Building a New China in Cinema

The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937

Laikwan Pang
Chapter 4

In the previous chapter, we discuss the representation of the relationship of the two genders in this film movement and discover that the cinema was more romantic and sexual than it proclaimed itself to be. Although revolution was considered morally sacred and therefore pertained to celibacy, this young and energetic left-wing cinema either failed to or never tried to suppress sexuality. Through the relationship of the two genders we discover that individual and collective identities were reconciled either through an affirmation of asexual romance, as in the case of Feng and Xin in *Unchanged Heart in Life and Death*, or through an idealistic celebration of collective sexuality, which is clearly observed in *The Highway*. The films reveal that this collective masculine subjectivity formed in this cinema fancied, either directly or indirectly, a simultaneous existence of romance and politics in the way that political participation also fulfilled sexual urge, if only cinematically. However, while this masculinity had to rely on the opposite sex as the legitimizing “other,” this “other” in turn also threatened the original ideology.

In fact, a manifestation of this new masculine subjectivity was this cinema’s unyielding devotion to women’s liberation, giving women a substantial position in this revolutionary project. Zhao Yuhua, Xin Feng, and Moli might not have contributed in direct ways to the building of a new China, but they remain essential, or even all-powerful, in this cinema. In this chapter, I will illustrate how women’s stories dominated and defined this film movement, calling our attention to the development of this collective subjectivity that might have overwhelmed itself. We will explore how the left-wing ideology appropriated the representation of women violently to consummate itself, as the male characters’ strength can only be actualized by the imaginary presence of this powerlessness, which might ultimately refer to no one but the heroes’ own impotency. However, this desire to tell women’s stories does not stay only on the level of cinematic
representation; I will also go outside the films and illustrate the fervent attempts of the left-wing filmmakers and critics to incorporate the suicides of two women film stars into their ideological structure. Through a comparison between the readings of these suicides performed in “reality” and those represented on screen, I will illustrate a cinematic mechanism that gave the women’s characters more autonomy than the actresses in reality had, showing that female representation in this cinema was not controlled solely by the dominant power structure but was also the site of contestation embodying many discourses and desires all at once. In her studies of Shanghai’s silent films, Miriam Hansen observes that “what makes the heroines of Shanghai silent films so memorable is that they oscillate among different types and incompatible identities.” This is even more obvious in the left-wing films which were often so political in outlook and emotional at heart. The cinema’s attempt to incorporate the many different contradictory agenda was clearly revealed in its telling of women’s stories.

The Obsession with Women’s Stories

Zhang Yingjin argued recently that this left-wing cinema transformed women into “wo-men,” the Chinese pinyin transcription of “we,” because the femininity of the female characters was gradually stripped away to become the genderless object of representation in the male filmic discourse. This analysis follows and verifies a granted gender relationship in which the male remains powerful and women disenfranchised. However, a more intimate examination of the movement in entirety demonstrates otherwise: femininity in this left-wing cinema was not removed but in fact emphasized. Instead of dominated by a simple gender representation of containing and policing, this left-wing cinema was obsessed with women’s stories, which was brought about by a diverse array of cultural issues and underlying forces.

Chinese cinema in the 1920s can be seen as a typical woman’s cinema. Romance and domestic stories dominated. Almost all performers who attained stardom were women; they include Yin Minzhu, Wang Hanlu, Zhang Zhiyu, and Hu Die. And most films, including those swordsman movies, featured the principled female actress and developed the narrative around her. Not until the advent of this left-wing cinema movement did we see an attempt to reverse this representation agenda. Torrent, one of the first and most important movies of this film movement, glorifies the heroic deeds of Liu Tiesheng, the ideal left-wing cinema prototype of intellectual/revolutionary (he is both a primary teacher and a leader of the peasantry), who leads the mass to revolt against their landlord. So is the case in The Highway, the film I analyzed in length in the last chapter.

However, this will of some individual filmmakers was too insignificant to influence the development of this left-wing cinema. Films featuring female leads continued to dominate this new cinema commanded by male filmmakers. Although these films differed from the women’s films of the 1920s in their obvious revolutionary ideology, a majority of the left-wing films produced in the 1930s focused on the theme of women’s liberation. These films include Three Modern Women, City Nights, Women’s Outcry, Cosmetics Market, The Future, Daybreak, Maternal Radiance, Flying Catkins, Wandering, The Sisters, The Classic for Girls, Country Worries, Little Toys, The Goddess, The Boatman’s Daughter, New Woman, Spirit of Freedom, The Crabapple is Red, Little Lingzi, and Flower of Society. Although these films were marked by overt nationalist concerns, women’s fates and struggles were the focus. Among the many pressing social issues concerning the filmmakers, gender inequality was singled out as the most captivating theme. Even in those films focused on other sociopolitical issues, the female characters oftentimes occupied the major attention in the overall story. Torrent and The Highway were two of the very few left-wing movies that placed so much emphasis on the male leads.

I agree with Zhang Yingjin about the policing of women’s voices in this cinema, but his claim of de femininity and the complete domination of left-wing masculinism in fact conceals the complexities involved, as the exploration of femininity was central to this cinema. It was a time when men completely dominated the film industry, left-wing or not. There were almost no women participated in the making of this left-wing cinema other than those occupying roles of performers. But the male filmmakers chose to tell their own stories through women. The obsession with women’s stories was particularly apparent in the early phase of the movement, from 1932 to 1934, during which the theme of women’s liberation dominated almost half of the left-wing films. Many young progressive directors chose women’s stories as the focus of their first films, like Shen Xiling’s Women’s Outcry, Fei Mu’s City Nights, Wu Yonggang’s The Goddess, and Situ Huimin’s Spirit of Freedom. The more rounded male roles, like Lao Zhao in Crossroads, Xiao Chen in Street Angel, and Wang Laowu in Fifth Brother Wang, were not created until the latter half of the cinema movement, when the directors were becoming more confident in their art. While some directors, such as Fei Mu, continued to tell women’s stories for the rest of their filmmaking careers, other more ideologically committed ones, like Shen Xiling and Situ Huimin, shifted to male stories later in the decade and successfully made overtly masculine movies during and after the war period. Ironically, although women were treated only as mouthpieces of the male filmmakers, the female characters initiated the young men’s exploration in their cinematic art and legitimized their ideological agenda. There was a complex discursive structure at work that made woman the surrogate to bear men’s anger and dreams at the same time.

First of all, we have a long tradition of Chinese males telling their stories through the experience of women; the description of woman’s suffering enjoyed a pivotal position in the male-dominated literature of China. Exceptions notwithstanding, the woman figure in Chinese literature is usually the personification of the tragic spirit; she is made to shoulder all grief and agonies by herself. Although the forced link between woman and victim can be seen in other liter-
ary traditions, the Chinese case is unique. There are strong components in Confucian ethics preventing people from interrogating society and encouraging their tolerance towards human suffering. Under such a social system, anger is oppressed and hopefully sublimated into some more positive energy such as kindness and sympathy. Almost the entire Chinese literary history is composed of cases in which the defeated intellectuals had nowhere to go except to literature to express their frustrations in life. Woman, who always occupied the lowest position in society, was the best persona to represent the powerless individuals who wanted but failed to engage reality politically.

The progressive culture in the 1930s struggled hard to invalidate this Confucian tradition. On the one hand, they saw the tragic women stereotypes as evidence of China's backwardness; the male filmmakers in modern China wanted to will women's victory into being. As Tani Barlow demonstrates, many Chinese intellectuals in the first half of this century gained important discursive advantages in self-legitimization by manipulating new gender ideologies appropriated from the West. The left-wing filmmakers also idealized their female characters into Westernized and independent women as a collective symbol for the new China. On the other hand, the practice of using woman's suffering as evidence of general social injustice persisted. As a result, many leading women characters portrayed in this cinema movement, like Lingling in Daybreak, Cuifen in Cosmetic Market, and Ye Dasao in Little Toys, were depicted as both victims and heroes, representing contrasting dramatic personae. They were usually the most mistreated ones under the oppressive social order, but always at the end of the stories they abruptly became masters of their own lives, walking away from the traditional imprisonment of family and marriage to become truly independent new women.

Another major motive for the filmmakers to make woman's films was the large female market developing. Although there is no credible accounting for early Chinese spectatorship, according to the various contemporary journal and newspaper descriptions, women must have been a large spectator group at that time. For example, a reporter classified the film spectators he observed into three groups: intellectuals, professionals, and petty urbanites. He claimed that women dominated the third spectator group, which was obviously the largest group compared to the first two. If this was purely impressionistic personal judgement, we can still safely infer the high number of women spectators attending these films according to the similarities observed between early American cinema and early Chinese cinema. Melvyn Stokes argues that the large number of female-centered melodramas and romances made in the 1920s and 1930s proved that Hollywood considered women to be its primary market. The films were often written by women scriptwriters, frequently adapting material from popular fiction also written by women mainly for women. They feature female stars, who outnumbered their male equivalents and seemed to spring from an apparently endless pool of talent. Although the Chinese left-wing filmmakers strove to purge from cinema the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies (popular romances) elements that were extremely popular in the 1920s' cinema, the female components of the 1930s' Shanghai cinema were as prominent as those described by Stokes. Not only were there a large number of films centered on women stories, but female stars also dominated the star system. We also saw the emergence of female scriptwriters, like Ai Xia whom we will discuss in detail. The films' advertisements used as many masculine adjectives, like heroic, historical, and grandiose, as sentimental descriptions, like soul-stirring, tear-driven, mesmerizing, etc. Masculine didacticism carefully incorporated romance and domestic stories in order to alienate the large number of female spectators. The heroines of this left-wing cinema bore the duties of male self-allegorization, the representation of a new revolutionary archetype, and female identification all at the same time. The male filmmakers relied on the suffering woman to illustrate social oppression, but they also had to put together a strong woman's figure to legitimize their politics. Yet the commercial setting did not allow them to appropriate women indisputably, which might alienate the female spectators. Thus a very unique woman's representation resulted. In the following, I will examine three films directed by three young and prominent male left-wing filmmakers from 1933 to 1935 to illustrate how all these macro cultural conditions were translated into cinematic representations. Specifically we examine how the representations facilitated more than one form of identification, and how the heroines, all performed by Ruan Lingyu, were made to embody different voices and desires. And then we will visit the real lives of Ruan Lingyu and Ai Xia, Ruan's uncanny predecessor, and examine how this desire to tell women's stories went beyond the cinematic frame.

Motherhood and Identification

Ruan Lingyu is one of the most well-known actresses in the history of Chinese cinema, and her legacy is intimately connected to the left-wing cinema movement. She started her acting career in 1925 when she was fifteen, but she did not immediately rise to stardom, mostly because her film company, Mingxing, already managed the then most popular actress, Hu Die. In 1929 Ruan Lingyu transferred to the newly established Lianhua Film Company, and her fame skyrocketed in consonance with the development of the progressive cinema. In Lianhua, she participated in the best productions with the best crew, and many of these films became some of the most famous left-wing films: Three Modern Women, City Nights, Little Toys, The Goddess, and New Woman, etc. High praises for her acting from filmmakers and spectators were so frequently heard that Ruan Lingyu was often considered as the most talented film performer, male or female, of the time.

However, we should not overemphasize her popularity. Ruan Lingyu was certainly not the single most popular actress in Shanghai at that time. Her lofty position towering above all others was rather largely constructed by later histo-
rians, who often associated the "progressive" characters she performed with the full-fledged development of the left-wing cinema movement. Some of the characters she portrayed were seen by critics and spectators as a realization of the new womanhood, which otherwise remained imaginary, bringing about her symbolic position representing the film movement. And most importantly, her lower-class background and widely-publicized suicide on International Woman's Day, as I will elaborate in detail, added much drama to the movement, and she served as an excellent real-life example to legitimize the movement's underlying ideology.

Over the entire oeuvre of Ruan's performance, Little Toys, The Goddess, and New Woman were the most famous ones and generally considered as the representative examples of her fine performances. And interestingly, in all of these three films, she performed a mother role. To most moviegoers then, Ruan Lingyu was not only an icon of the left-wing cinema movement, but she also represented an ideal and modern motherhood. This maternal weight defined not only the actress's public image but also left-wing filmmaking as a whole. These mother figures, I would argue, were more than just mouthpieces of the filmmakers but were also invested with a multitude of interests and discourses. They were sources of empowerment and legitimization, as well as anchors of identification for both male and female spectators.

In Little Toys, as I have illustrated, Ruan portrayed a radiant, assertive, and loving mother, Ye Dasao. At the end of the film, we see an elaborate street scene portraying the mother going insane, yelling among the passersby that the war is coming (figure 5.1). Ye's heart has been broken because her elder daughter has just been killed in a Japanese bombing. She is struggling hard to pick up her courage to live again and has just started to go back to her normal life in selling toys on the street. But now she is further agitated by seeing her son on the street, who was lost ten years ago in an earlier warfare, who no longer recognizes her. All of a sudden, the sounds of firecrackers celebrating the New Year overwhelm the street, and Ye goes crazy by associating the blasting noise of firecrackers with the Japanese bombing. This final scene made many spectators breathless when the film premiered in the New Year of 1934.

In The Goddess, a film I have discussed in chapter 3, Ruan is a suffering prostitute who lives only for the hope of raising her son, and the film also ends with Ruan's consciousness. When she is imprisoned for killing the rascal who has been controlling her life, we see the prostitute smiling alone in a dark cell, her face superimposed with her son's cheerful face, suggesting her contentment with the status of her daughter who is now kept guardian by the kindhearted school principal (see figure 7.5). The title states that "the prison is the only place in her life that gives her peace and comfort." She can now spend all her time fantasizing about a bright future for her son. The film bitterly suggests that the prostitute finally succeeds in escaping the city by capturing herself in the cell, by sacrificing herself to give a new life to her son.

Ruan also portrayed a passionate and suffering mother in Cai Chusheng's *New Woman*. Wei Ming is a divorced teacher and writer who is forced to prostitute herself because she needs the money to save her daughter's life. After much struggling, she chooses to commit suicide as she loses both her daughter and her dignity. This is noticed by a tabloid editor who has failed to win her heart and now decides to take revenge by exposing her prostitute identity and condemning her suicide in the newspaper. At the end, the film insists on bringing her back to temporary consciousness in the hospital after her suicide attempt. She shouts to the camera directly with wishes to survive and to seek revenge. In this silent movie, which cannot allow her determining voice to be heard, the subtitles of "I must live" were printed in larger and larger fonts, revealing her growing reluctance to be killed by the narrative's condemnation (figure 5.2). Intriguingly, this ending shows the tug-of-war between the narrative and the mother's will, revealing a certain uneasiness and ambivalent relationship within the left-wing cinematic discourse that condemns the emotional-otherwise-weak mother on the one hand and relies on her strength for legitimization on the other.

The three films all glorified the maternal love of the female characters and condemned society for sacrificing her saneness, freedom, and life. The visualization of her sufferings and the representations of her consciousness dominate these left-wing films and instill them with obvious masculine messages. While the end of Little Toys represents the mother's mental disorder by showing her jumping and yelling on the street, The Goddess and New Woman, through either images or words, also end with the disclosure of her consciousness. Here we see how the representation of motherhood, particularly her subjectivity, serves many different functions. First, she is both the victim and the hero, concurring in the traditional woman-victim stereotypes and the new revolutionary female image, both imposed on the basis of man's fears and desires. This is most obvious in Little Toys: the insane mother/prophet is not only victimized by, but also the only one to stand awakened among, the ignorant and pleasure-seeking mass, referring both to the well-dressed passersby and the film spectators themselves. She embodies the conflictual desires of the male director who followed, but at the same time, was anxious to break through, traditional female representation.

Secondly, the constant referral to her subjectivity, particularly in New Woman in which most of the important characters and events are introduced from her perspective through shot/reverse shot/superimposition, also actively invites identification of the female spectators. Spectators can engage with, and therefore enjoy, the emotional intensity of the story by suture into the characters' mental positions. However, in the above-discussed scenes the mother is at the same time the one looking and the one being looked at, and she is also to different degrees objectified. The look at her is structured on multiple planes. While the films encourage spectators to recognize the sufferings of the mothers, they also facilitate their identification with her child, who occupies the symbolic position of both the directors and the spectators. We should notice that in the above three films, the mother's consciousness revealed is all related to her lost child, with whom the directors and the spectators might have identified in terms of the Oedipal love they desire. As Sally Taylor Lieberman carefully documents
in her book, motherhood was one of the most favored themes among male intellectuals in modern Chinese literature, and particularly in the works of Lu Xun and Yu Dafu, she finds that the writers’ sense of political frustration is often allegorized in the relationship between a powerless son and a strong mother. The son’s failure either to rescue his mother from pain or to punish her tyrannical acts demonstrated the frustrated identity-construct process of modern Chinese intellectuals in relation to their nation-building wishes.

The child’s special position is most obvious in *New Woman*. Wei Ming, a single parent, left her baby daughter to her sister in their hometown to go to Shanghai for a living. As their lives are getting more difficult, the aunt brings the now juvenile girl to visit her mother of whom she has no memory. On the train, the aunt tells the story of Wei Ming to the girl. There is an elaborate system of subjective shots in this scene, which is not frequently seen in Chinese cinema during this period, demonstrating the face of the daughter looking at different women around her, imagining if her own mother looks like anyone of them. At the end, the aunt takes out a photo of Wei Ming from her bag, and the series of subjective shots ends on this picture. After a careful scrutinizing of the picture, the young daughter concludes that Wei Ming is both a loving mother and a suffering woman (figures 5.3-5.12). Through this series of subjective shots, the film carefully facilitates the identification between the spectators and the daughter in relation to Wei Ming, who are both investigating Wei Ming’s personal stories through visual means.

Therefore, the film invites spectators’ multiple identifications with the mother: one can identify with Wei directly, seeing her as surrogate for themselves in bearing and purging suffering. But these spectators, as well as others who are not emotionally sutured into the mother position, could also at the same time identify with the daughter, who represented either the strong masculine agency appropriating her mother’s sufferings into the film’s overarching left-wing discourse, or the vulnerable and deprived subject desiring maternal protection. This plural identification, both empathetic and sympathetic, allowed a more fluid relation to be built between the film and the spectators. While the film artificially constructed a “new woman” to legitimize its patriarchal agenda, Wei ended up possessing a life richer than it was designed. She might always remain an object, but as her objectification was carried out from diversified sources, the character was given a larger space to assert her meanings in and to the film, therefore in and to the left-wing ideology. It demonstrates the uniqueness of the woman’s representation in this cinema, as it serves as a site of ideological contestation instead of simply allowing one voice to be heard. This was made possible partly by the filmmakers’ ambivalent relationship with their women characters, partly by cinema’s own characteristic relation with reality. Occupying the unique position between fiction and reality, cinema disallowed the left-wing cinema’s control over women’s representation to be total and stable.

**Ai Xia—The Condemned Woman Warrior**

The desire of this cinema to claim women’s stories and women’s consciousness on the cinematic level but projected itself to the extracinematic dimension, yet this appropriation desire also ultimately failed to stabilize its objects. As shown in its reaction to the suicides of two famous actresses, Ai Xia and Ruan Lingy, the left-wing discursive machine was anxious to prove its omnipotence not only in fiction but also in reality. However, I will argue that filmic representation, through the protection of the cinematic frame, gave a certain amount of autonomy to its characters not available in reality.

Ai was always seen as a symbol of renegade. She left her own middle class family in Beijing and came to Shanghai to start a new life in show business in the late 1920s. Although as an actress Ai never attained real stardom in her short life span, she was famous for her multifaceted talents. The first woman film scriptwriter in China was Pu Shunqing, the wife of the famous director Hou Yao, who wrote the script for *Ai Shen de wan'ou* (The Cupid’s Doll). The second female film scriptwriter (female directors would appear much later in the history of Chinese cinema) was Ai. As well as being the scriptwriter of *Xian dai yi ni xing* (A Woman of Today), she also played the film’s female lead (figure 5.13). The film depicts the romantic affair between Taotao, an employee of a real estate company, and her lover Yu Leng, a father of two children. She is so infatuated with him that she embezzles her company’s money in order to support his luxurious lifestyle. Taotao is later arrested for her criminal act, and during her imprisonment, Yu Leng deserts her. In the end she finally wakes up from her romantic dream and decides to lead a new life. The ending title of the film is: “Lying ahead is a bright road. Go—the ocean is wide, the sky is open.”

The story can be seen as a typical left-wing cultural product that condemns the earlier May Fourth indulgence in romance and embraces women’s liberation in the new era. As Ai admitted, she identified her own filmmaking with the current progressive left-wing cinema. Ideologically, *A Woman of Today* did not deviate from the left-wing films made by most of her male counterparts. Taotao’s story was only one rendition out of many under the same formula where the suffering and victimized woman suddenly turns into a triumphant figure transcending gender boundary. But the left-wing critics did not stamp their approval onto this film; the inconsistency of her character trait was particularly pointed out. They found the shift of Taotao from a devoted lover to a devoted revolutionary too abrupt and unconvincing: her indulgence in sensual love was too vividly depicted in the earlier part of the film, but it was not addressed at all in the end. But the real motivations of these attacks were probably not initiated by this characterization, which was recurrently found in many other left-wing films, but the eroticism depicted. Many comments about the film were related to its candid portrayals of sexuality. For example, Ling He, the famous left-wing...
film critic of that time, disapproved of this film because he considered it to be more pornography than pedagogy.24

Ai committed suicide in the Lunar New Year in 1934. Why would she, as a rising movie star and a promising new writer, choose to end her life? There were more than seven special issues in newspapers and magazines devoted to her death right after the incident,25 and the general conviction was that she ended her life because of her illicit relationship with the director Li Pingqian.26 In a newspaper article entitled “Memorializing Ai Xia” published right after her suicide, the author Chen Ping wrote that:

Most female intellectuals are highly aware of the illusion of romance and despise unconditional love. However, in reality they still hold on to the fantasy and see ideal love as the fist of their lives; tragedies are often the results. Ai Xia clearly suffers from the same problem. Although in Mingxing Monthly she writes that she does not believe in unconditional love, her incessant search for it clearly states the opposite.27

Interestingly, the critic’s rationalization of Ai’s death can easily be linked to the character Taotao she created and played in A Woman of Today. Chen Ping wrote in the same article: “Intellectually, Ai Xia has gained new insights [about social reality]; but she failed to accommodate her emotional sensibilities accordingly. This disharmony is the leading factor to her suicide.” Here we can interchange the name Ai Xia with Taotao, and the criticism still remains valid, with the only difference being that Ai suffers the consequences in reality, while Taotao’s successful transformation remains in fiction and unconvincing. In a criticism in Morning Daily published after Ai Xia’s death, the writer wrote:

We were chatting about A Woman of Today one day. All of us respected Ai Xia’s courageous and vivid creation and performance of [Taotao], but we also found the abrupt shift of [Taotao] at the end not convincing. One of us asked: “What will be the future of [Taotao]?” Another responded offhand: “How can she have any future? Either she becomes deified or dies!” Now, the heroine in A Woman of Today has transformed herself successfully, but the author of A Woman of Today chooses death.28

Although Ai had claimed that the story of A Woman of Today reflected her own life,29 the mirroring connection between Ai and Taotao made by critics and viewers was more than a common scholarly practice in relating the life of an author to his/her works. It was also an attempt to conflate the public and private discourses of cinema, connecting cinematic and extra-cinematic reality in order to support an omnipotent left-wing nationalist ideology that governs both. In one year, this ideology found another incident in which to invest and further its power, although the appropriation desire was manifested in a slightly different way.

Ruan Lingyu—The Truly Liberated?

Ai’s death was only a prelude to a much bigger social event that happened one year later: the suicide of Ruan Lingyu, and both incidents were somehow related to Cai Chusheng. Rumor was that Cai had an intimate friendship/affair with Ai Xia, and her suicide broke his heart. In order to wage a war against the reporters, whom Cai blamed for Ai’s death, he made the film New Woman, recounting Ai’s tragic life and condemning the paparazzi’s aggressions. In an uncanny way, Ruan Lingyu, who played the film’s heroine Wei Ming modelled after Ai Xia and who also fell in love with Cai, committed suicide very soon after making the film. And the reason for Ruan’s death was very similar to Wei Ming’s (therefore Xi Aia’s) problems; she was not able to face up to the press and the public about her adultery scandal. Fiction and reality were so complicatedly linked with each other in these two incidents that they demonstrated the very complex relationship between cinema and history. Interestingly enough, this dilemma between fiction and reality was also what the left-wing cinema movement strove to reconcile and conflate.

As I have illustrated in detail, the left-wing cinema needed a new revolutionary-woman image to represent a new China. The life, on-screen and off-screen, of the glamorous superstar can be seen as the epitome of this new politics of female representation. Although Ruan’s story had been frequently told and appropriated, the importance of her legacy in this left-wing cinema deserves our effort to read about her life once again.30 Ruan in real life was the daughter of a maid in a rich household.31 Similar to the plots of many popular novels and movies, the poor girl fell in love with the master’s son, Zhang Damin, but was rejected by the conservative matriarch because of her lower class status. Secretly married to her young lover, Ruan moved out of the household with her mother, taking the financial responsibilities for supporting the new family as a film actress. With the earnings of his now famous wife, Zhang began to indulge himself in his previous promiscuous and extravagant lifestyle, which enraged the actress. Ruan left Zhang for a rich businessman, Tang Jishan, but Zhang continued to harass her through charges of adultery and by spreading rumors about her to the press. Unable to endure such torment, Ruan committed suicide on the International Woman’s Day, March 8, of 1935. With the heavy melodramatic and class elements, this real-life story can be seen as a rendition of the typical left-wing movie.

Many famous left-wing intellectuals published articles immediately after Ruan’s suicide to condemn society for killing this actress renowned for portraying progressive women. Ruan’s suicide was seen as a manifestation of social injustice, in contrast to Ai’s suicide that was interpreted as the result of her ro-
mantic illusions. It shows that the left-wing culture reacted quite differently to the two suicides in spite of their resemblance. Similar to the case of Ai, Ruan’s suicide coincided with the experience of the character Wei Ming, whom she portrayed in the aforementioned New Woman, which premiered just one month before her death. In fact, the director Cai was inspired by the death of Ai and created the story of this film based on her life.32 However, while Ai was directly connected to Taotao, the May Fourth archetypal woman image, the left-wing discourse did not link Ruan’s suicide to Wei Ming, who is also a typical rendition of the May Fourth spirit. These different interpretations may be due to the different star images the two represented; Ai represented the wayward individualist, while Ruan, as I have illustrated, often portrayed the strong mother figure whose strength and love the left-wing masculine discourse feared and desired. Therefore, while Ai is responsible for her tragedy as an individualist should be, the personal experiences and weaknesses of Ruan’s were glossed over, and her suicide was made into a symbol that represented the collective sufferings of Chinese women. For example, the famous left-wing essayist Nie Gannu argued: “The one who killed Ruan Lingyu was not herself. The murderer was not an individual person like Zhang Damin or Tang Jishan. The killer is the residual feudal morality that still infatuates our minds.”33 Although recognizing Ruan Lingyu’s own emotional weakness in committing suicide, the famous film critic Chen Wu similarly blamed society for her death, “The sole cause of Ruan Lingyu’s suicide is the remaining feudal power. The representatives of feudalism in this case are the irresponsible reporters, Zhang Damin, Tang Jishan, and Ruan Lingyu’s own mentality.”34 Even the respectable Lu Xun wrote an article to criticize the corruption of the newspaper business, which, as he believed, caused the death of Ruan Lingyu.35

The left-wing filmmakers were among the most vocal and emotional ones. The famous director Fei Mu exclaimed agitatedly; “It is the feudal residual in our society that killed Ms. Ruan.”36 Li Minwei, the well-respected producer, explained Ruan’s death in this way:

Ms. Ruan had seen all the brutalities of social injustice, particularly those related to the inferiority of women. Women can never elevate their positions in this semi-feudal society, and Ruan Lingyu felt powerless to redeem her and tens of thousands of other suffering women from this injustice. Therefore, on March 8th the International Woman’s Day she ended her own life. Protest ing with her dead body, she demands justice from us all.37

Li Minwei here overlapped Ruan Lingyu’s personal encounters with an imaginative public experience. He interpreted her suicide not as her private decision but representing the demand of women in general for gender equality. Luo Mingyou, another film director and the boss of Lianhua Film Company, also righteously proclaimed that “Ms. Ruan did not die of suicide; she sacrificed her-

self to society and all women.”38 Under the endorsement of these filmmakers, from a victim, Ruan Lingyu was transformed to a heroine who was courageous enough to rage against the corrupt social structure by sacrificing her life.

According to the last letter Ruan Lingyu wrote just before her death, the major reason leading to her suicide was her refusal to face her ex-husband’s adultery charge and the following public condemnation. The trial was to commence the day after her suicide; her choice of March 8 might have little to do with the date’s symbolic significance but her own personal considerations. But these details were all ignored; the intellectuals were concerned more about the propaganda of this death to support their own ideological beliefs, although their self-justifying passion and anger can also be understood. The two different, yet similar, reactions of the left-wing intellectual machine showed that the actresses’ private emotions and experiences became an access to the investigation of social reality; and both the on-screen and off-screen female stories were organized into a coherent ideological structure. The persona and private components of the suicides were emptied out to be refilled by the collective will and interests of the filmmakers and critics, making the left-wing ideology seemingly all-embracing.

**Cinema and Its Frame**

The representation politics of this left-wing cinema movement and the public discussions generated by the two suicides combined to illustrate the degree of ferocity and anxiety of the left-wing patriarchy in appropriating women’s stories, both in filmic representation and in reality. And this appropriation mechanism was driven not only by the filmmakers’ identity-struggling but also by the cinema’s aesthetic ideology. It is well recognized that socialist realism was the aesthetic tour de force of the global left-wing culture in the early decades of the century. China’s left-wing cinema was not an exception, and most of the related filmmakers and critics considered artistic representation valuable to humankind only if it had direct reference to social reality. Gender inequality was so highlighted in this cinema also because it was seen as evidence of China’s moral backwardness. And in order to prove the validity of its ideology, this realist cinema associated its cinematic representation to reality by connecting their fictive world to the stars’ own private lives. Through such conflation and reinforcement between the private and the public, the actresses’ suicides became vivid and powerful manifestations of the old world, which in turn legitimated the consolidation of the progressive culture as a whole. The gender discourse and the national discourse were woven by this realist desire into an interlocking network in which the lives and the film roles of these actresses intersected. It was at this point where realism and nationalism converged; it is also here where we observe how the patriarchy struggled to be omnipresent.39

However, the more ardent was this desire, the more anxiety was shown embedded. Being so indulged in persuading themselves and the spectators about the
degree of “realism” in the films, the filmmakers and critics might only have displayed their anxiety in the illusionary nature of film, acknowledging that there was a distance between cinema and reality, between women’s personal experience and male’s ideology. The filmmakers and critics had to rely on the “reality” out there to authenticate and validate their filmmaking and criticism. Only when the narratives set up on screen found direct bearing in the reality off screen could the filmmakers assure the public and themselves that the oppression the women experienced in films was not an imaginative conception; and only upon such equation could the critics find themselves at ease in their cinematic pedagogy. Instead of a simple coercive relationship, this gender relationship showed more about the filmmakers’ struggles and distress than their total tyranny.

In fact, cinema played a conflicting role forging this new masculine subjectivity. On the one hand, the left-wing intellectuals made the clever move to drop anchor in cinema because of the medium’s substantial market potential and its visual nature. Cinema has the tendency to homogenize a large population, as the capital-intensive nature of film production and distribution requires large potential spectator groups. While films are made with the heavy concerns of their clientele in mind, spectators inevitably are subject to cinema homogenizing effects that mould their emotions, tastes, and values. Cinema’s photographic resemblance to reality also makes it the most effective means, among other available ones, to consolidate a new collective subjectivity in the first half of the twentieth century.40

However, cinema sometimes also disrupts the overarching ideological structure that mediates our reception. For example, when we compare the suicide of Wei Ming in New Woman with Ruan’s own, it clearly shows the difference between cinematic representations and the extra-cinematic ones. While Wei Ming’s direct protests to the camera rendered both the spectators and filmmakers breathless,41 Ruan Lingyu herself had no such space of attestation when it came to her own suicide. In the film we observe that although the narrative clearly condemns the May Fourth woman who is doomed to fail history, she is also allowed to tell of her reluctance to comply. However, under the public discourse, Ruan’s real voice was completely silenced and appropriated by the left-wing propaganda machine. As argued by Mirian Hansen, “the bourgeois public sphere was gendered from the start—as an arena of virtuous action, and civilized interaction, for the ‘public men.’”42 Attempting to redeem Ai and Ruan from the criminal act of suicide, the male critics in fact victimized them further by making them available for discussion in the public sphere. After all, it was the horror of the overwhelming public condemnation that forced both Ai and Ruan to commit suicide. They might have chosen otherwise if they had recognized that their suicides did not halt but indeed accelerated their helpless falling into the public sphere.43

Interestingly, the female characters seem to have retained more power within the cinematic frame than in those unprotected public spaces like newspapers and magazines. Rey Chow and Slavoj Žižek explore this power dynamic in cinema from different perspectives. Analyzing the films made by the famous Chinese Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou, Chow argues that women are always the objects of cinematic close-ups and slow motions, and they provide the suturing points at which the narratives hang together.44 Zhang Yimou relies on women characters to display a Chinese culture because the sheer visuality of woman’s sexuality made the narratives hang together. But it is also this “force of surface,” as argued by Chow, which challenges the deep assumption that reality is at the core waiting for us to reveal it; it forces us to meet head on the exteriors and requires us to recognize and come to terms with cinematic visions which all are comprised of the surfaces alone.

In the analysis of Hitchcock’s Rear Window, Žižek argues that the desire of James Stewart is produced by what he can see through the window. Grace Kelly finally succeeds in becoming worthy of his desire by literally entering the frame of his fantasy, by crossing the courtyard and appearing “on the other side” where he can see her through the window.45 This analysis provided by Žižek can be seen as a cinematic rendering of Chow’s idea, while Chow’s argument also helps us further understand the implication of this Hitchcock scene. Woman is employed in the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema because the new cinematic “ethnography,” quoting Chow’s word, must be established through the visuality created by the “shallow” display of women’s bodies within the cinematic frame. But while the audience is absorbed in this display, the object also exhibits its effect to those who hold the gaze. “Like Fassbinder’s, Zhang’s cinema is about the affect of exhibitionism rather than that of voyeurism.”46 Grace Kelly in Žižek’s example can also be understood in this way. By entering the frame of James Stewart’s fantasy, although she becomes the object of his desire, she is also protected by this frame. Chow argues that “the power of surfaces is thus the power of confrontation, which ultimately makes us, the spectators, aware of the sensation of being stared at.”47 Following this argument, entering the male frame of fantasy and transforming oneself from a three-dimensional “reality” to a flat representation, Grace Kelly, however, resumes the power of confrontation, forcing James Stewart to recognize her presence which has been ignored. Not only is she able to occupy the full attention from her lover, but her action of entering the murderer’s apartment also escapes the verbal control of James Stewart. Instead, he is forced to recognize her independent existence, which is nonetheless still inside the frame of his projection.

Following Chow’s and Žižek’s analyses, we can go back to our earlier analysis of the suicides of Ruan Lingyu on and off the screen. Dialectically, the patriarch must rely on, therefore is conditioned to, an “other” to define its power and identity. It is true that in any patriarchal discourse woman represents not herself but, by a process of displacement, man’s desire and anxiety; but she, in the metonymical chain, will not only end up in but also easily trespass the phalus. As the young male filmmakers in the Chinese left-wing cinema showed so much anxiety in inscribing women’s private stories and experiences into their nation-building process, their films, in fact, reflected either their childlike dependence on the “mothers” to authenticate their wills and reasoning, or their
eagerness to rebel against the source of empowerment to assert individuality. Both processes seem to be doomed, because the mothers might overpower them any moment.

Cinema is most revealing in illuminating this power dynamic. When the visual and illusionary nature of the medium coincides with the vulnerability of female representation, it becomes most seductive to male’s confiscation. But this sheer vulnerability, as discussed in Chow’s and Žižek’s analyses, can also exert power back to such seizure, ultimately invalidating this appropriation mechanism. Cinema is able to protect its subjects within its frame, particularly in those close-ups or direct frontal views, in the sense that when the objectification of woman is intensified to the degree that little space is left between the characters and the spectators, the latter is made to confront the former directly, bypassing the ideological mediation of the patriarchy. While female representation is invested with various interests of different parties, the direct visual portrayal of hers also facilitates a head-on collision between the viewer and the viewed, allowing her a certain autonomy not available in the public discourse. As the Chinese left-wing cinema was so anxious to seek the endorsement of the woman characters, the anxiety was translated into visual terms that overwhelmed the action itself.

In the case of New Woman, for example, the director seemed to be so anxious to portray Wei Ming’s image and thoughts in order to express himself, to the extent that his own control threatened to vanish. Instead, the gaze of the spectator was returned directly with the gaze of the character, forcing the spectator to recognize his/her position hitherto defined by the cinematic apparatus. Comparing Wei Ming’s suicide to Ruan’s own, the actress could not confront the public directly because of the overall ideological function of movie stars, as argued by Richard Dyer, is to help preserve the dominant power structure.\(^48\) The star is composed entirely of social mediation, powerless in his/her actual social political autonomy but extremely powerful in reflecting the control of the dominant ideology to the public. While Ruan fell prey to this mechanism, Wei Ming did not. Interestingly, this left-wing cinema was clearly patriarchal in structure, but it also set up a boundary that protected and showcased women’s autonomy, no matter how insignificantly it was in view of the all-powerful patriarchy. Under the current academic hyperbole in celebrating borderlessness and transbordering, the tangible border of the cinematic frame might be most illuminating in offering us alternative tactics to those de-territorializing mechanisms ruling our world.

The flourishing of women’s stories in this cinema movement demonstrated that, in order to make themselves heard, the filmmakers had no other tools more powerful or more handy than speaking for the women. Wishing to start a new page of Chinese history, the filmmakers ended up on a traditional path. And more ironically, only through the representation of the opposite sex did a new masculine subjectivity truly consolidate in Chinese cinema, as the domination of male subjectivity, instead of masculinism, clearly distinguishes the 1930s’ left-wing cinema from the previous Chinese cinema. However, in contrast to the general belief that this cinema was single-handedly pushed through by the left-wing discursive machine, this gender politics also demonstrated that this movement was a spontaneous cultural process and was conditioned to many diverging discourses and conflicting interests. The dialectic between victimizing and heroizing woman characters, between their servility to different interests and their autonomous existence, only revealed the process of a discursive formation in its organic way. The accounts equating communist control with the development of this cinema fail to acknowledge the complicated co-web set up among gender and other discourses in any cultural phenomenon, in which no one’s interests can completely dictate others’. We might never be able to define and, therefore, confine this subjectivity, but the most equivocal discourse may ultimately be the most powerful one.

Notes


3. There are few biographical materials of Yin Minzhu, Wang Hanlun, and Zhang Zhiyu available. But there are several books published recently recounting the life of Hu Die, which are important documents to our understanding of early Chinese cinema. These writings include her autobiography *Hu Die huiyi lu* (The Reminiscence of Hu Die), ed. Liu Huiqin (Taipei: Liane baoshu, 1968) and a better biography of hers written by Zhu Jian, *Dianying huanghou Hu Die* (The Queen of Cinema: Hu Die) (Lanzhou: Lanzhou University, 1996).

4. The only male character whose star status exceeded many famous female performers at that time was Jin Yan. Later in the decade the names of Zhao Dan and Yuan Muzhi were also getting famous. Interestingly, all the three male performers had strong left-wing political ties, and their stardom was to a large extent promoted by this left-wing cinema movement.

5. For the synopsis of these films, see ZZDY, 223-345.

6. Among the four films, only *Women’s Outcry* and *The Goddess* were written by the directors themselves. But Fei Mu and Situ Huimin were also actively involved in the choosing and writing of the scripts.

7. This tradition of women’s tragedies continued in the cinema of Hong Kong and Taiwan after 1949. It was not until the 1960s and the 1970s when the economy of the two places soared did the position of male figures in films begin to surpass that of females. And interestingly, the concerns for women’s sufferings continued to be central in the mainland cinema until the Fifth Generation cinema. This is a rather complicated phenomenon that involves many cinematic as well as extracinematic issues. A more systematic, theoretical framework must be formulated before jumping to a conclusive statement.
about the gender manifestation of Chinese cinema. Unfortunately, this topic lies beyond the scope of this book.

8. Rey Chow argues that the predominant feature of Mandarin Duck and Butterflies fiction was that women’s problems served as the hinges of many narratives written by male authors. *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 34-83. Joseph Allen also provides some interesting examples to show how the male poets assumed feminine voices to tell their own stories in the *yuëfu* poetry. See his *In the Voice of Others: Chinese Music Bureau Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1992).

Lawrence Lipking, from a different perspective, provides a similar conclusion in his analysis of the abandoned women images in the poetry written by Li Bai, Cao Zhi, and Ezra Pound: “They serve both as ‘allegories’ of masculine frustrations and as a servile other self who reminds the male of his power.” *Abandoned Women & Poetic Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 134.


15. The film depicts a daughter instead of a son for whom the mother sacrifices herself probably because the daughter is ultimately the one to assume the “new woman” identity.


18. It is believed that the film, like so many other valuable ones at that time, is no longer available: nor has this film, to my knowledge, been analyzed in detail by any later scholars and film historians. But judging from the newspaper reports and criticism at that time, this film must have been one of the most controversial movies in the new 1933 cinema. The following synopsis is reconstructed from related materials published in newspapers and magazines at that time.

19. The names of the lovers were certainly symbolic. The character tao means grapes; its erotic evocation is obvious. The family name of the man is yu, which means I or me in classical Chinese. Leng means cold or coldness. The sexual relationship between the two was likely to be revealed in their names.


21. *SB*, Jan. 1, 1934. In another magazine article she also proclaimed that a good movie should “reveal how capitalists and landlords exploit the poor.” “Gèi yóuzhī dìnyìng de zìmén rén” (To the sisters who are ambitious in filmmaking), *Dìnyìng huābào* (Cinema pictorial) 5 (Sept. 1933): 12.

22. See, for example, the comments of an audience printed in *SB*, June 20, 1934.

23. Some of these comments can be found in *SB*, June 16, 20, 28, 1933.


25. For example, one-third of the volume of *Dìnyìng huābào* (Cinema pictorial) 9 (March 1934) was devoted to a eulogy of Ai Xia. CB also devoted a special issue on Ai Xia’s death on Feb. 17, 1934.

26. See, for example, Gong Jia’nóng, *Gong Jia’ròng congqìng huìyì lù* (The memories of Gong Jia’ròng regarding the film industry) vol. 2 (Taipei: Chuanqi wenshe, 1980), 255-256, 261, 348. However, I must point out that the three volumes of Gong Jia’nóng’s writing suffer from many factual mistakes and deliberate misrepresentations of the left-wing filmmakers. We cannot take his words for granted.


29. This is suggested in an article in *SB*, June 20, 1933.

30. Recent studies on Ruan’s life and career can be found in her biography written by Chen Ji, *Yìdài yìnxìng, Ruan Lingyu* (The film star of a generation: Ruan Lingyu) (Xi’an: Shanxi renmin, 1985); an anthology and picture collection edited by the historian Cheng Jiuhua, *Ruan Lingyu* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying, 1985); and the recent Hong Kong film *Ruan Lingyu* (The Actress/The Centered Stage) (Stanley Kwan, 1993).

31. The following description of Ruan Lingyu’s life is summarized from Chen Ji’s work.

32. See Cai Chusheng’s own account in *Cài Chushèng xuànjí* (Selected writings of Cai Chusheng) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying, 1968-69). As hinted by the 1993 Stanley Kwan film *The Actress*, Cai Chusheng had affairs with both Ai Xia and Ruan Lingyu. I requested references from Stanley Kwan, and he admitted that these were only hearsay. I could not find any historical evidence to prove the affair of Cai Chusheng and Ai Xia; but Ke Ling, who knew both of them personally at that time, verified the affair of Cai Chusheng and Ruan Lingyu to me in an interview. (Interview with Stanley Kwan, Hong Kong, Jan. 14, 1997. Interview with Ke Ling, Shanghai, China, Nov. 6, 1996.


34. Cheng, *Ruan Lingyu*, 16.

35. Lu Xin used the pen name Zhao Lingyi in publishing this article. Lu *“Rènyìng ke wèi”* (A discussion of “People’s words could be corroding”) *Taibai* (Taibai monthly) 2, no. 5 (May 20, 1935). Rpt. in Cheng’s *Ruan Lingyu*, 13-14. “Rènyìng ke wèi” is a Chinese idiom meaning that people’s gossip is destructive. This idiom was written in Ruan Lingyu’s last letter. The letter is reprinted in *Ruan Lingyu*, 12.


37. “Ruan Lingyu jìnian zhuanhào” (The special issue memorializing Ruan Lingyu), *Lianhua huabao* (Lianhua pictorial) 5, no. 7 (April 1, 1935): 23.


39. This politics of appropriation is definitely not unique in China. In many other so-
cialist cultural movements and gender is also made a component of the larger ideological framework by conditioning females’ private experiences to the collective ones. See, for example, Renate Holub’s criticism of Antonio Gramsci on his feminist outlook being severely curtailed by his deterministic view of progress, which deems feminine sexuality only a function of the larger nationalist interests. Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1992), 198.

40. Theorists like Christian Metz, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey, and Kaja Silverman have provided us a rich array of scholarship demonstrating how the viewing subject, whose identity is always in its construction, inserts itself into and is defined by the symbolic register of the film text. However, there are more and more reservations raised to these “subject-position theories” as totalizing and ignorant to the dynamic reception process. For a detailed response of some contemporary film scholars to this set of “subject-position theories,” see David Bordwell, “Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory,” in Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 6-9.

41. This is splendidly portrayed in Stanley Kwan’s The Actress. In the scene depicting Wei Ming’s death, the crew is so overwhelmed by Ruan’s performance that everybody stays motionless watching Ruan’s continual crying even after Cai says “cut.”

42. Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10. Here Hansen is reiterating the discussions of some feminist historians including Joan B. Landes and Jean Bethke Elshtain about the debate on the public sphere.

43. The article of Kristine Harris also analyzes the relation between the suicide of Ruan Lingyu and the film New Woman. We arrive at two different conclusions: Harris claims that critics saw the actress’ suicide as showing her weakness and powerlessness. But I argue that the left-wing filmmakers heroized, more than dispowered, her. This discrepancy is mainly a result of our diverging focus: Harris’ interests are the popular culture while I concentrate on the reactions of the intellectual culture.


45. Chow, Primitive Passions, 147-49.


47. Chow, Primitive Passions, 169.


Figure 5.4.
She looks out the window of the train trying to catch a glimpse of the possible images of her mother.

Figure 5.5.
Cut to her subjective view, seeing two farming women in the field.

Figure 5.6.
Not satisfied, she starts gazing upon the women on the train.

Figure 5.7.
Cut to her subjective view, seeing an old lady dozing off.

Figure 5.8.
Camera slowly pans to the left, replicating the daughter's subjective view, and she sees another old lady.

Figure 5.9.
Cutting back to her perplexed look.
Figure 5.10. The daughter continues to beg her aunt to tell her what her mother looks like.

Figure 5.11. The aunt finally takes out a picture of her parents, explaining to her how her father abandoned them.

Figure 5.12. The extensive set of subjective shots ends with the daughter examining Wei Ming’s picture.

Figure 5.13. Taotao (played by Ai Xia) in A Woman of Today captured in a cell.