plot talks about three kind of woman: the frivolous (Miss Wang), the intellectual (Wei Ming), the political activist (Li Aying). Wei Ming (Ruan Lingyu) is the intellectual who escapes from an unhappy marriage to take fortune in Shanghai, where she works as a music teacher. She wrote a book and she'd like to publish it but it's difficult to find a publisher. Her friend with whom she falls in love, is an editor and promises to help her. During her spare time she writes an hymn that her friend, Li Aying, a political activist asks her for women workers. Unfortunately the main investor of the school where she teaches, Dr. Wang, is attracted by her and when she refuses his advances she is fired. Also the publisher decides to publish her book only for her good looking. When she is laid off her daughter comes with her sister from the countryside to visit Wei Ming. The daughter gets sick and she has no money to pay the medicines. So she decides to sacrifice herself becoming a prostitute for one night, but her first client is that Dr. Wang who bothers her before and is Miss Wang's husband, Wei Ming's frivolous classmate. She leaves the house of appointment and comes back home where she finds her daughter dead. For the anger and her guilt-feelings she commits suicide eating many pills. In the hospital she changes her mind because she wants to fight to women rights but it is too late.

⁴¹ BRATU HANSEN (2000, 15).

considered a modern woman. Ruan Lingyu is Wei Ming an intellectual woman who wants to emancipate herself through her work of writer and music teacher, but who is also attracted by the bourgeois way of life, undecided if dedicate herself completely to female workers cause or to take part to middle class. In spite of all her efforts to emancipate herself through her work she is still an object of desire and at the end she discovers that the reason why she can publish her essay is her beauty. During the movie, the image of the star, Ruan Lingyu, and that one of the heroine Wei Ming overlies. The pictures hanging on the walls of Wei Ming's room and those passing through many hands, from the publisher, to a journalist, an editor, and an unscrupulous businessman (using some close-ups on the picture) are the same that appear on every magazines and newspapers⁴² to celebrate Ruan Lingyu's diva status. As asserted Francesco Pitassio the reproduction debate concerns also actors and stars in particularly who are subjected to be reproduced not only in film printing process but also for their omnipresence in magazines and photographs⁴³. Ruan Lingyu during the shoot of *The Goddess* was a celebrity, her image became an icon of suffering, a model for many young woman who were looking for emancipation. Like for many Hollywood actresses being on the cover of many magazines represented her success, even if it was only appearance.

For both (Ruan Lingyu and Wei Ming) the success passes through their image, if in Wei Ming's case the pictures are her pass for a career as a writer (the publisher decides to publish her book only after seeing her on a picture), Ruan Lingyu uses her image, becoming very popular, to represent women who suffer and fight against patriarchal society, in a way we can say that her star condition had a social function. But even if they try to emancipate they both remain only an object of desire. In a way that the public image of the star and that one of the heroine who is looking for fame coincide because they represent a female model of that time. In a society ruled by men women can make their way only apparently.

In the last scene of the movie Wei Ming, glancing at the camera, cries out her will of living to show that women are not only an object of desire but, above all, persons who fight for own rights. We can touch her pain with "our hands" to express Epstein's point of view about close-up⁴⁴. Her

⁴² When the movie was distributed in movie theaters her scandalous affair was on every first page of newspapers and magazines. Her first fiancé accused her to be a bigamous and some months later the trial began, but Ruan Lingyu never set foot on the courthouse, because she committed suicide some days before her testimony. She was not guilty because she never married but she only lived together with her lovers, but the idea of scandal and to be judged by everyone tormented her. After her death many comparison between her and Wei Ming's character took place. Also national and Communist party sentenced her as a negative model, and during Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) her tomb was destroyed. For us Ruan Lingyu represents many women of her time and for this reason the closeness with some of her roles is so meaningful, but we don't think that she was coerced by her characters. Many women committed suicide during that period fearing to lose face (a feeling very common in China and in general in Asia). For more information about girls who committed suicide, see GOODMAN (2005, 67-101).

⁴³ Cf. PITASSIO (2003). For a more detailed analysis see also DYER (1979); FARQUHAR – ZHANG (2010).

⁴⁴ EPSTEIN (1921, 104).

style is minimal, we can talk about a kind of acting for subtraction, where she never exceeds in showing her suffering. When Wei Ming glances at the camera, she shows all her despair for her choice and impossibility to come back to her life.

Ruan Lingyu's fame increases after her death. When it was clear that her suicide was the result of some injustices, such as the envy for her popularity and the difficulty for a woman to demonstrate her skill regardless her beauty, Ruan Lingyu became a symbol for all Chinese women who were looking for emancipation, and not only an allegory of the weak China.



Fig. 6

Wei Ming at the end of her life cries out with all her forces her will of living to fight for her and all women's cause.

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