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Signed:

Entertainment and Ideology in Shanghai's Film Star Culture (1905-1936)

by

Zheng Ji



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Abstract

This research examines the formation and development of Shanghai film star culture from 1905 to 1936, and discusses film stars' social status in the transitional Republican Chinese society. I argue that the film star culture in Shanghai was shaped by two forces: the popular social ideology and Shanghai's commercial entertainment culture. Also, because stars took part in the promotion of the popular social ideology through their performance in entertainment, they stepped away from marginalised society and their social recognition increased.

This research not only examines stars as images, a conventional method in the approach of star studies within the discipline of film studies, but also takes a historical approach to analyse the original social and cultural context's influence to the creation and promotion of stars images. Therefore, this thesis relies on analysis of primary materials including newspapers, fan journals, popular magazines, film texts, and stars' autobiographies.

The first chapter introduces a brief history of the development of Chinese film star culture from 1905 to 1936. It especially locates the development of film star culture in the context of the global expansion of Hollywood and Shanghai entertainment industry that developed from the late Qing onwards. The remaining chapters discuss how the popular ideologies and entertainment culture created and promoted three aspects of stars' images: their screen images, personal images, and social images that were shaped in public events. To illustrate the main argument of this thesis, a case study on Hu Die, arguably the most influential star from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, is carried out in the final chapter to demonstrate the relationship between her star image and the social and cultural context.

I conclude that although stars were always confronting doubts from the public in regard to their motivations to promote social ideologies through entertainment, the embodiment of these ideologies in stars' images enabled them to be involved in intellectual discourses, which helped to raise their social status. Such changing status of film stars also reflects a more flexible social mobility that appeared in the transitional Republican Chinese society.

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Occupation. Although later I narrowed down my research topic and excluded this time period, I still owe him very special thanks for all his help.

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Introduction

In 1934, Shanghai pictorial, *The Young Companion* (*Liangyou*), announced its choice of ‘model women’ (*biaozhun nüxing*) in the form of an illustration (Figure 1.1).¹



Figure 1.1 *Model Women (Biaozhun nüxing)*

The picture contains images of ten well-known women, each celebrated for a particular aspect of their personal character. The illustration itself is constructed of four concentric circles. The centre circle contains the silhouette of a naked female figure and the title *Model Women (Biaozhun nüxing)*.² The three outer circles are divided into ten sections, each introducing one women by 1) detailing her special achievement, 2) providing comment on her special virtues and achievement and 3) a close-up portrait. The women are from different professions and various social classes, including Soong May-ling (wife of the Kuomintang [KMT] president Chiang

¹ *Biaozhun nüxing (Model Women)*, in *Liangyou (The Young Companion)*, Dec, 1934. Shanghai. p. 22. (The image of Hu Die is highlighted by the author.)

² This nude female figure, which symbolises the ‘model woman’, might be inspired by the image of Greek goddess as in western fine arts. In Republican Shanghai’s pictorials, it was not rare to see Western art, including female nudes. See: Carrie Waara, “The Bare Truth: Nudes, Sex, and the Modernization Project in Shanghai Pictorials,” in Jason C. Kuo, ed., *Visual Culture in Shanghai 1850s-1930s* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007). p. 185.

Kai-shek) who “has the virtue to support her husband’s career”; Hu Mulan (KMT party chief Hu Hanmin’s daughter) who “serves her father and shows filial piety to him”; Ding Ling, the famous novelist; and Lin Pengxia, the pilot who explored northwest China, flying alone and later writing the first detailed geographical book about China’s hinterlands.³ This illustration of *Model Women* could be interpreted in different ways. For example, the women could be seen as ten individual model women with different personal virtues and achievements. Alternatively, the silhouette of the naked woman in the centre could be interpreted as a symbol of the general concept of the ‘model woman’, while the ten women represent and embody the different aspects of such a woman. Irrespective of the interpretation, it is clear that the ten women and their merits were acknowledged and respected in Republican Shanghai, where *The Young Companion* magazine was published.

Among these women is the film star Hu Die. A camera represents Hu’s career in motion pictures, and the comment further explains that a model woman should be “as widely known as Hu Die”. Hu Die’s inclusion and positive appraisal here are noteworthy considering her performing arts background. In traditional culture, performers’ social status was very low in China, yet in this pictorial the film star is accorded equal social standing to women of distinguished backgrounds from the upper classes. Unlike farmers and artisans, performers were dependent on other people’s excess wealth, so they were considered non-productive subjects in traditionally agrarian Chinese society,⁴ lived in poverty and faced social discrimination. Because actors and actresses dressed up and entertained by appealing to customers’ desires, the profession was considered a form of ‘prostitution’. Performers and their descendants were not permitted to take the civil service exams, and a well-to-do family should not marry their daughters off to performers.⁵ The general perception of performing artists was therefore quite negative, as Joshua Goldstein notes: “all of these factors accumulated to reinforce the social impression that actors’ low social and economic status was linked to an inherent moral

³ Yin Yuxia, “Qianshan zhuyan liu miaomo-nüfeixingyuan Lin Pengxia yu ‘Xibei xing’ (Extraordinary Writings on Mountains and Swan Geese: Aviatress Lin Pengxia and the Book ‘Way to Northwest’),” in *Tushu yu qingbao (Library and Information)*, no. 4 (2003): pp. 87–88.

⁴ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870 - 1937* (Berkely, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-23.

turpitude”.⁶ Seen from a historical perspective, it is quite remarkable that Hu Die was included in this group of ‘model women’. This begs the question: what then raised the social status of film stars in Republican China?

The illustration itself may go some way towards answering this question. It would seem that Hu Die’s fame is her chief achievement with the appraisal stating that she is known across the ‘four seas (*sihai*)’, which could refer to the whole nation or the whole world. However, it does not explain why such wide recognition was regarded as advantageous to a person.

The illustration clearly indicates that the film star’s reputation was established through the mass media – the camera representing that Hu’s reputation was both founded in and spread through film, and the magazine, *The Young Companion*, itself represents another medium by which a film star’s fame could grow, i.e. printed media. The pictorial highlights the importance of the mass media in establishing the stars’ reputations. How then, did the mass media build up a film star’s reputation?

The Young Companion was a popular journal specialising in pictorials⁷ reflecting the urban style of ‘modern’ living.⁸ By introducing and displaying material culture and glamorous urban figures (such as these ‘model women’), the journal presented to its readers the image of the modern person and modern lifestyle. Therefore, to some extent, the illustration of model women could be seen as representing an idealistic construction of a modern society in Republican China. Why were film stars selected to deliver the printed media’s version of modernity, and what were the social influences on film stars’ ‘role-playing’ of the modern figure?

Again, this illustration of ‘model woman’ is helpful as an initial means of exploring many of the aspects that concern this research. As it shows, by the 1930s, film stars had already become very visible and sometimes distinguished social figures, their influence reaching the wider society via the mass media.

⁶ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870 - 1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 23.

⁷ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge(Massachusetts): Harvard UP, 1999). p. 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

My research will explore film star culture in the early part of Chinese film history. More specifically, it will focus on film star culture in Republican Shanghai with a view to investigating its genesis and development, discussing the mechanisms that put film stars in the spotlight allowing them to climb the social ladder, examining the social discourses around film stars, and the social impact of film stars and the general film star culture in Republican China.

Research Objectives: the Film Star Culture in Shanghai, 1905-1936

This study will focus on Chinese film star culture from 1905 to 1936, mainly in the Shanghai area, before the breakout of the Second World War in 1937. In this section I will explain why the specific time scope and location are chosen for this research and the terminology of film star culture.

Why 1905-1936?

The Chinese term for film star, *dianying mingxing*, is believed to have been first translated from American film magazine articles by filmmaker Lu Jie (1894-1967) during the early 1920s.⁹ This was a time when the Chinese film industry was in its infancy and American film culture, including film star culture, had a major impact on Chinese film culture. According to *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* (*Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi*) no more than 40 Chinese feature films were made before 1921.¹⁰ During the period 1921-1931 however, approximately 650 were produced. These figures attest the fledgling nature of the Chinese film industry during this decade. Chinese film stars appeared when film production in China became consistent in the 1920s.

However, this study will start from the making of the first Chinese films in 1905. Empress-Dowager Cixi's photographer, and manager of the Fengtai

⁹ Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying qikan quanmu shuzhi, 1921-1949* (*Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts, 1921 - 1949*), (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu wenxian chubanshe (Shanghai Scientific and Technological Literature Publishing House), 2009). p. 2.

¹⁰ Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*), vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1997). pp. 519-522.

Photographic Studio (*fengtai zhaoxiangguan*), Ren Qingtai (1850-1932), made the first Chinese film - a short stage performance film called *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjunshan) in 1905 for the famous Peking Opera performer, Tan Xinpei (1847-1917), in Beijing. Tan Xinpei's reputation as a famous Peking Opera performer was already established before this film, so his fame might be one of the attractions to potential audiences. This event not only marks the beginning of Chinese film production, but also the first instance whereby an actors' fame was used in film production and promotion. Although Tan Xinpei was not a genuine film star, his example is nonetheless helpful for our understanding of film star culture in looking at the background of the entertainment industry from which he came and from which Chinese film star culture emerged.

The development of film star culture depended on the development of the film industry. With a subsequent industry boom, Chinese film stars began to emerge.¹¹ A 'movie craze' swept the nation during the 1920s, marked by the mushrooming of film studios in Shanghai. By the mid-1920s, 146 film studios had been established in Shanghai.¹² After the First World War, Chinese industry and the economy recovered while war caused economic recession in Europe. The post-war re-distribution of power allowed Hollywood to take over the Chinese film market, previously shared with European products, resulting in a new Hollywood movie craze in China. In order to reclaim the market from Hollywood, and enticed by potentially huge financial gains, Chinese film studios sprang up.

It is generally acknowledged that by the 1930s, the Chinese film industry had reached a comparatively mature stage. Numerous small studios failed and disappeared, to be replaced by several vertically integrated and bigger studios with their own production facilities, distribution networks, promotional departments and even exhibition chains, including the Lianhua Film Studio (*Lianhua yingye gongsi*)

¹¹ Wan Chuanfa, "Chushi de leixing: hua fen biao zhun ji hudong jizhi (Initial Film Genres: Definitions and Interactions)," in Lu Hongshi, ed., *Zhongguo Dianying: miaoshu yu chanshi (Chinese Cinema: Description and Interpretation)*, *Xinshiji dianyingxue luncong (Film Studies in the New Century)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2002). p. 66.

¹² Yingjin Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). p. 8.

and Mingxing Film Studio (*Mingxing yingpian gongsi*).¹³ For their very survival, every studio made efforts to cultivate their own stars to attract audiences and maintain their loyalty.

The outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 had a profound impact on Chinese film production. The war crippled the film industry with production stopping for more than a year.¹⁴ When production resumed in late 1938, the industry faced new challenges different to those of the pre-war years. Firstly, the industry had been subject to stricter censorship from the Japanese invaders during the war, both in the semi-occupied era (1937-1942) - the so-called 'isolated island period (*gudao shiqi*)' - and in the occupied era (*lunxian qi*, 1942-1945). Secondly, a great number of established film stars left Shanghai during the war.¹⁵ To kick start the industry and compensate their losses, studio owners made efforts to establish new stars.¹⁶ The methods adopted to make stars during war-time were restricted by the special social, especially political circumstances of the time. Thirdly, the Japanese propaganda department tried to manipulate the Shanghai film industry, partly through promoting Japanese stars, including Li Xianglan (Yoshiko Yamaguchi, b.1920) - a Japanese star who grew up in China, adopting a Chinese name to conceal her Japanese identity.¹⁷ Film star culture in China changed dramatically after the breakout of the Second World War and is a topic deserving of its own separate research. This study will therefore be restricted to the film star phenomenon pre-1936.

Why Shanghai?

This research focuses on the film star culture that emerged from the Shanghai film industry. Besides Shanghai, there were other film production centres in pre-war China, such as in Beijing, Nanjing, and Hong Kong.¹⁸ While all film studios, both

¹³ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵ Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (California: Stanford UP, 2003). p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁷ Yoshiko Yamaguchi, *Zai Zhongguo de rizi: Li Xianglan, wode bansheng* (*Days in China: Li Xianglan, a Half of My Life*), Daoyu Wenku (Taipei: Linbai Publishing Inc, 1989).

¹⁸ Li and Xing, *Zhongguo Dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*), 1: p. 103.

inside and outside Shanghai, promoted their own stars, only Shanghai stars achieved fame on a nationwide and international scale.

Shanghai was the centre of the Chinese film industry pre-1949. Many actors and actresses from other regions came to Shanghai, subsequently achieving nationwide stardom through the Shanghai film industry. The film actors and actresses who built their reputations as national stars in Shanghai were considered as Shanghai stars, no matter where they were from or which studio they served at the beginning of their careers.

The distribution network coverage of the Shanghai film industry was broad. By the 1920s, Shanghai films could be seen in many different places - from northern cities, such as Shenyang and Dalian, to Southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia.¹⁹ With the help of this network, Shanghai film star culture spread. Although Shanghai stars' influence was equally as far-reaching as this network, this research will mainly focus on the film star culture in the city of Shanghai.

Shanghai was also a centre of general entertainment. Known worldwide as 'the Paris of Asia', it was the fifth largest city in the world by 1930 and China's largest harbour and treaty port.²⁰ Shanghai was the most diverse and colourful Chinese city of the twentieth century globally in terms of its multiple political forces and diverse national and international cultures and lifestyles. A former fishing village, Shanghai opened up to foreign trade and residence as a treaty port under The Treaty of Nanking (1842).²¹ Until the late Qing, Shanghai had been divided into an International Settlement, comprising the former British and American settlements, and the French Concession, governed directly by the French.²² Westerners brought ambition, faith, business, as well as varied cultures, lifestyles and new entertainment forms, such as high fashion, horse-racing, nightclubs, cinemas and film magazines to Shanghai. Shanghai's modern print culture and entertainment culture, that had both

¹⁹ Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: the Politics of Chinese Cinemas*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003). p. 2.

²⁰ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: the Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard UP, 1999). p. 3.

²¹ Lynn Pann, Xue Liyong, Qian Zonghao. Introduction in *Shanghai: a Century of Change in Photographs 1843-1949*. (Hong Kong: Haifeng Publishing c.o., 1993).

²² Richard J. Meyer, *Ruan Ling-yu, the Goddess of Shanghai*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005). pp. 5-6.

flourished from the late Qing onwards, and Western film culture brought by foreigners all helped provide the right socio-cultural conditions for the genesis and development of a film star culture in Shanghai. Offering somewhat of a promised land, Shanghai also acted as a magnet for mass migration from the countryside.

As an international metropolis, Shanghai was also a part of the global film industry. Foreign films and film stars were enjoyed by Chinese audiences and global film star culture influenced the production and consumption of Chinese film stars in many ways. For example, the story of a female foreign film star's struggles in pursuing a film career was used by a Chinese film magazine to encourage more Chinese women to devote themselves to the industry.²³ Although Hollywood stars such as Mary Pickford (1892-1979) and Anna May Wong (1905-1961) never appeared in a Chinese film, their visits to Shanghai (Mary Pickford-1929²⁴, Anna May Wong-1936²⁵) aroused tremendous passion, excitement and social discourse among Chinese film buffs. These foreign stars who contributed to the formation of film star culture in Shanghai will also be discussed in this research.

The film star culture also existed in some other cities. For example, film magazines were published in other cities outside Shanghai such as in Guangzhou²⁶ and Beijing²⁷, and Shanghai stars' visits to other cities like Beijing²⁸ and Hangzhou²⁹ were extremely welcomed by local audiences. Nonetheless, films failed to reach the hinterlands before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, and what limited film exhibition sites did exist in Republican China were concentrated in

²³ Xu Moqin, "Dui dianying yanyuan shuo jijuhua (Speaking a Few Words to Film Actors)," *Yingxi Zazhi (Shadowplay)*, no. 3 (1925).

²⁴ Liu Huiqin, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe (Culture and Art Publishing House), 1988). p. 48.

²⁵ Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2005). p. 89.

²⁶ Such as *Mingzhu Semi-weekly (Mingzhu banzhoukan 1921-1934)*, see: Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo Xiandai Dianying Qikan Quanmu Shuzhi, 1921-1949 (Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts, 1921 - 1949)*. p. 3.

²⁷ Such as *Zhongtian Cinema (Zhongtian dianying, 1925)*. See: Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo Xiandai Dianying Qikan Quanmu Shuzhi, 1921-1949 (Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts, 1921 - 1949)*. p. 17.

²⁸ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)*. pp. 66-67.

²⁹ Zhu Jian, *Dianying huanghou - Hu Die (The Film Queen - Hu Die)*, E-book. (Lanzhou: Lanzhou daxue chubanshe (Lanzhou UP), 1996.). p. 110.

only a few of the bigger cities and the cities around Shanghai.³⁰ Consequently, far from the production centre and with less exhibition sites, the film star culture in other cities was quite tame compared to that in Shanghai.

Star Culture vs. Star System

This research adopts the term ‘star culture’ to describe the research objective rather than ‘star system’,³¹ which is often applied in film studies. This choice of terminology better reflects the dual approach that this research takes: to examine film star production in China from (1) a film industry perspective and (2) a wider socio-historical perspective.

A mature star system had not yet developed in pre-WWII China. The emergence of Chinese film stars came long after their foreign counterparts. The first named star in world film history came in 1909 in the form of Max Linder, a French comic performer.³² Although the first Chinese film studio, the Asia Film Studio, was established in Shanghai by an American Benjamin Brodsky (1875-1955) also in 1909,³³ large scale production of feature films did not begin in China until the 1920s.³⁴ However, many film studios were short lived during that time period, which could not provide consistent industrial conditions for the establishment of a star system. With the foundation of bigger studios with their own production facilities, distribution networks, promotional departments and exhibition chains in the 1930s, methods for producing film stars matured. However, due to a lack of financial capital, low output, inefficient and weak distribution networks, and few exhibition theatres

³⁰ Yu Li, ed., *Zhongguo dianying zhuanyshe yanjiu: dianying zhipian, faxing, fangying juan* (Research on Chinese Film Specialist History: Film Production, Distribution and Screening) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2006). pp. 32, 90.

³¹ The star system was the method of creating, promoting and exploiting movie stars in Classical Hollywood cinema (1930-1945). As audiences’ increasing interests towards stars developed, they began to demand to know the personal lives of their favourite stars and to patronise films in which they appeared. To cash in audiences’ interests towards stars, studios thus created stars through their publicity machinery, and controlled these stars through long-term contracts. See: Anthony Slide, “The Star System,” *The American Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary* (New York, Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1986). pp. 324, 325.

³² Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000). p. 42.

³³ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema), 1: p. 16.

³⁴ Zhang and Xiao, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*. p. 8.

for domestic films, the star system, in the same sense as the Hollywood model, did not appear.³⁵ The production of Chinese film stars was only in its initial stages at that time. Therefore, 'star culture' is adopted here in preference to 'star system'.

By the 1910s, Chinese film stars had not yet appeared, rather only traditional opera stars appearing in films would be recognised by audiences. The Hollywood star system was established in 1919.³⁶ Since then, Hollywood star culture started to influence the emergence and development of Chinese film star culture through films that dominated early Chinese film market and fan magazines etc. With the influx of Hollywood films, Hollywood stars such as Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and the Gish Sisters became familiar to Chinese audiences. By the early 1920s, Chinese film journals devoted to foreign film stars had already begun to appear, such as *Motion Picture (Yingxi congbao)*, 1921). The early film fan activities that were inspired by Hollywood film stars and star culture will also be considered a part of the Shanghai film star culture.

Literature Review

Compared to other subjects in the domain of the Republican-era Chinese film industry, such as film history itself, prestigious directors, and the Left-wing Film Movement,³⁷ film stars have traditionally received little scholarly attention. This was due to two main reasons: 1) the Chinese film industry was not star-centred³⁸ and 2) the canonical Chinese film history book, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, was written from a political point of view in which film stars are considered less important than the ideology makers such as film directors, script writers and film

³⁵ Yu, *Zhongguo dianying zhuanyshe yanjiu: dianying zhipian, faxing, fangying juan (Research on Chinese Film Specialist History: Film Production, Distribution and Screening)*.p. 33.

³⁶ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts*. (London & New York: Routledge. 2000). p. 349.

³⁷ Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-37* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005).

³⁸ 'Star vehicle films' that tailored for particular stars appeared in the 1940s, and often belong to the genre of sing-song film, such as singer Zhou Xuan's sing-song films in the late 1930s and 1940s, singer Ouyang Feiying's silver screen debut: the sing-song film *A Nightingale* (Yingfei renjian, 1946). However, this production trend was interrupted by the political circumstances after the CCP came to power in 1949.

commentators.³⁹ Therefore, ideological aspects of the industry received more attention, such as the subject matter, filmmakers deciding the ideological messages, and political film movements.

In recent years, this situation has started to change. Due to the considerable development of studies on film stars and stardom in the West over the past two decades, Chinese scholars have begun to realise that film stars and star culture are also important in film studies.⁴⁰ The English-language scholarship also notices that a lack of research on Chinese stars and stardom is a “significant research gap in Chinese film studies”.⁴¹ A number of studies on specific aspects of Chinese film stars and star culture have been published by both Chinese and Western scholars recently, which will be shown later in this section. However, there is no single published study in English that discusses the formation and development of Republican-era Chinese film star culture.

The fullest work to date on the history of the development of Republican-era film star culture is Yan Kailei’s *Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation on the Republican-era Film History* (*Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan*) published in 2010 in Chinese.⁴² Yan’s research aims at narrating the history of the genesis and development of film star culture, and revealing the relationship between the creation of stars and the mass culture in Republican China during the period 1923-1949.⁴³ She argues that both different “notions on film production (*dianying guannian*)” and the developing “mass culture (*dazhong wenhua*)” shaped the stardom.⁴⁴ However, in terms of the mass culture, Yan only addresses the popular magazines and newspapers, but overlooks other forms of mass culture, such as Hollywood films and commercial advertisements. Her research mainly focuses on the film industry and mass culture’s creation of stars, while other important factors

³⁹ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*), 1:.

⁴⁰ Chen Xiaoyun, ed., *Zhongguo dianying mingxing yanjiu* (*Studies on Chinese Film Stars*) (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 2012).

⁴¹ Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese Film Stars* (London: Routledge, 2010). Abstract. no pagination.

⁴² Yan Kailei, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan* (*Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation on the Republican-era Film History*) (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2010).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

that influenced the star-making process, such as the public perception of stars and the social cultural context of the film industry, are not given sophisticated critiques in her book.⁴⁵ My research will investigate the dynamic interactions between the formation and development of Republican-era film star culture and its original social, political, economic and cultural contexts, which are not critically discussed in Yan's research.

The few existing studies on Republican-era film stars mostly focus on three aspects: 1) the making of stars, 2) social discourses on stars, and 3) studies of a particular star, which will be discussed as follows.

A number of studies have discussed the formation and development of Republican-era film star culture from the perspective of the film industry's star-making methods. Wang Xiaoqian argues that early Shanghai stardom borrowed star production methods from Hollywood, including using the mass media to spread the glamorous image of film stars. Thereafter, Wang argues that the public's aesthetic sensibility toward Chinese women was established by film star images presented in the printed media.⁴⁶ She also emphasises that although the promotional method was from Hollywood, it was traditional Chinese tastes that decided the image of these Chinese beauties.⁴⁷ I agree with her about Hollywood's influences on the making of Chinese stars. However, she overlooks other aspects of star culture that the Chinese film industry would model on. For example, before film stars and media reports about them appeared, a courtesan star culture had already emerged in Shanghai aided by a booming print media.⁴⁸ This research will address both Hollywood and the indigenous entertainment culture's influence on the domestic film star culture. Her argument of traditional Chinese taste dictating the media will also be challenged in this research through articulating Hollywood fashion and tastes' influence on the making of Chinese stars.

⁴⁵ For example, Yan only presents that the public's different attitudes influenced the shaping of stars' images, but does not give critical interpretation to these different views nor explain how they affected the star-making process. See: Ibid., pp. 128-130.

⁴⁶ Wang Xiaoqian, "Modeng meili yu dushi zhigan: dushi xiaofei yujingxia de Shanghai zaoqi dianying mingxing (Modern Attraction and Urban Character: early Shanghai Film Stars in the Urban Commercial Discourse)", *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, no. 4 (2006). pp. 100-102.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁴⁸ Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. (Seattle & London: Washington UP, 2006). pp. 220-246.

The idea that a star was made by the industry is shared by many scholars.⁴⁹ In Qian Chunlian's research on film stars of the 1930s, she suggests that, driven by economic profit, both film studios and film actors themselves actively created star images.⁵⁰ Yan Kailei gives a brief introduction to performance training, actor recruitment and the employment system in the Republican-era film industry in *The Conditions of Early Chinese Film Star Careers* (*Zhongguo zaoqi dianying mingxing de zhiye shengcun zhuangtai*).⁵¹ In her recent book, *Stars and Their Times*, Yan introduces the film studio and mass media production of early film stars.⁵² However, Qian and Yan's studies only present their findings, but do not give critical analysis to them. Therefore, the significant values of these first hand materials are neither well-used nor well-presented. Overall, researches on the production of Republican-era film stars are often found wanting in terms of critical analysis and discussion. My research will not only further investigate different methods of star-making used in the film industry, but also analyse why and how these methods were applied to producing stars.

Social discourse on film stars is one of important components that constitute the star culture, which also influences the production of stars and the development of star culture. This aspect has received the most scholarly attention. A considerable number of studies on film star discourse have been conducted.

Michael G. Chang examines the varying discourses on female stars in Shanghai in his article "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public

⁴⁹ See: Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*. p. 12; Yan Kailei, "Zhongguo zaoqi dianying mingxing de zhiye shengcun zhuangtai (The Conditions of Early Chinese Film Star Careers)", *Beijing dianying xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Beijing Film Academy*), no. 5 (2008); Hong Fangyi, *Tianya genü: Zhou Xuan yu tadege* (*A Sing Song Girl in Wander: Zhou Xuan and Her Songs*) (Taipei: Showwe, 2008).

⁵⁰ Qian Chunlian, *Zhuanxing shehui zhong de leixing fenhua- 20 shiji 30 niandai Zhongguo dianying mingxing yanjiu* (Genres in a Transforming Society- a Research on Chinese Film Stars in 1930s). In *Shanghaid daxue xuebao (shekeban)* (*Journal of Shanghai University: Social Sciences*), Vol.14. No.1, Shanghai: Shanghai UP. Jan.2007. pp. 136-140.

⁵¹ Yan, "Zhongguo zaoqi dianying mingxing de zhiye shengcun zhuangtai(the Conditions of Early Chinese Film Stars' Career)."

⁵² Yan, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo Dianyingshi xintan* (*Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation of Republican Film History*).

Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s".⁵³ Categorising stars into generations based on similar working environments, Chang focuses in particular on different representations of female film stars through their autobiographies, persona establishing in fan press, newspapers and popular magazines in different time periods. He argues that in the 1920s movie actresses were seen as sexually and morally suspect starlets, and by the 1930s movie stars were individually praised for their talent, virtue, and innocent persons.⁵⁴ He shows that the changing public discourses on female film stars' social behaviour influenced the stars themselves and fans, as well as the general female community in Shanghai at that time. I would suggest that these two different discourses on female stars actually co-existed in both the 1920s and the 1930s. In my research, I will provide unused original materials of film publications to interpret why these two conflicting views on stars co-existed, and how they affected the production of different star images. Chang's research also briefly introduces the film star Hu Die's way to success in the 1930s,⁵⁵ which is probably the only research on Hu Die in English language scholarship. In my research, I will present a case study with more first-hand materials to discuss the life and career of this once most famous but rarely studied film star.

Shelley Stephenson investigates the history of film culture in Japanese-occupied Shanghai from 1937 to 1945 through film stardom, film and star discourses in fan magazines, cinemas, and film exhibition, with a particular concern for the urban milieu and Chinese audiences in her doctoral thesis *The Occupied Screen: Star, Fan, and Notion in Shanghai Cinema, 1937-1945*.⁵⁶ By focusing on film stars and reports about them in the fan press, she examines discourses surrounding nationalism, gender, class and modernity. Stephenson argues that the major social, cultural and political circumstances of occupied Shanghai are depicted through a competing star discourse in the press. She also discusses two functions of the fan magazine: on one hand, it bridged the gap between stars and fans; on the other hand, it kept a distance

⁵³ Michael G. Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s", in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). pp. 132-159.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 142-145

⁵⁶ Shelley Stephenson, "The Occupied Screen: Star, Fan, and Notion in Shanghai Cinema, 1937-1945" (PhD diss. the University of Chicago, 2000).

between stars and fans in order to ensure continued audience engagement. Although covering a different time period, Stephenson's research informs my study in terms of methodology for analysing press material and highlighting different angles of approach to the film star phenomenon.

Wan Xiaonan deals with how female stars in the 1920s used the fan magazines to react and respond to the various discourses from the public, literary elite and male audiences around them in "Rising Stars? Fallen Women? - Female Film Stars in Shanghai in the 1920s (Shangshengde mingxing? duoluode nüxing?—1920 niandai Shanghai de dianying nümingxing)".⁵⁷ He points out that in the 1920s female stars were expected to be social educators in the intellectual discourse, while at the same time being objects of male audiences' sexual desire.⁵⁸ I agree with his observation, and will further suggest that the idea of stars-as-educators was applied to both male and female stars in the 1920s and 1930s. Unused first hand materials will be examined in my research to analyse the dual image of film stars as both educators and subjects of mass commodification. Wan also argues that with the help of the city's new media, female stars made efforts to establish their star images they would like to present in the public, thus took part in creating discourses about them.⁵⁹ My study will further research the relation between stars' self-promoted images and the social discourses around them.

Chou Hui-ling borrows performance theory to study Chinese female stars during the period 1910-1945. She suggests that through performance, these female stars not only performed their ideal artistic roles on screen, but also identified with their screen persona in daily life. Therefore, their life became a form of public performance.⁶⁰ Applying this argument to female stars of Republican period, Chou demonstrates how the discourses surrounding the Hollywood star, the New Woman and the Modern Girl spread to and later shaped Republican Chinese society by stars'

⁵⁷ Wan Xiaonan, "Shangshengde mingxing? duoluode nüxing?—1920 niandai Shanghai de dianying nümingxing (Rising Stars? Fallen Women? - Female Film Stars in Shanghai in 1920s)", *Huadong daxue xuebao, zhexue yu shehui kexueban* (*Journal of Huadong University: Philosophy and Social Science*) (February 2008). pp. 74-82.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 77-80.

⁵⁹ Wan, "Shangsheng de mingxing? duoluode nüxing?—1920 niandai Shanghai de dianying nümingxing. (Rising Stars? Fallen Women? - Female Film Stars in Shanghai in 1920s)." pp. 80-82.

⁶⁰ Katherine Hui-ling Chou, *Performing China: Actresses, Performance Culture, Visual Politics, 1910-1945* (Tai Bei: Rye Field Publishing Co., 2004). pp. 20-24.

public performances.⁶¹ Following this approach, this study investigates film stars' public image and its relation to their screen persona, and further examines the relationship between the ideologies represented in the images of Chinese stars and ideologies brought by the global Modern Girl culture and Hollywood culture.

Studies on the images of specific stars have been conducted from a variety of different approaches. My research will follow their methodologies to analyse individual stars. Approaching from a combined musicology and socio-cultural perspective, Hong Fangyi analyses the life and works of actress Zhou Xuan in *A Wandering Sing Song Girl: Zhou Xuan and Her Songs* (*Tianya genü: Zhou Xuan yu ta de ge*). Hong focuses particularly on Zhou's music producers, arguing that recording studios, composers, lyricists and accompanists all played a role in creating her public persona.⁶² Sean Macdonald's study on the star image of Li Lili, examines how Li's particular star image was established through stage performance and further used in producing films.⁶³ Inspired by Hong and Macdonald's research, this study will also investigate the creation of film stars' images in relation to their works, filmmakers, and the production strategy of the industry.

Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935) is probably the most known Republican era Shanghai film star in academia. The star's successful career, tragic suicide at a young age and extensive social discussions aroused immediately after her death attracted the interests of scholars. Numerous studies on her career and life stories have been carried out. Most of these studies focus on three issues: her performance style, such as "Ruan Lingyu: Reflections on an Individual Performance Style"⁶⁴ and "Forever Parted with Her: Ruan Lingyu's Performance of Tragedy and Visual Politics (Yu ren yongjue: Ruan Lingyu de beiju biaoyan yu shijue zhengzhi)"⁶⁵; her representation as a "New Woman" in both her films and the press' depiction of her private life, such as

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 23-30.

⁶² Hong, *Tianya genü: Zhou Xuan yu ta de ge* (*A Wandering Sing Song Girl: Zhou Xuan and Her Songs*).

⁶³ Sean Macdonald, "Li Lili: Acting a Lively Jianmei Type," in *Chinese Film Stars* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). pp. 50-65.

⁶⁴ Mette Hjort, "Ruan Lingyu: Reflections on an Individual Performance Style," in *Chinese Film Stars* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010). pp. 32-49.

⁶⁵ Sha Dan, "Yu Ren Yongjue: Ruan Lingyu de Beiju Biaoyan Yu Shijue Zhengzhi (Forever Parted with Her: Ruan Lingyu's Performance of Tragedy and Visual Politics)," *Yishu Pinglun (Art Criticism)* no. 03 (2011). pp. 42-46.

the monograph *Ruan Ling-yu: The Goddess of Shanghai*,⁶⁶ “The New Woman Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai”,⁶⁷ “Ruan Lingyu and the ‘New Woman’ (Ruan Lingyu yu ‘Xin Nüxing’)”,⁶⁸ and a section dedicated to her in Chris Berry’s article “How Should a Chinese Woman Look? Woman and Nation”,⁶⁹ as well as the mass media’s influences on the entertainment industry, such as “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s”⁷⁰ and “Tabloids and the death of Ruan Lingyu (Xiaobao yu Ruan Lingyu zhi si)”.⁷¹ These studies on Ruan Lingyu inform my research in terms of analytic approaches to studying film stars’ screen image, private life, and social discourses around them. In contrast to the numerous studies on Ruan, another equally famous film star in Ruan’s time, Hu Die, is overlooked by scholars. Hu and Ruan are similar in many ways: Hu’s career was also very successful in pre-WWII China, and her personal life was also exposed in the public, which brought her huge crisis as well. But Hu did not choose to commit suicide. Instead, she actively took part in the defence of her own image publicly. In my research, I will dedicate a case study to Hu Die to show how the star associated with her image producers – her studio and the pro-star press, to establish a positive image of her in order to negotiate with various negative social discourses around her.

When discussing the formation and development of Chinese film stars and star culture, current research however tends to see the early film star culture as a natural feature that developed in tandem with the film industry and overlooks the historical background of the entertainment star culture. For example, this view was held by Wan Chuanfa and Zhu Feng in *The Star and the Star System in the Film*

⁶⁶ Richard J. Meyer, *Ruan Ling-yu: The Goddess of Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005).

⁶⁷ Kristine Harris, “The New Woman Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai,” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: Hawai’i UP, 1997). pp. 277-302.

⁶⁸ Wu Yimin, “Ruan Lingyu yu ‘xin nüxing’ (Ruan Lingyu and the ‘New Woman’),” *Dianying Huakan (Film Pictorial)* no. 12 (2005): p. 55.

⁶⁹ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, “How Should a Chinese Woman Look? Woman and Nation,” in *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006). pp. 108-134.

⁷⁰ Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s.” pp. 128-159.

⁷¹ Liu Xiange, “Xiaobao yu Ruan Lingyu zhi Si (Tabloids and the Death of Ruan Lingyu),” *Wenshi Cankao (History Reference)* no. 15 (2012). pp. 80–81.

Industrialization (Dianying chanye zhongde mingxing yu mingxingzhi).⁷² The film star contests in Shanghai are explained as a result of the development of the film industry in their research.⁷³ However, the connection between the film star contests and the earlier courtesan star competitions in Shanghai is overlooked.⁷⁴

Before the appearance of film stars, entertainment stars had already existed in Chinese entertainment culture. Such an entertainment star culture can shed light on the formation of film star culture. In *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, Catherine Yeh argues that courtesans and new urban intellectuals, including journalists, contributed to the formation of a new urban entertainment culture in Shanghai.⁷⁵ She especially points out that the film star followed the courtesan star's track to fame, finally mounting the public stage.⁷⁶ I agree with the outline that entertainment star culture, established before film stars appeared, influenced the later film star culture, but this point of view needs to be further evidenced by supporting materials.

Many studies on Chinese cinema in this time period focus on its ideological perspective, e.g. *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*,⁷⁷ *The Origins of Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-37*,⁷⁸ *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*,⁷⁹ as well as the canonical film history book, *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*.⁸⁰ However, many scholars criticise the "politicised reading" as a "hegemonic discourse suppressing other dimensions of the film culture"⁸¹ and "seek other perspectives and frameworks

⁷² Wan Chuanfan and Zhu Feng, "Dianying chanye zhongde mingxing yu mingxingzhi (The Star and the Star System in the Film Industrialization)," *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Cinema)*, no. 7 (2008). p. 14.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ The relation between the film star election and the courtesan star competition will be further analysed in chapter four.

⁷⁵ Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. p. 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

⁷⁷ Hu Jubin, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003).

⁷⁸ Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-37*.

⁷⁹ Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham & Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

⁸⁰ Cheng, Li and Xing ed., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*.

⁸¹ Pang Laikwan, "The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s," in *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London: BFI, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). p. 61.

to understand and theorise this vigorous film culture”,⁸² including perspectives of modernity and cosmopolitanism. The formation and development period of early Chinese film stardom came at a time when China responded to the competition with rising Western imperialist powers through nation-building projects. Therefore, “the nationalist quest for China’s regeneration to blot out humiliation at the hands of imperialists”⁸³ is not only a recurring theme in modern Chinese history, but also in Republican-era Chinese film culture. For this reason, the ideological perspective of the film star culture will still be examined in this research, whilst the commercial side of the film star culture will be equally investigated and discussed.

Research Questions, Hypothesis, and Methodologies

The limitations of current research on the culture of Republican-era Chinese film stars are shown in the literature review above. Firstly, throughout existing research there are many examples about Republican-era film stardom in which the emergence of film stars is seen as a simple outcome of the industry’s development. Such statements overlook the dynamic interaction between the film industry and its social context. Secondly, the significant connection between the cultural background (e.g. Hollywood star culture and Shanghai entertainment culture) and film stardom have been neither well-presented nor critically discussed. Thirdly, many studies on the production of stars amount to mere collections of data and lack analysis. And the interaction relationship between the production of stars and social discourses on stars is yet to be sufficiently discussed. Fourthly, the dynamic interaction between the socio-political environment and film stardom has been neither well-presented nor well-discussed in current research.

Due to the limitations of existing studies, the Republican-era film star culture deserves more research. Since the late 1980s, first-hand materials from the Republican era, such as film journals, newspapers, studio advertisements, posters etc., have been unearthed from the archives and re-published. Thus, recent film scholars

⁸² Ibid., p. 62.

⁸³ Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2004). p. 12.

have greater access to original documents than ever before, which also asks more and in-depth research of this subject.

Since this short doctoral thesis cannot examine every aspect of this area, my research will focus on three aspects of Republican-era film star culture: 1) how the star culture appeared and developed in its socio-political and cultural contexts 2) various star discourses and their interactions with the production of stars; 3) stars' social impact. Due to the complex nature of Republican-era film culture, this research will need specific angles to approach it, which will allow for efficient discussion of complex and sometimes seemingly unrelated factors. Therefore, as I am going to explain below, this research will investigate different aspects of star culture by examining their connection with social ideologies and entertainment culture.

Although some scholars criticised the using of nation-building ideas as the framework to define the meanings and significance of Shanghai's cinema,⁸⁴ this research will still analyse Republican-era film stardom by locating it in its ideological context. As nationalist sentiment was often expressed in star discourse, it is necessary to understand it from a political perspective. Because "nationalism is one of the key defining features of Shanghai cinema of the 1930s",⁸⁵ the political discourse also shaped the screen image of film stars at that time. Furthermore, film stars' images reflected and embodied different social ideologies in a given society.⁸⁶ Therefore, to address the ideological perspective will help us understand the social context's influence to the creation of stars, and the social significance of film stars' images.

Besides the ideological and social context, this research will also emphasis entertainment culture, as an important cultural context in which the star phenomenon was shaped. The commercial entertainment culture in Shanghai provided capital and talents to support the film stardom. Many social discourses on the film industry and film stars were developed from discourses on the general entertainment culture. Other entertainment business' methods to create and promote entertainment stars

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

⁸⁶ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New ed. (London: BFI, 2002). pp. 2-3.

also inspired the making and promoting of film stars. Consideration of these aspects should prevent over-emphasis on the ideological perspective and non-treatment of the commercial nature of the pre-WWII war film industry.

Ideological and the commercial side of entertainment culture were not disconnected in Chinese film culture in Republican era. On the contrary, there was a complex relationship between them. I agree with Pang Laikwan's observation that "what is striking about Shanghai film culture immediately before the war was the overlap between commerce and politics: simply speaking, nationalism sells".⁸⁷ Although many films in the 1930s were criticised as "commercialism",⁸⁸ politically radical films calling for revolution often adopted commercial strategies to sell, e.g. the use of big name stars and to express revolutionary opinions through romantic stories. As well as immediately before the Sino-Japanese War, nationalist discourse was also integrated into film culture for commercial purposes during the 1920s. Hu Jubin suggests that the Chinese film industry in the 1920s expressed an "industrial nationalism".⁸⁹ It was a time when Chinese filmmakers endeavoured to make films in order to compete with the influence of imported Western films in the domestic market. This nationalist concern contributed to the flourishing of the film industry and the positive social discourse on the economics thereof at that time. Many film stars were promoted in the name of building Chinese film stars during this pre-war period, which was in fact to use the nationalist sentiment to defend the cultural and economic invasion from Western films and their stars. All in all, politics and commerce are inter-dependent and are indispensable to the discussion of the formation and development of the Republican-era Chinese film star culture.

I would suggest that the cooperation of politics and commerce in film star culture is well-reflected in the creation and promotion of film star images, and embodied in different social discourses on these images. Therefore, this study will

⁸⁷ Pang, "The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s." p. 59.

⁸⁸ For example, in the debates about "hard film" (*yingxing dianying*, films with progressive ideologies) and "soft film" (*ruanxing dianying*, films made for the sake of art) in 1930s, "soft films" were criticised as only caring about the commercial profits.

⁸⁹ The idea of developing the domestic film industry in order to compete with Western film industries, which was well-acknowledged in the 1920s' domestic film industry, is regarded as a kind of 'industrial nationalism' by Hu Jubin. Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949*. p. 20.

make use of the star-image approach, a conventional method in the approach of star studies within the discipline of film studies. Richard Dyer's pioneering work *Star* studies film stars from both sociological and semiotic perspectives.⁹⁰ He reads stars as a social phenomenon, for they are all situated within a specific set of social and (film) industrial conditions. He also takes the view that stars function as 'signs' in films, signifying and delivering different meanings. Dyer argues that when discussing the sociological and ideological aspects of film stars, we are not dealing with real people, but "images existing in films and other media texts".⁹¹ Therefore, he locates stars in four forms of media text - promotion, publicity, films, and criticism and commentaries - and investigates stars' social meanings through what he terms 'star images', which embody a range of ideologies.⁹²

The star-image approach accommodates my approaches of the social ideologies and entertainment culture, for the ideological meanings are embodied in stars' image, and star images are also the products of the entertainment industry. To understand the production and significance of film stars and the relationship between film stars and society, this research will analyse film stars' screen images (i.e. the persona constructed through the characters they played), personal images (i.e. the portrayals of their personal lives in printed media), and their images that were shaped in public events.

As it has been mentioned above, the political discourse and the discourse on entertainment culture were involved in the creation of star images and the star discourse. Star images also embodied different social discourses. Therefore, this research will take various discourses that shaped the star images and the star discourse itself as research objects. The dynamic interactions among these different discourses will be analysed in order to understand how the star discourse was formed and its social influences. First-hand printed resources such as magazine and newspaper reports on stars and their films, comics, interviews with stars, contemporary film reviews, studios' promotional materials, as well as the stars' own writing about themselves provide rich texts for the analysis of discourses.

⁹⁰ Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. p. 1.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹² Ibid.

Based on the research approaches, I would argue that the popular social ideology (e.g. nationalist quest) and Shanghai's commercial entertainment culture enabled the appearance of film stars and formed the film star phenomenon and that courtesan star culture in particular acted as a model for film stars' subsequent path to fame. Catherine Yeh briefly mentions this argument in her research on Shanghai courtesans.⁹³ In this thesis I will present more evidence than Yeh to illustrate the relationship between courtesan star culture and film star culture. I will also argue that changing nationalist discourses shaped the various screen images of stars. Stars delivered social ideologies on screen, and also influenced the everyday lives of fans through displaying their personal lives in the printed media. I will suggest that film stars' important role in urban entertainment culture and their embodiment of dominant political ideologies and modern lifestyles enabled their increasing social recognition, which finally raised their social status. I will demonstrate that this changing status of film stars also reflects a more flexible social mobility that appeared in pre-WWII Republican China.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1: the Birth and Development of Chinese Film Star Culture

The first chapter will explore the origin and development of early Chinese film stars and Chinese film star culture. I will argue that Chinese film stardom appeared under the influence of both Hollywood star culture and a booming domestic urban entertainment industry. Due to the American film industry's export policies, Hollywood stars and star culture were very influential in China beginning in the early 1920s. Hollywood became one of the production models for Chinese stardom. The Chinese film star phenomenon also appeared partly as a consequence of the booming urban entertainment industry in Shanghai, and partly due to a new commercial culture legitimising the pursuit of commercial profit which urged the development of industry and commerce.

⁹³ Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. p. 220.

Richard deCordova's analytical framework, originally used to explore the origins of the American film star system is inspiring to plot the genesis and development of the Chinese film star culture. The production of Chinese film stars was influenced by Hollywood, which legitimates this approach. This chapter suggests that the establishment of the Chinese film star phenomenon underwent three stages: (1) the emergence of discourse on film acting (as well as on professional film actors); (2) the appearance of the 'picture personality', i.e. the circulation of actors' names and images through film and occasionally through the budding film press; and (3) the rise of the star, i.e. the exposure of stars' private lives and the creation of their public image with the help of the fast developing mass media.

Chapter 2: Nationalist Discourses and Film Stars' Screen Images

In most cases, film stars establish their image firstly through the films in which they appear. Before analysing other images of stars, chapter two will focus on their on-screen images.

Although the images of stars were fabricated, Republican Chinese audiences took them seriously. This chapter argues that Chinese audience's dissatisfaction with Western actors and their negatively-received portrayal of stereotypical Chinese characters in Western films led to demands for Chinese stars able to represent the ideal image of the Chinese people and the nation to both domestic and overseas audiences.

The popular nationalist discourse changed over time along with the change of political circumstances in pre-WWII China. The complex political forces in the metropolitan Shanghai area caused further complicated nationalist sentiment among the masses. The screen images of film stars were shaped according to various nationalist discourses for catering the public's taste and fulfilling their desire to see ideal Chinese men and women on the big screen.

Chapter 3: Off-screen Images: Social Models of a Modern Nation

The third chapter will look at the private images of stars that were circulated in the printed media, including studio publicity and fan journals.

Three different aspects of film stars' off-screen images: 1) their appearance, 2) their career, and 3) their leisure activities will be discussed in order to examine what kinds of off-screen images were presented to the public and their potential social influences. I will show that Chinese star makers used popular social discourses prevailing in Chinese society to interpret and promote stars' personal images, portraying them as ideal citizens in a modern nation. At the same time, stars were also confronted with doubts and irony from society for their lifestyle and personality. Such controversial views on stars' personal images showed that different social ideologies were depicted and competed through different star discourses.

Chapter 4: Film Stars' Ambiguous Public Role in Promoting Nationalist Ideas

Chapter four will examine film star images in relation to social events. Within this approach, society is read as a 'text' in which stars 'play' various roles through their public behavior and statements.

Film stars' activities and public statements in relation to public events, such as star elections and the national products movement, will be analysed to disclose how pre-established images (both on-screen and personal images) were used to deliver nationalistic messages. Through such social activities, film stars further re-confirmed their image as social celebrities. However, although film stars made efforts to establish their image as patriotic celebrities, a positive response from the public was often reluctant. Such social events thus became a sort of public forum where film stars' social acceptance was tested. The social discourse about film stars further displayed the seemingly contradictory factors that created and enabled the film star culture in the first place: nationalist discourse and the commercial entertainment culture.

Chapter 5: A Case Study on "the Most Popular Star" Hu Die

The fifth, and final, chapter is comprised of a case study on the film star, Hu Die (1908-1989). Hu was arguably the most influential film star in mid-1920s to mid-1930s. However, academic research on her is very rare.

This chapter will focus on her various on-screen images, her private image, and the political discourse surrounding her. The case study will show that the social influence on the discourse about film stars was not entirely unidirectional and that Hu also had an influence on society through the ideological messages embedded in her images. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, Hu was selected as one of Republican China's 'model women' due to her nation-wide and even international fame.

In addition to supporting my claims that social ideologies and a booming urban entertainment culture shaped the film stars themselves and the general film star culture in Republican China, my investigation into the life and work of Hu Die also reflects the changing social circumstances in China at the time - circumstances that facilitated greater social mobility for the lower classes.

Chapter 1 The Birth and Development of the Chinese Film Star Phenomenon

1.1 Introduction

Film is one type of industry and the most efficient tool for education as well. No country in the world does not improve it, and try its best to compete with [the film industries of] other countries. [We] just look at the cinemas [in China] built by foreigners and films imported from overseas, and every year [foreigners] earn thousands and ten thousands of gold [from us]. Our interest is flowing away, which is so obvious. But it is rare to see our films exported to other countries. Alas, only from this perspective, can [we] know that other countries are rich and our country is poor.

-Yuan Sheng, 1925¹

The world in the 20th century is a world of economic competition. Countries who once invaded other countries' territory by military force, now 'invade' others' economies by industrial and commercial strategies. Therefore, besides reforming politics and managing state affairs, a country in the 20th century should promote industry and commerce for self-defence...

Recently, the film industry is experiencing a renaissance, and the development of Chinese industry and commerce is also thriving...

-Ren Jinpin, 1925²

As a matter of fact, those money-making films, broadly welcomed and popular films all contain several essential elements, which are as follows:

An eye-catching title

Performers who are very well-known and trusted by the public

- Fo Sheng, 1927³

¹ Yuan Sheng, "Qianyan (Foreword)," *Xinxin tekan: 'Zhangong', 'Huijia' (Xinxin Special Issue for the Film Contributions to the Military, Coming Home)*, 1925.

² Ren Jinpin, "Qianyan (Foreword)," *Dianying zhoukan (Film Weekly)*, 1925.

A super star is not natural born, but is cultivated.

-Dan Duyu⁴

According to Richard Dyer, the ‘film star’ as a social phenomenon is shaped by both the film industry’s production and consumers’ consumption.⁵ Dyer’s observation can also be applied to the early Chinese film culture, considering the Republican-era film industry’s commercial nature and the profit-driven film market. The quotations above clearly show that the commercial features of the film industry were well acknowledged by Chinese film commentators and filmmakers – film was considered a type of industry; the film star was seen as a factor of production and also the product of the industry. The film star’s crucial status to enable the commercial profits of the industry had been well recognised in Chinese film culture at that time.

The above quotations beg many questions: where did the understanding about the film industry and film stars come from? What social forces supported the emergence of Chinese film stars and developed the film star culture? And how were film stars produced and used to maximise the film industry’s commercial gains? This chapter will explore the origin and development of Chinese film star culture through examining the socioeconomic forces that enabled stars and created a new social phenomenon.

When discussing the emergence of the film star phenomenon in world film culture, many nations’ film star culture that emerged from the first two decades of the twentieth century have similar trajectories: at first stage actors crossed over into films and became the first actors for films; then the ‘real’ film star phenomenon started to form with the establishment of a wide-ranging film press and the rise in cinema attendance. The emergence and development of French,⁶ American and Chinese star culture all took a similar path. Richard deCordova’s study on the origin of American film star system, he explores the process of the emergence of film stars

³ Fo Sheng, “Zhuanqian de dianying (Money Making Films),” *Tianyi qingnian yingpian gongsi tekan: ‘Nü lushi’* (Tianyi Youth Film Company Special Issue for Film Female Lawyer), 1927.

⁴ Quoted from: Zheng Yimei, *Yingtian jiuwen-Dan Duyu he Yin Mingzhu* (Old Stories in Filmdom - Dan Duyu and Yin Mingzhu) (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Culture Publishing, 1982). p. 53.

⁵ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979). p. 6.

⁶ Phil Powrie and Eric Rebillard, *Pierre Batcheff and Stardom in 1920s French Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009). p. 27.

spanning from stage actors' involvement into the film industry to the creation of film stars. DeCordova divides the process that created American film stars into three phases -- the emergence of "the discourse on acting (i.e. social discussions on the role of human labour in the production of film)"⁷; the appearance of "the picture personality (i.e. actors' names, images and 'personalities' that were represented in and deliberated through their images in press and films)"⁸; and the rise of "the star"⁹. Although his research is based on the American star phenomenon, considering the similar stages of development shared by both early American and Chinese film star culture, deCordova's analytic framework could be applied to the American film star system and will be used here to analyse the origin and development of early Chinese film star culture.

I would suggest that the development of the Chinese star phenomenon experienced similar steps as Hollywood's: the emergence of discourses on film acting, which then further developed into a the discourse on professional film actors; the appearance of 'picture personality'- in the Chinese case, it was the circulation of the actors' names and images, mainly through the new medium of film itself and occasionally through the budding film press; and the rise of the star- the exposure of the stars' private lives and the creation of their public image with the help of the fast developing mass media.

According to the different stages of the development of film star culture, this chapter is structured by three sections. The first section will trace back to the earliest Chinese film production and consumption. Famous Peking Opera actors were performers in the earliest filmmaking practices. Although they were not real film stars, and not even professional film actors, an investigation of the early practice of performance in film will help us to understand the social and cultural background in which the Chinese film star culture emerged. The second section will introduce how the discourses on film acting and actors appeared from the drama culture. Because of

⁷ Discourse on acting: according to deCordova, the concept of film actor was constituted from the discourse on acting which were discussions on the role of human labour in the production of film. Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: the Emergence of the Star System in America*. (Champaign: Illinois UP, 2001). p. 46.

⁸ Picture personality: spectators identified with film actors by their names, images and "personalities" that were represented in and deliberated through their images in press and films. Ibid., pp. 85-90.

⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

the influence from the comparatively mature Hollywood star culture, the ‘picture personality’ period in Chinese film star culture was short and often overlapped with the rise of the ‘film star’. Therefore, the last section will explore how and by what socioeconomic forces and in what cultural circumstances ‘film stars’ were created, without a separate discussion on the ‘picture personality’.

By analysing the different stages in the development of Chinese film stardom, I will show that Chinese film culture took shape under the influence of both Hollywood star culture and a booming domestic urban entertainment industry. The proliferation of mass media will particularly be addressed to demonstrate how it benefited the star culture and turned it to a social cultural phenomenon.

1.2 Early Stage Opera Films and ‘the Cinema of Attractions’

It is well-known that Chinese film production began with a famous Peking Opera actor. Ren Qingtai, the owner of Beijing Fengtai Photographic Studio made the first Chinese film *Dingjun Mountain*, which is an excerpt from the Peking Opera of the same title. The most popular Peking Opera actor of that time Tan Xinpei performed for camera, and Ren Qingtai’s cameraman Liu Zhonglun recorded the whole performance.¹⁰ Ren continued making several more Peking Opera films over the next few years, such as Tan Xinpei’s *Changban Slope* (*Changbanpo*, 1905), Yu Jusheng’s *Yanyang Mansion* (*Yanyanglou*, 1905), Yu Zhenting’s *The Leopard* (*Jinqianbao*, 1906) and *Baishui Beach* (*Baishuitan*, 1907), and Xu Deyi’s *Capture Guan Sheng* (*Shou Guan Sheng*, 1907).¹¹

Film scholars’ previous analysis on Ren’s productions of filmed stage performances often focus on his commercial motivation and deliberate application of the ‘celebrity effect (the sensation caused by the appearance of celebrities in the film)’, as film historian Lu Hongshi¹² and Qian Chunlian¹³ discuss. Because Ren

¹⁰ Lu Hongshi, “Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films),” *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, no. 02 (1992). p. 84.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lu, “Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films).”

¹³ Qian Chunlian, “Bainian Zhongguo dianying yu mingxing (A Hundred Years of Chinese Film and Film Stars),” in *Zhongguo dianying zhuanyshe yanjiu: dianying wenhuajuan (Research on Chinese Film Specialist History: Film Culture)*, Zhongguo dianying zhuanyshe yanjiu (Research on Chinese

Qingtai, the owner of the Daguanlou Shadow-play House (*Daguanlou yingxiyuan*), made films himself, Lu Hongshi suggests on the one hand, the film production assured a steady supply to his theatre, and on the other hand, it maintained audiences' passion for films through replacing Western film clichés, that had long occupied the film screen, by incorporating Chinese content such as Opera performances.¹⁴ According to Lu, at that time Western filmmakers, no longer satisfied with the film of actualities such as documentaries, views of famous and distant places and recorded vaudeville acts, began to explore film's ability to tell fictional stories.¹⁵ By considering both the context of the new trend in filmmaking and Ren's inexperience in film production, Lu claims that Ren's decision to make Peking Opera films, the plots of which were very familiar to Chinese audiences, would guarantee box-office profits.¹⁶ Regarding the appearance of famous actors in these early productions, Lu considers that the fame of Tan Xinpei and other well-known opera actors would draw audiences' attention because its famous actors held great sway among its audiences.¹⁷ Qian Chunlian concludes that using famous Peking Opera actors' social awareness to attract audiences could be seen as a primitive form of the filmmaker's 'star consciousness (*mingxing yishi*)', i.e. to use stars in films deliberately in order to attract audiences.¹⁸

Although I agree with Lu and Lian's approach of analysing the early films from a commercial aspect, I argue that the sensation caused by the appearance of famous opera actors in these early films was not the same as the 'star effect' in terms of the film star culture. Rather, I would suggest Ren's film choices were driven by the attraction of a novel visual experience that was supplied by the ability of film technology to take the world and represent it on the silver screen. To use Tom Gunning's terminology, Ren Qingtai's Peking Opera films should be categorised as, "the cinema of attractions", which is a type of picture that draws audiences' attention by its ability to "show something" and to provide a stimulating spectacle rather than

Film Specialist History) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2006). pp. 29-83.

¹⁴ Lu, "Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping(Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films)." p. 83.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Qian, "Bainian Zhongguo dianying yu mingxing (A Hundred Years of Chinese Film and Film Stars)." pp. 29-31.

cinematic skills of storytelling.¹⁹ The evidence could be found in the ‘teahouse culture’, from which the first pictures were made and screened.

When film was first introduced to mainland China through Hong Kong in the late 19th century it was far from an industry and more a type of variety performance in very primitive form.²⁰ Without dedicated screening sites, films were shown with other types of performance in different venues such as “proto-malls/amusement estates”,²¹ horse racing sites, as well as teahouses.²² Film scholar Zhang Zhen describes teahouse leisure activities in the late Qing and early Republican period as “teahouse culture”,²³ which consisted of tea and snack food service, Western ‘shadow-plays’ (films), opera performances, magic shows and other performance varieties. Before making films, Ren Qingtai started his career in the entertainment industry running such a teahouse in Beijing. Ren purchased and converted the Dahengxuan Tea and Opera Garden (*Dahengxuan chaxiyuan*), a teahouse which occasionally held local opera performances, into an amusement estate (which combined shopping centre with performance varieties) renaming it the Daguanlou Shadow-Play House (*Daguanlou yingxiyuan*) in 1902.²⁴

Teahouses and opera theatres such as the *Daguanlou* and *Jixiang juyuan* (Jixiang Theater) were the major shooting and screening sites for opera films.²⁵ According to Ren’s cameraman Liu Zhongpeng, before film production, Ren Qingtai had his staff attend opera theatres to observe which operas were most popular with audiences. From these popular titles he then selected operas that contained more

¹⁹ Paul Grainge, Mark Jancovich, and Sharon Montheith, “The Emergence of Cinema,” in *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader*. (Toronto and Buffalo: Toronto UP, 2007), pp. 3-13.

Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant- Garde,” in *Film Histories: An Introduction and Reader*. (Toronto and Buffalo: Toronto UP, 2007), pp. 13-20.

²⁰ Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1996). p. 3.

²¹ A term Meng Yue uses to describe urban facades which “combined entertainment and small businesses in an urban site”. Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires*. (Minneapolis, London: Minneapolis UP, 2006). p. 172.

²² Ibid., p. 11.

²³ Zhang Zhen, “Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: Laborer’s Love and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), pp. 32-34.

²⁴ Different versions of the history of *Daguanlou* exist in different scholarly works. My source is from the *Daguanlou* film museum that was rebuilt on the original site, which I visited in 2009.

²⁵ Lu, Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films). p. 84.

physical movements and less dialogue and songs to make into films.²⁶ These opera films were shot with a stationary camera and normally one reel or two reels without any changes of focal length.²⁷ In teahouses and opera theatres, audiences could enjoy both live stage performances and filmed performances in the same venue. I would suggest that it was the novel experience of viewing opera through the new medium of film that attracted audiences, rather than the performances per se. By showing the very same figures from the world of Chinese Opera, a vivid but untouchable world now became accessible to audiences. This transformative ability of film technology to transfer the familiar real world onto the screen, fascinated with the new medium. To summarise, famous actors like Tan Xinpei in early films were not film stars and even the concept of the film actor/star had not yet appeared in China at that time. Rather, the lure of these early opera films was rooted in the ‘trick’ of film technology itself.

In addition to his work as a film exhibitor, amusement centre owner and photographic studio owner, Ren Qingtai was also an investor, and entrepreneur (*shiyejia*) whose investments included a soda water factory, a furniture shop, Chinese herbal medicine stores, and western style pharmacies.²⁸ Film production was among his other business activities. I would suggest that Ren’s commercial activities might have benefited from the developing urban commercial culture which had proliferated since the late Qing era. Chinese reformers in the late Qing, including officials and intellectuals such as Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929), promoted modern commerce and industry as a means to gain wealth and power for the state.²⁹ Such a commercial ideology with strong patriotic features did not necessarily drive the business activity of every merchant, but these thoughts on economy legitimised and established a commercial culture which provided a positive social discourse to encourage the pursuing of commercial success by various

²⁶ Lu Hongshi, “Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films),” *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, no. 02 (1992). pp. 85-86.

²⁷ Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1996). p. 38.

Lu, Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films). p. 84.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁹ Wellington K.K. Chan, “Selling Goods and Promoting a New Commercial Culture: the Four Premier Department Stores on Nanjing Road, 1917-1937,” in *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900-1945*, 1st ed., the Cornell East Asia Series 103 (New York: Cornell UP, 1999). p. 20.

means.³⁰ Ren Qingtai's commercial activities were also conducted in such a commercial culture.

I believe that the appearance of Tan Xinpei and other well-known Peking Opera actors in the new medium form of film also indicated that a new dimension for the establishment of cross-media celebrities was on its way. From the late Qing, an urban celebrity culture arose due to the reform of the entertainment industry, relating especially to its economic system and promotion methods.³¹ With the help of a modern press industry, the reputation of popular entertainment actors, such as well-known courtesans and opera actors was established through the circulation of their images and stories in new media including tabloids and newspapers.³² Such circulation brought the entertainment industry and the actors themselves great economic gains. Film technology provided a new platform for the circulation of images, which led to an increased visibility of its participants which in turn facilitated and fuelled the further development of the entertainment star culture.

When a fire destroyed Ren's Fengtai Photographic Studio in 1909, his filming career was over forever.³³ Film scholars bemoan the fact that the fire stopped experiments in Chinese filmmaking, which had only just begun.³⁴ But the fire did not thwart Chinese entrepreneurs' willingness to develop a film industry. During the 1910s, Chinese-run film studios began to appear in Shanghai from 1910s, such as Xinmin Film Company (*Xinmin yingpian gongsi*, 1913-1914),³⁵ Huanxian Film Studio (*Huanxian yingpian gongsi*, 1916),³⁶ and the motion picture department

³⁰ Kong Lai Chi, "Merchant Discourse on Self-Interest in Modern China," in *Creating Chinese Modernity: Knowledge and Everyday Life, 1900-1940*, 1st ed., Studies in Modern Chinese History 4 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006). p. 99.

³¹ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007). Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. (Seattle & London: Washington UP, 2006).

³² Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, 1st ed. (Seattle & London: Washington UP, 2006). p. 15.

³³ Lu, "Ren Qingtai yu shoupi guochanpian kaoping (Ren Qingtai and the First Chinese Films)."

³⁴ Qian, "Bainian Zhongguo dianying yu mingxing (A Hundred Years of Chinese Film and Film Stars)." Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History*, 1st ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1996).

³⁵ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

(*Huodong yingxibu*, 1919-1927) of the Commercial Press (*Shangwu yinshuguan*)³⁷. From the 1910s, Shanghai became the centre of the Chinese film industry.

1.3 From Civilised Plays (*wenmingxi*) to Shadow-Plays: Discourse on Film Acting

With further development of the film industry, narrative films that required actors to convey film stories through their performances began to appear, which set a crucial condition for the emergence of film actors. The first Chinese narrative film is *The Difficult Couple* (*Nanfu nanqi*), made by the Asian Film Company in Shanghai in 1913.³⁸ But the appearance of narrative films did not turn the public's attention to film actors and acting automatically, let alone the emergence of film stars. Indeed, in the 1910s, filmmakers and critics who saw themselves as pioneers of the Chinese film industry were dedicated to exploring the characteristics of the film medium, defining this new entertainment form, and manipulating the new technology, which will be discussed below. In this section, I will demonstrate that ideas about film actors and film performance were generated from their concerns regarding the medium of film and film technology as well as the influence of the theatre culture.

Cinema is known as '*dianying* (electric shadows)' in Chinese. Before the term '*dianying*' became standardised nation-wide in the early 1930s, it was only popular in the Beijing and Tianjin area.³⁹ Cinema was called '*huodong yinghua*' (lit. motion shadow picture) in Guangdong, and was referred as '*yingxi*' (lit. shadow-play) in Shanghai and nearby regions including Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.⁴⁰ The various names of cinema implied the public's different understandings about the film medium in general. 'Electric shadows' emphasises the technological aspect of the film medium; 'motion shadow picture' indicates the relation between film and pre-

³⁷ Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*), vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1997). pp. 39-40.

³⁸ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (*Chinese Silent Film History*). p. 45.

³⁹ Zhou Jianyun and Wang Xuchang, "Yingxi gailun (A General Introduction of Shadow-play)", in *Changming dianying hanshou xuexiao jiangyi* (*The Teaching Materials of the Changming Correspondence School for Film*) (Shanghai: *Changming dianying hanshou xuexiao* (Changming Correspondence School for Film), 1924).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

film visual entertainment forms such as slides show and still photography; and ‘shadow-play’ suggests that early cinematic productions understood the cinema in relation to the theatrical world. ‘Shadow-play’ was also the name of a traditional popular entertainment form which can be traced back to the Ming era – the ‘leather shadow-play’ used opaque and articulated figures in front of an illuminated backdrop to create the illusion of moving images.⁴¹ Both ‘leather shadow-play’ and film tell a story through moving images, so the latter was named after the traditional entertainment form. Early film pioneers, who were often theatre enthusiasts, put emphasis “more on play rather than shadow.”⁴² Zhang Zhen points out that those early filmmakers “were deeply immersed in traditional Chinese theatre while also enthusiastically espousing the transplanted modern spoken drama.”⁴³ This emphasis on ‘play’ rather than ‘shadow’ indicates that the Shanghai film industry was rooted in Shanghai theatrical culture, popular since the late Qing.

The early Shanghai film industry was indebted to its contemporary theatrical culture in many ways, e.g. they shared venues, producers, actors and contents. As stated in the previous section, the first film houses were amusement centres and teahouses which also hosted other variety shows including opera performances and storytelling.

Dramatists were the real pioneer of the Chinese film industry. One of the founding fathers of Chinese cinema, the famous dramatist Zheng Zhengqiu (1888-1935), was enthusiastic about writing drama critiques and advocating the educational merits of spoken drama.⁴⁴ Another founding father of Chinese cinema, Zhang Shichuan (1889-1953), was a comprador of a foreign advertising agency.⁴⁵ In 1913, Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu were hired by two American businessmen to

⁴¹ Zhongguo dianying tushi bianji weiyuanhui (The Committee of Illustrated Chinese Film History), *Zhongguo dianying tushi (Chinese Film: An Illustrated History 1905-2005)*, 1st ed. (Beijing: zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe (China Communication UP), 2007). p. 3.

⁴² Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005). p. 99.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 101.

⁴⁴ Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui (China Film Association) and dianyingshi yanjiubu (Department of Film History Research), *Zhongguo dianyingjia liezhuan (The Collected Biographies of Chinese Filmmakers)*, vol. 1, 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1982). pp. 202-203.

⁴⁵ Liu Siping, *Zhang Shichuan congying shi (the History of Zhang Shichuan's Filmmaking Experience)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2000). p. 7.

re-organise the Asian Film Company that was firstly founded by the American filmmaker Benjamin Brasky.⁴⁶ From that time on, Zhang and Zheng collaborated together in the film industry. They co-founded Huanxian Film Company in 1916⁴⁷, and the later Mingxing Film Studio in 1922.⁴⁸ This collaboration between an intellectual (Zheng Zhengqiu) and a businessman (Zhang Shichuan) brought together the two essential ingredients for the foundation of modern Chinese entertainment culture – where intellectuals were interested in film’s potential to affect social reform, the new commercial culture presented great opportunities for film businessmen. Zheng and Zhang’s collaboration lasted until Zheng’s death in 1935, but they often had disagreements in terms of differing filmmaking principles - Zheng’s persistence on the pedagogical role of film was sharply opposed to Zhang’s commercial priorities.⁴⁹ The success and challenges of their collaboration rested entirely in their mutual inter-dependence and simultaneous conflict of the two driving forces pushing the early Chinese film industry: social concern and commercial profit.

Although there are no surviving prints, we still have written materials such as film titles and plot descriptions. Through these and the earliest complete Chinese film available, *Labourer’s Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing*, 1922), early films can be said to have adopted the physical comedy from Western cinema and Chinese popular drama,⁵⁰ such as *Bicycle Causes Trouble* (*Jiaotache chuanguo*, 1913),⁵¹ *New Camellia* (*Xin chahua*, 1913),⁵² and *Victims of Opium* (*Heiji yuanhun*, 1917).⁵³

The popular drama type ‘civilised play (*wenmingxi*)’⁵⁴ especially influenced the production of early short films in terms of content and performance style.⁵⁵ The

⁴⁶ Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Films)*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1997). p. 16.

⁴⁷ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (Chinese Silent Film History). p. 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁴⁹ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema), 1: p. 58.

⁵⁰ Liu, *Zhang Shichuan congying shi (the History of Zhang Shichuan’s Filmmaking Experience)*. p. 14,16. Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (Chinese Silent Film History). p. 56.

⁵¹ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*. pp. 20-21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵³ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 27.

⁵⁴ I adopt this translation from Zhang Zhen’s book. See: *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*, p.99. Civilised play (*wenmingxi*) is also translated as “Civilisation

civilised play is a prototype spoken drama that emerged under the influences of Western-style theatre and Japanese Shingeki (lit. 'new drama').⁵⁶ It usually employed contemporary themes, social critical messages and progressive ideas.⁵⁷ As early films were adapted from civilised plays, contemporary film scholars maintain these films also contained certain positive and progressive social messages, as did civilised plays.⁵⁸

To early film producers like those filmmakers in the Asia Film Studio, it was the film story not the actor that would assure the success of a film. At that time a popular story, originating from either a novel or a social event, was often adapted into various versions such as 'new dramas' (reformed Chinese operas), civilised plays, and films.⁵⁹ In these adaptations, stage actors would be randomly replaced by another group of civilised play actors. From a studio's point of view, a popular story could reduce the potential commercial risks and guarantee box-office returns, so the duty of actors was only to make sure the story was clearly represented.

During the short film period from the mid to late 1910s, film actors were comprised mainly of civilised play actors with a few amateur play actors, variety and local opera performers.⁶⁰ A civilised play troupe usually joined in the film production as a whole, because the troupe not only provided actors, but also costume and stage props.⁶¹ At that time, the function of actors in a film was also no more than a necessary component like props or costume, and the idea of personality character individuality or the differences between a leading and supporting role did not yet exist in producers' minds. Zhang Shichuan's anecdote from his Asia Film Studio period illustrates early producers' non-fussed ideas about actors: when they

Dramas" sometimes. I prefer Zhang's translation because it both indicates its relationship with traditional stage performances and also embodies early drama reformers' progressive idea of promoting social progress and civilisation.

⁵⁵ Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)* (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1996). pp. 50-51.

⁵⁶ Huang Shizhi, "Shanghai xiju xieshe yu Zhongguo xiandai xiju xingtai de xingcheng (Shanghai Drama Association and the Establishment of Chinese Modern Drama)," *Xiju wenxue (Drama and Literature)*, no. 309 (2009). p. 20.

⁵⁷ Chang Bin, "Guanyu 'wenmingxi' de zisikao (Rethinking about the 'Civilised Play')," *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan (Modern Chinese Literature Studies)*, (February 17, 2000). p. 243.

⁵⁸ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

continued to complete a slapstick scene left from the day ahead, one actor wore his opposite role's costume because he thought the other actor's costume was nicer than his.⁶² No one noticed this, including the director on location. When producers watched the finished film for the first time, they saw two actors' costumes magically exchanged during their fight. It was only now that producers started to realise what had happened.⁶³ This story suggests that directors only gave their attention to the continuity of the storytelling, which was displayed through actors' physical movements, and that actors' screen images and character personality, represented in part at least by their costumes, had not been fully taken into account.

It was the discourses on film acting that gave the very first requirements of the professional 'film actor'. From the early 1920s, the ability to achieve 'verisimilitude (*bi zhen*)' in performance was considered the essential quality in being a good film actor. The requirement of a verisimilar/ realistic acting style mirrors the realistic literature and drama. Chinese reformers in the early 20th century called for a cultural transformation, which was believed could change popular opinions and further pave the way for a complete transformation of Chinese society.⁶⁴ Many intellectuals and writers laid the burden of hope for cultural transformation on realism in literature.⁶⁵ It was a widely shared view that one of the key features of realistic literature was its objectivity. It was believed that realistic literature was objective social representation.⁶⁶ Intellectuals assumed that successful realistic literature would encourage its readers to get involved in the social and political issues confronting the nation.⁶⁷

It was also the same case in the drama field. Since the late 1910s, May Fourth cultural radicals advocated Western realist drama, and saw it as the most pure, evolved, and universal form of drama,⁶⁸ because they believed that realistic drama

⁶² Zhang Shichuan, "Ziwo daoyan yilai (Since I Have Been Directing)", *Mingxing (Bright Star)* 1, no. 3 (1935).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: California UP, 1990). p. 3.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁸ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870 - 1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 149.

could reveal social reality to the audience and inspire the audience to take action to change reality.⁶⁹ They felt that every aspect of the performance should be devoted to representing socio-political reality.⁷⁰ Therefore, drama reformers agreed that everyday speech and movements should be used in performance.⁷¹

Because of such a cultural context, especially due to cinema's close associations with theatrical culture, early filmmakers and theorists saw cinema as an extension of realistic drama and literature. For example, Gu Kenfu (189?-1932) claimed in the inaugural editorial for the first Chinese film journal, *The Motion Picture Review* (*Yingxi zazhi*), that the "realist school was at the forefront of world drama trends and its advantage is to achieve verisimilitude. Accordingly, verisimilitude would be the standard for drama in the future...and the most verisimilar drama is the shadow-play".⁷² As "the most verisimilar drama", Chinese cinema employed contemporary content and pedagogical themes from civilised plays. Cinema was seen as common education (*tongsu jiaoyu*) by filmmakers and critics, "because no matter man or woman, old or young, educated or illiterate, all could follow the social message embodied in film's contemporary theme which was conveyed through actors' realistic style of performance".⁷³ Following the principle of social education, verisimilitude became the first principle of acting. Gu further argues:

When we are watching a film, if this film fails to achieve 'verisimilitude', then performers would know that they were performing and audiences would also realise that they were watching a drama; hence, the drama's ability to influence audiences would be reduced. If a drama could be of 'verisimilitude', then, the performer should forget he is actually an impersonator but a character in the play (*juzhongren*) who has the same emotion as the character; those who are watching should also take themselves as a character in the play, then they would feel that they were experiencing the drama themselves, thus, the film's

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 160.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 150.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gu Kenfu, "Fakanci (Opening Statement)," *Yingxi zazhi* (*The Motion Picture Review*) 1, no. 1: 1921.

⁷³ Zhou and Wang, "*Yingxi gailun* (General Introduction of Shadow-play)"

ability to influence audiences would be increased tremendously.⁷⁴

Gu also differentiates between theatrical performance and film performance in his essay, claiming that, in comparison with ‘new drama’ (a name randomly used to refer to reformed Peking Opera, spoken drama or civilised plays), shadow-play, without song and dialogue, emphasised facial expressions and physical movements (*zuo gong*). He further suggests, however, that the physical movements of Peking Opera actors usually “are guilty of over-exaggeration (*biaoqing guodu de maobing*)” because no one would behave like this in daily life. He contends that “shadow-play is like sketching, so everything (in shadow-plays) should aim for verisimilitude and not be over-exaggerated”.⁷⁵ In Gu’s article, the notion of film performance style is mentioned, although in a less theoretical way, distinguishing film acting from other types of theatrical performance. It was this notion that called for the emergence of professional film actors in the coming years.

The emphasis on verisimilitude also sheds light on the public discussion of casting choice and film performance style in the years to come. For example, the film itself was required to be realistic (*zhen*),⁷⁶ and verisimilitude became the standard by which film commentators would examine the quality of an actor’s performance.⁷⁷

The first feature-length film, *Yan Ruisheng* (1921), exemplified early filmmakers’ pursuits of this realistic style of performance. This film was adapted from a real-life scandal which occurred in Shanghai in 1920 where a young playboy named Yan Ruisheng had been executed for robbing and murdering a well-known prostitute, Wang Lianying, for revenge after she refused to lend him money to pay his gambling debts.⁷⁸ This event was adapted firstly into a ‘new drama of current affairs (*shishi xinju*)’ by the Xia brothers (Xia Yueshan, 1868-1924 and Xia Yuerun,

⁷⁴ Gu, “Fakanci (Opening Statement)”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Wang Ruiling, “Cong biaoqianyishu shuodao zhongguo dianyingjie (From the Acting Art to the Chinese Filmdom),” *Yingxi zazhi (The Motion Picture Review)* 1, no. 9 (August 1930).

⁷⁷ The word *zhen/bizhen* (verisimilitude) or *buzuo* (not-affectation) were always applied to comment the film performance in film reviews. Just to name a few such film reviews as below:

K.K.K., “Yishu shangde ‘dayimieqin’ (Review on the Film ‘Dayimieqin’ from an Artistic Aspect),” *Dianying zazhi (Movie Magazine)*, no. 1 (1924); Songlu, “‘Qi’er’ yingpian zhi xingping (Review on the Film ‘the Abandoned Child’),” *Shenbao*, January 31, 1924;

Chen Peisen, “Ping ‘Gu’er jiuzi ji’ (Review on “Orphan Rescues his Grandfather”),” *Shenbao*, March 10, 1924.

⁷⁸ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 67.

1878-1832) who ran the New Stage Theatre (*Xinwutai*).⁷⁹ The tremendous success of this play led to copycat productions across the theatre world.⁸⁰

The new-founded China Shadow-play Research Society (*Yingxi yanjiuhui*) decided to make a screen version of the story with representations of the real-life living environments of the characters including a series of urban attractions, such as horse racing sites, the Xuzhou train station and catholic churches.⁸¹ The two protagonists in the film were not civilised play actors but non-professional actors who were considered to be similar to Yan and Wang in terms of personality. A former prostitute, Wang Caiyun, took the role of the late Wang while Yan Ruisheng was played by Chen Shouzhi who, also working for a foreign company, was believed to be Yan Ruisheng's acquaintance and resembled Yan in terms of his gestures and facial expressions.⁸² Zhang Zhen argues that "the film's appeal can largely be attributed to the sensational nature of the story in particular and the penchant for modern fads and stimuli among the Shanghai petty urbanites in general".⁸³ Indeed, the film's efforts to create a sense of authenticity in terms of the location and cast may have been due to the filmmakers' inclination towards the visual spectacular and appetite for greater commercial profit. However, the casting choices indicate that the filmmakers were aware that the similarities in personality between actor and character would determine the verisimilitude of the performance. As shown in the case of *Yan Ruisheng*, it was believed that this similarity in personality could be achieved through hiring actors with a similar background and life experience to the characters they were to play.

Although this was only a one-off experiment in selecting non-professional actors as protagonists due to their apparent 'similarities' with the real-life characters they were to portray, it does at least highlight filmmakers' concerns that actors should build a convincing character through expressing their own personality traits that coincided with that of the character. This notion was gradually employed by

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

⁸⁰ Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005). p. 105.

⁸¹ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (Chinese Silent Film History). p. 70.

⁸² Yang Xiaozhong, "Huiyi Shangwu yinshuguan huodong yingxi bu (Remembering the Film Department of the Commercial Press)," in *Gankai huadangnian* (*Sighing and Remembering Early Years*), 2nd ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1984). p. 10.

⁸³ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. p. 107.

studios as one of the decisive factors when casting. As will be discussed in the next section, the requirement of verisimilitude aroused a debate on whether civilised play actors were qualified for film performance. One consequence of this was that in the coming years it became somewhat of a trend to audition for particular roles depending on one's personal character and/or background – a trend that could be seen as the beginning of the emergence of professional film actors after which film stars began to emerge in quick succession.

1.4 The Emergence of Film Stars

Although cinema was seen as an educational tool in early Chinese film culture, film actors in the 1910s to early 1920s were still facing social discrimination for the humble origins of their profession. Even intellectuals, who vehemently believed in civilised play and cinema's educational function, saw performance as disgraceful, with Zheng Zhengqiu admitting:

At that time, 'women's world (nǚjie)' was not as liberal as it is now. Actually, it is still not liberal today. [If you] wanted to invite a lady to perform in a film, [you should just] forget about this (idea)! Where were Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei?⁸⁴ Who would dream of them at that time? [Thus,] male actors like Wang Xihua and Huang Xiaoya had to perform female roles. Even I myself, embarrassed to say, saw performance as degradation, so I only instructed actors how to act and would never agree for my performance to be taken into the lens.⁸⁵

Zheng made this statement in a 1924 newspaper article, remembering his early film experiences in the 1910s. Several changes in filmdom which took place during the first two decades of the twentieth century are revealed in his statement: firstly, in the 1920s actresses started to appear in the film world for the first time, replacing male actors who previously played female roles in the 1910s; secondly, actors such as Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei - mentioned in the quotation - began to establish a reputation as real film stars; thirdly, discrimination of the acting profession seemed

⁸⁴ Wang Hanlun (1903-1978), Yang Naimei (1904-1960). Both are female film stars.

⁸⁵ Zheng Zhengqiu, "Shuo Zhongguo yingxi (Talk About Chinese Shadow-plays)," *Dabao* (Boradsheet) (Shanghai, December 1924).

to be out of fashion by the mid-1920s, especially to those regularly exposed to new ideas, so a “liberal” person like Zheng Zhengqiu would be “embarrassed” by his old thoughts.

Beginning in the 1920s, the ‘picture personalities’ and ‘stars’ that emerged and co-existed, can be seen as signalling the beginning of the Chinese film star system. According to deCordova, ‘picture personalities’ that followed the ‘discourse on acting’ referred to film actors whose identity was not based primarily on past theatrical affiliation but on their career in the film world.⁸⁶ These actors began to be known by audiences through their films. deCordova claims,

“one can delineate three aspects of the picture personality’s existence in discourse: the circulation of the name⁸⁷; the ‘image’, taken in the broad sense to denote both the actor’s physical image and the personality that is represented as existing within or behind it; and a discourse on the actor’s professional experience.”⁸⁸

In the first half of the 1920s in Shanghai, film actors were gradually becoming public figures, with the physical images, names and personalities embodied in their images circulating in various media, e.g. movies, newspapers and magazines, gramophone discs, wireless broadcasting and commercial calendars, to name but a few.

The film star, by deCordova’s definition, appeared when “the question of the player’s existence outside his or her work in film became the primary focus of discourse.”⁸⁹ From the 1920s, film publications introducing stars’ off-screen lives began to appear, e.g. *Shadow-play* (*Yingxi congbao*, 1921), *Film Magazine* (*Dianying zazhi*), *Morning Star* (*Chenxing*, 1922).⁹⁰ Some of these were published by cinephiles and journalists, including *the Motion Picture Review* (*Yingxi zazhi*,

⁸⁶ Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: the Emergence of the Star System in America*, 1st ed. (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 2001): p. 51.

⁸⁷ Either characters’ names or actors’ names associated with films.

⁸⁸ deCordova, *Picture Personalities: the Emergence of the Star System in America*. p. 73.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁹⁰ Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying qikan quanmu shuzhi* (*Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals’ Abstracts, 1921 - 1949*), 1st ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Scientific and Technological Literature Publishing House, 2009). pp. 1-5.

1921)⁹¹ and *Movie Weekly* (*Yingxi chunqiu*, 1925),⁹² and yet more were published by film studios promoting their own stars and pictures.⁹³ Films with stars as the main subject also appeared, such as *A Female Movie Star* (*Dianying nümingxing*, 1926), *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (*Yinhan shuangxing*, 1931), *Amorous History of Silver Screen* (*Yinmu Yanshi*, 1931), *A Female Movie Star* (*Yige Nümingxing*, 1933). If these films did not mirror the ‘true life’ of the film star, at least they could represent the popular imagination toward them. All these publications and films around the topic of film stars’ personal life evidenced that by the 1920s, the ‘film star’ was already widely accepted as important cultural and economic asset within the film industry and a noteworthy phenomenon in society in general.

Next, I will discuss three major factors that influenced the emergence of Chinese film stars and film star culture: (1) Hollywood film culture, (2) competition in the domestic film industry and (3) the development of mass media.

1.4.1 Hollywood’s Influence on Chinese Star Culture

Hollywood not only sold films to China but also introduced its star culture to Chinese audiences, creating the cultural circumstances in which Chinese stars were made and Chinese star culture was born. Actually, the Chinese term for star, *mingxing*, was believed to be first translated from American film articles by Lu Jie.⁹⁴

Before Hollywood, in the 1910s, the Chinese film market was dominated by European films such as products by the French studio Pathé, which controlled almost all cinemas and most distribution networks in major cities like Guangzhou, Shanghai and Hong Kong.⁹⁵ However, French influence on Chinese film culture was limited because during Pathé’s heyday in China in the 1910s, theatres were few and movie-going was far from a popular form of entertainment for Chinese people. For example,

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁹² Ibid., p. 5.

⁹³ Cinemas also published film journals to advertise films they were screening and the leading stars in them. But this situation is mostly found in regions outside Shanghai, such as *Pearl Bi-weekly* (*Mingzhu banzhoukan*), published by *Guangzhou’s Pearl Theatre* (*Mingzhu yinghuayuan*). See: Ibid., p. 3. Considering the flourishing film culture in Shanghai, perhaps Shanghai cinemas did not need to publish their own film magazines to promote films and actors.

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 2

⁹⁵ Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-34*, (London: BFI, 1985). p. 44.

there were only three cinemas in Shanghai in 1913.⁹⁶ The majority of audiences in the 1910s in China were Europeans, watching newly released films in cinemas located in foreign concessions. Chinese amusement sites, where both film screening and other entertainment such as opera, cross-talk and storytelling were hosted, far outnumbered cinema houses. A large number of foreign films shown on Chinese screens at that time were used films (called ‘junk films’ in American film market reports⁹⁷) from Europe or other more developed Asian film markets.⁹⁸ As stated in the previous section, to most early audiences it was film’s new entertainment form rather than the content that seduced them. Consequently, the curious public was still attracted to these second-hand films for the novel visual experience they provided.

WWI saw a decline in film production in Europe. At the same time the American film industry grew rapidly. This then presented the perfect opportunity for an American film industry, no longer content with restricted to domestic territory, to replace the dominant status of European films in the global market.⁹⁹ American films also began taking the Chinese market from the French. Compared to other world markets - European markets and the Asian markets of Singapore and Japan – the Chinese market was by no means big enough to fulfil the American film industry’s ambitions, even though it had a huge population. The civil war (warlord period, 1916-1927) in China restricted film distribution to treaty ports, where the political environment was comparatively stable and the economy advanced.¹⁰⁰ Unlike their strategy of setting up direct branch offices to control other major Asian markets including the Philippines, Japan and Singapore, American studios dealt with the Chinese market through signed agencies - both Chinese and/or foreign - based in China.¹⁰¹

Although the American film industry, in Thompson’s words, “made little attempt to court Chinese customers”,¹⁰² and direct branch offices of American studios did not open in China until the mid-1930s, the impact of American films on

⁹⁶ This situation would not improve until the early 1920s. See: Ibid., p. 144.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

⁹⁸ Ibid.,

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁰¹ Xiao Zhiwei and Yin Hong, “Haolaiwu zai Zhongguo: 1897-1905 (Hollywood in China: 1897-1905)”, *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Cinema)*, no. 129 (2005). p. 71.

¹⁰² Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-34*. p. 143.

the Chinese film industry and film culture was still considerable with most films available in the Chinese market being American. According to the Shanghai-based Chinese-American film distributor, Luther M. Jee, around 90% of the 450 foreign films shown in China in 1926 were of American origin.¹⁰³ The predominance of American films in the Chinese market continued into the 1930s, e.g. in 1934, of the 407 films imported 84.8% were American, while Chinese-made films totalled only 84.¹⁰⁴

American films were imported en-masse at a time when the number of filmgoers in China grew rapidly. From the 1920s, old-style teahouses gave way to modern theatres, cinemas, multi-functional variety halls and shopping malls from the mid-1920s.¹⁰⁵ Around fifty new cinemas were built from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s in Shanghai¹⁰⁶ - which had the most cinemas in China in the mid-1930s.¹⁰⁷ According to historian Lou Jiajun, from the 1920s, a Shanghai cinema would normally schedule three screenings per day¹⁰⁸ and the number of seats offered daily reached over 130,000 during the 1930s.¹⁰⁹ With the proliferation of Chinese-run cinemas, ticket prices dropped, becoming more affordable to petty urbanites.¹¹⁰ It was not only second-run Chinese theatres that sold cheap tickets, but the once-expensive European-run first-class theatres also began to offer keenly priced tickets to maintain audiences and market share alike.¹¹¹ Going to the cinema was no longer

¹⁰³ Patterson Jr Richard, "The Cinema in China", *New York Times*, January 23, 1927.

¹⁰⁴ Wu Yigong et al., eds., *Shanghai dianyingzhi (A Chronicle of Shanghai Motion Picture)* (Shanghai: shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), 1999). p. 596.

¹⁰⁵ Lou Jiajun, "20shiji chu Shanghai chengshi yule xingtai zhuanxing shuping (the Change of Shanghai Urban Entertainment System in Early 20th Century)", *Lishi jiaoxue wenti* (History Teaching), no. 4 (2006). p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Wu et al., *Shanghai Dianyingzhi (A Chronicle of Shanghai Motion Picture)*. p. 614.

¹⁰⁷ Lou, "20shiji chu Shanghai chengshi yule xingtai zhuanxing shuping (the Change of Shanghai Urban Entertainment System in Early 20th Century)"

¹⁰⁸ Lou Jiajun, "Cong shangzuolü kan 30niandai wanqi dianying shichang de xiaotiao - yi Shanghai Jincheng dianyingyuan weili (To Analyse the Recession of Film Market in Late 1930s from Attendance Rate --Take the Shanghai Golden City Cinema as an Example)", *Lishi jiaoxue wenti* (History Teaching), no. 4 (2005). p. 85.

¹⁰⁹ Jiajun Lou, "20shiji 30niandai Shanghai Chengshi Wenhua Ditu Jiedu (Reading the Culture Map of Shanghai in 1930s--Exploration of the Distribution Features of Urban Entertainment)", *Shilin* (Historical Review), no. 5 (2005). p. 116-124.

¹¹⁰ Lou, "20shiji chu Shanghai chengshi yule xingtai zhuanxing shuping (the Change of Shanghai Urban Entertainment System in Early 20th Century)"

¹¹¹ Lou Jiajun and Chen Juanjuan, "Shanghai dianyingyuan kongjian buju yanbian ji yingxiang yinsu fenxi (the Change and Influences of the Distribution of Shanghai Cinematic Spaces)", *Dianying Yishu* (Film Art), no. 328 (2009). p. 101.

an activity restricted to westerners and the Chinese higher classes, but a form of mass entertainment, as an article published in a film magazine in 1931 highlights:

Referring to the motion picture, it has become the bread for all human beings in the world now. The rich people, of course can drive to cinemas like the Carlton (*ka'erduan*) and the Nanjing Theatre (*Nanjing daxiyuan*), and watch films with cigars and ice cream. Middle-class people can go to cinemas by bus or rickshaws, while the lower classes would go to the cinema of lowest rank on their feet. Everyone in the city is obsessed with films. What they watch are films, what they listen to are films, and what they talk about are still films.¹¹²

Regular cinema-going was crucial to the emergence of the film star system: the more regularly audiences watched films, the more potential there was for audiences to recognise the actors appearing on screen. It was when cinema-going was becoming popular in Shanghai that Hollywood films brought a culture of the 'film star' to their Chinese audiences.

The American film industry's export strategy played an indispensable role in introducing the Hollywood star system to overseas markets. The Committee on Public Information, an independent agency of the U.S. government tasked with influencing American public opinion towards participation in WWI, formed the Division of Films in 1917, aimed at disseminating American films in both domestic and overseas markets.¹¹³ Although this committee was originally expected to focus on educational and documentary films, the main products sent to audiences abroad were fictional films and film stars, to which a committee report clearly testifies: "what the war weary foreigners liked and demanded was American comedy and dramatic film. They had to have their Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin and Norma Talmadge."¹¹⁴ Film stars were the best "goods" to sell, and what followed films and film stars to overseas markets was the American lifestyle and other domestic products, as the American magazine, *Collier's Weekly*, illustrates:

¹¹² Li Songyun, "Guopian fuxing shenglang zhong de jige jichu wenti (Several Basic Issues in the Domestic Film Renaissance Movement)," *Yingxi Zazhi (The Film Magazine)* 2, no. 3 (1931).

¹¹³ Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-34*. p. 93.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Well, consider what the American moving picture is doing in other countries. It is familiarizing South America and Africa, Asia and Europe with American habits and customs. It is educating them up to the American standard of living. It is showing them American clothes and furniture, automobiles and homes. And it is subtly but surely creating a desire for these American-made articles.¹¹⁵

Latching on to this cultural promotion function of motion pictures, the American film industry along with the Department of Commerce promoted the slogan “trade follows the film” after the end of WWI.¹¹⁶ Packaged together in this way, American film stars and the American lifestyle were sold as a single product, with each strand strengthening the influence and popularity of the other.

Both the exotic image of the American star and fancy ideas about modern life attracted Chinese middle and upper class audiences. Of course, due to poor economic conditions, and a huge difference between the value of the Chinese *yuan* and the U.S. dollar, the Chinese market could not compete with European markets’ capacity for consumption of American-made luxuries. That said, the American film industry’s strategy of selling its stars and the American lifestyle still gained positive response from Chinese audiences and the developing commercial culture in China. American film star style and fashion could be found in Chinese magazines, shop windows, celebrity gatherings and even Chinese cinemas. For example, celebrated Shanghai beauty and film star Yin Mingzhu (1904-1989), originally named Yin Shangxian, gave herself the name ‘bright pearl (*Mingzhu*)’ after the American star Pearl White.¹¹⁷ Additionally, glasses in the style of the Hollywood star Harold Lloyd (1893-1971), were found in Chinese shops: in an advertisement in *The Motion Picture Review* (Yingxi zazhi), a pair of Lloyd-style glasses with two of his film stills in each lens occupied the centre of the page, around which the message claimed that the Lloyd-style frames made him the most handsome among all comedians, including Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle (1887-1933), with the last line

¹¹⁵ “Business in Wartime: No.16: Internationalizing the American Idea”, *Collier's Weekly*, October 19, 1918.

¹¹⁶ Tino Balio, ed, *The American Film Industry*, Revised Edition. (Wisconsin: Wisconsin UP, 1976) p. 213. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-34*. pp. 123,187.

¹¹⁷ “F.F nüshi xiaoshi (A Brief History of Mr F.F.),” *Xinxin tekan* (*Xinxin Special Issue*) (July 1, 1925).

informing readers that Lloyd-style glasses were available from the Far Eastern Glasses Company (*Yuandong yanjing gongsi*).¹¹⁸ What being sold here were not only glasses, but also a promise of fulfilment of Chinese fans' fantasies about Hollywood stars.

A special distribution system also ensured the dominance of American films in the Chinese market and further guaranteed the familiarity of American stars. There were two major distribution methods: theatres either (a) shared box-office revenue with film studios at a certain rate or (b) rented films from the studios for a fixed price. No matter which method theatres adopted, they also had to accept a strict additional condition stipulating that during the screening period, no other films could be screened without prior consent, lest the cinema run the risk of being fined by the American film studio concerned.¹¹⁹ American distribution agencies also took charge of film publicity. They renamed film titles in Chinese and wrote plot summaries and introductions for audiences who did not read English and were not familiar with a Western cultural background.¹²⁰ Film posters and publicity materials were available to rent from American film studios, which also guaranteed that American star promotional methods were deployed in the Chinese market as efficiently as anywhere else.¹²¹

Personal lives of film stars translated from American publications and the circulation of images also provided Chinese audiences and journalists with examples of how to 'consume' and 'worship' their stars. American film magazines such as *Photoplay* were occasionally available to Chinese readers and there were even several Chinese film magazines specialising in American films and their stars, such as *Shadow-play* (*Yingxi Congbao*, 1921)¹²² and *Hollywood Weekly* (*Haolaiwu zhoukan*, 1928).¹²³ The latest American films and detailed anecdotes appeared in

¹¹⁸ *Yingxi zazhi* (*The Motion Picture Review*), May 25, 1922. p. 37.

¹¹⁹ Li, "Guopian fuxing shenglang zhong de jige jichu wenti (Several Basic Issues in the Domestic Film Renaissance Movement)"

¹²⁰ Xiao Zhiwei and Yin Hong, "Haolaiwu zai Zhongguo: 1897-1950, (Hollywood in China: 1897-1950)," *Dangdai dianying* (*Contemporary Cinema* no. 129 (2005). pp. 68,71.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹²² Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo Xiandai Dianying Qikan Quanmu Shuzhi* (*Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts*, 1921 - 1949). p. 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Chinese publications, arousing public interest and imagination towards these stars from another 'sky'.¹²⁴

The focus on film stars in American film journals also served to inspire their Chinese counterparts. In the editorial of a 1925 film magazine, editor Ren Jinping clearly states that American journals inspired them to publish stars' personal statements in the new magazine:

American film publications like *Photoplay* often publish articles written by film stars, which enable readers of the journal to see film stars' intelligence and knowledge. Our magazine notices that, and we are also planning to do so...¹²⁵

The American film star system had a direct impact on the emergence and development of the Chinese film star system: film stars were introduced, along with the process for creating and promoting them. This all served to inspire the establishment of the Chinese film star system.

1.4.2 Studio Efforts towards Making Stars

The film studio in China, hoping that their film stars would help them survive a highly competitive market, was the primary active 'star maker'. A wave of studios opened and closed almost overnight throughout the 1920s, the total number of which was believed to be over one hundred in Shanghai alone.¹²⁶ This "movie craze", as it was known, was facilitated by an increase in surplus capital, due to improved economic conditions post-WWI, and investors' confidence in the industry's ability to produce rapid returns.¹²⁷ Most of these studios however, never even made a single film, others made only one - the so-called 'one-film companies' (*yipian gongsi*) - while the rest struggled desperately in what was a very competitive market.¹²⁸

In response to Hollywood's dominant status, and also in order to survive this chaotic and fierce market, studios made various efforts to attract audiences. One of

¹²⁴ "Meiguo dianying nüling qijuzhu (Daily Life of American Female Film Stars)," *Dianying zazhi* (*Movie Magazine*) no. 11 (1925).

¹²⁵ Ren Jinping, "Benzhi chongkan xuanyan (the Manifesto of Our Resumed Publication)," *Dianying Zazhi* (*Film Magazine*), no. 13 (1925).

¹²⁶ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (*Chinese Silent Film History*). p. 81.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

the most effective strategies employed to win this battle was for studios to cultivate their own film stars into a sort of ‘brand name’ with mass appeal representing both the studio and their pictures.

In this section, I am going to explain how professional film actors were trained, in both film schools and film studios, and how film studios cultivated their contracted actors as film stars.

1.4.2.1 Film Schools

Discussions on the verisimilitude of film performance, which called for professional film actors, signalled cinema’s first departure from stage performance. The training that emphasised a professional film performance anticipated the coming of the film star, with such training indicating that the film industry had begun to regard the quality of its actors.

The emergence of professional film actors was an indirect result of public debates, initiated by film critics, on whether civilised play actors were qualified film actors and should they act in films. Criticism of civilised play actors’ appearances on film came from film commentators in the early 1920s, reaching a peak in the mid-1920s, but was to die down with the establishment of more film studios and the recruitment of people to be trained for perform as professional film actors. Complaints about civilised play actors mainly focused on their illiteracy¹²⁹ and their unnatural, over-exaggerated and stereotypical performance style.¹³⁰ Because film was seen as an art form by some critics (which will be discussed in chapter 2 and chapter 3),¹³¹ those illiterate play actors were regarded as not competent for film performance.¹³² With Chinese filmmakers’ further explorations into the unique features of film technology, including the spatial relationship between set and actor

¹²⁹ Huimin, “Xinjujia she yingxi de wojian (My Opinon on New Dramatists Making Films)”, *Shenbao* (Shanghai, September 26, 1922).

¹³⁰ Zheng Zhengqiu, “Xinjujia buneng yan yingxi ma (Couldn’t New Dramatists Play in Films)”, *Mingxing gongsi tekan “Feng Dashaoye”hao (Special Issue for Film “feng Dashaoye”from Mingxing Studio)*, no. 4 (1925).

¹³¹ Xu Gongmei, “Yingju de dongzuoshu (shadow-play’s Movement)”, *Dianying zazhi (Film Magazine)*, no. 7 (1924).

¹³² Huimin, “Xinjujia she yingxi de wojian (My Opinon on New Dramatists Making Films)”, *Shenbao* (Shanghai, September 26, 1922).

within the film space and the advent of the close-up, these professional film actors whose more realistic and less dramatic performance style better suited the new film medium were preferred by film directors and critics.¹³³ Even the former dramatist Zheng Zhengqiu admitted that “shadow-play and new plays (*xinju*, a general name for spoken drama and civilised play) were absolutely different”, so if these actors of new drama wanted to play a role in the film, he further suggested, they should “agree to accept training and study it [film performance] modestly”.¹³⁴

A number of film schools were established in the 1920s, aimed at training new actors for the new film medium, and more practically, for securing sufficient numbers for the fast developing industry. Some schools were affiliated to studios and were built at the same time as the studios were founded, e.g. the Minxin Film School (Minxin Studio), the Film School (Zhonghua Film Studio), the Dalu Film School (Dalu Film Studio), the Mingxing Film School (Mingxing Film Studio). Some with experience in the entertainment industry also opened film schools, such as the Kunlun Film School, owned by the spoken drama actor Qian Huafo (1884-1964) and the Fansan Film School, under the direction of actor Ji Fansan (? - ?). Some film schools hired foreign instructors and even co-operated with foreigners such as the Far East Asian Film School (*Yuandong dianying xuexiao*) and the American-Asian Film School (*Meiya dianying chuanxisuo*).¹³⁵ The singing and dancing school of United Photoplay (Lianhua Film Studio) was integrated from the Bright Moon Singing and Dancing Troupe (*Mingyue gewutuan*), many of whose members, trained at Li Jinghui's (1891-1967) female music schools, later became to be famous film stars in the 1930s.

The curriculums and training guidelines of these film schools were usually ambitious. For example, according to film star Hu Die's memoirs, the *Zhonghua* Film School provided courses including concise film theory (*dianying gailun*), film administration (*dianying guanli*), history of modern western drama, cinematography, basics about film studios (*shenying chang changshi*), directing, common knowledge of

¹³³ Zheng Zhengqiu, “Xinjujia buneng yan yingxi ma (Couldn't New Dramatists Play in Films)”, *Mingxing gongsu tekan “Feng Dashaoye” hao* (Special Issue for Film “Feng Dashaoye” from *Mingxing Studio*), no. 4 (1925).

¹³⁴ Zheng Zhengqiu, “Xinjujia buneng yan yingxi ma (Couldn't New Dramatists Play in Films)”.

¹³⁵ Yan Kailei, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan* (Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation on the Republican-era Film History) (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2010). p. 11.

screen writing, cosmetology, singing and dancing, and twice-weekly foreign film screenings.¹³⁶ The Minxin Film School encouraged their students to read broadly, watch as many films as possible, observe life and society, listen to good music, learn posture and facial expression from paintings and photos in pictorials and American film magazines, and to visit great mountains, lakes and places of historical interest.¹³⁷

Many teachers in these schools had a western-style education, and sometimes professional drama and practical film experience from America. Chen Shouyin (ca.1896-?), a director from the Dazhonghua China Film Company, as well as chief recruitment officer for the Zhonghua Film School, learnt performance and play writing in his early years in the American entertainment industry. He had a brief spell with the National Stock Company in Broadway, once served at Hollywood Selznick Studio as an actor and playwright and also attended performances at Hollywood's Universal Studios.¹³⁸ Hong Shen (1894-1955), known as China's first film script writer,¹³⁹ was educated in modern drama at Harvard University and in film training at Columbia University, thereafter returning home with ambitions of helping advance Chinese spoken drama and film. He taught drama at Shanghai Fudan University and was also a part-time teacher at the Minxin and Zhonghua Film Schools.¹⁴⁰ Another two teachers in this film school, Xu Hu (?-?) and Wang Xuchang (?-?), were veteran film teachers who had studied cinematography in France and opened the Changming Film School in 1924.¹⁴¹ The background of these teachers also showed the influence of world film culture on the development of the Chinese film industry.

However, the influence of the film schools on their students' careers is not so easily measured. Firstly, almost every film school was short-lived due to

¹³⁶ Liu Huiqin, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 1988). pp.14-15.

¹³⁷ Chen Zuiyun, "Yingxi yanyuan de xiuyang: zai Minxin yingxi zhuanmen xuexiao yanjiang zhi ci (Cultivation of Shadow-play Actors: A Speech at Minxin Film School)," *Mingxing gongsi tekan (Special Issue of Mingxing Studio)* (1926).

¹³⁸ Chen Shouyin, "Wo toudun dianyingjie zhi jingguo (My Experiences of Plunging into Filmdom)," *Yingxi Chunqiu (Shadow-play History)* no. 4, 5, 7, 12 (1925).

¹³⁹ Early films including those civilised play adaptations were without scripts and very improvisational.

¹⁴⁰ Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui (China Film Association) and Dianyingshi yanjiubu (Department of film history research), *Zhongguo dianyingjia liezhuan (The Collected Biographies of Chinese Filmmakers)*. pp. 214-221.

¹⁴¹ Wu et al., *Shanghai dianyingzhi (A Chronicle of Shanghai Motion Picture)*. p. 166.

interruptions brought by either war or shortage of financial support.¹⁴² Although affiliated schools were partly funded by film studios, and also charged students a small tuition fee, it was never enough to support the school entirely.¹⁴³ The general economic conditions in film schools were not promising, since film schools themselves were not profitable and their sponsors normally only provided limited funding to start the school. Secondly, these film schools generally only provided part-time training. For example, the Zhonghua Film School was an evening school open 7-10 pm with the entire course comprising only a half-year semester, or three hundred and thirty-six hours.¹⁴⁴ Although it is too arbitrary to conclude and measure the influence these film schools had on the personal development of filmmakers, it remains that many well-known film stars were on their lists of alumnae, such as China's first "queen of film" Zhang Zhiyun (1904-197?), Hu Die, martial arts film star Xu Qinfang (1907-1985) and the famous screen 'villain' Wang Xianzhai (1900-1942), to name but a few.

According to Hu Die, compared to the large numbers applying to these schools, few were lucky enough to be selected and to finally graduate.¹⁴⁵ But these film schools still offered the opportunity to become a film star and more significantly, opened up an alternative path for ordinary people with a basic educational background to climb the social ladder. Film school recruitment advertisements appeared in the popular press, like *Shenbao* and film journals,¹⁴⁶ so potential future film students can at least be regarded as not having been completely illiterate and also immersed to a certain degree in modern society. Affiliated film schools offered their students the hope of being assigned works from the film studio.¹⁴⁷ These film schools were different from the traditional opera schools, with the former providing something more akin to the vocational training provided by the modern industry today. So the modern-day fairy-tale of the ordinary person becoming a film star was

¹⁴² Lianhua yingpian gongsi (Lianhua Film Studio), "Lianhua yingpian gongsi sinian jinglishi (Experiences of Lian Hua Film Company in These Four Years)," in *Zhongguo dianying nianjian (The Year Book of Chinese Film Industry)* (Nanjing: Nanjing Zhengzhong shuju (Nanjing Zhengzhong Publishing House), 1934). p. 937-939.

¹⁴³ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)*. p. 15

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Hu Die, "Wode zibai(My Confessions)", *Zhongguo dianying (Chinese Films)*, no. 1-4 (1937).

¹⁴⁶ "Mingxing gongsi chuangan dianying rencai yangchengsuo (Mingxing Film Company Founds Film Talents Training School)", *Shenbao* (May 1, 1933).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

indeed a dream that could only exist in a commercial and industrial society with greater social mobility, which in turn also enhanced the prospects for individual development and success brought by a changing society.

1.4.2.2 Studios' Star Image Production

Film school training was not the only route into films. In the early years of the Chinese film industry everything was new and untested and there was a degree of uncertainty regarding its longevity. With many unwilling to take the risk, family and friends of filmmakers, along with civilised play actors, became an important source of acting talent, e.g. the early stars of the Minxin Film Studio, Yan Shanshan (1896-1952) and Lin Chuchu (1904-1979), as well as Dan Er'chun (1915-?) and Yin Mingzhu (1904-1989) from the Shanghai Picture Company (Shanghai huapian gongsi) were family members of studio managers.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, young and aspiring opera actors were often discovered by film studios and persuaded to act in their films, e.g. Yuan Meiyun (1917-1999). And, with the expansion of the film industry, more and more ordinary people joined the industry through studio auditions. If an amateur actor's début was accepted positively by a director, he or she might have the opportunity to appear in more films, or even to become the studio's next big film star.

Film studios normally employed two sets of actors - *jiben yanyuan* (lit. 'basic actors', meaning 'contract actors') and *linshi yanyuan* ('temporary actors'). Temporary actors were short term monthly-paid actors who signed contracts with studios for each film they appeared in. Contract actors, who received both monthly salaries and sometimes a special payment for each film, signed long term contracts with the studio (usually over one year).¹⁴⁹ In the knowledge that regularly-appearing contracted actors could become synonymous with the 'brand name' of the studio,

¹⁴⁸ Zhang Junxiang and Cheng Jihua, eds., *Zhongguo dianying dacidian (China Cinema Encyclopaedia)* (Shanghai: shanghai cishu chubanshe (Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House), 1997). pp. 579,1165. Zheng Yimei, *Yingtian jiuwen - Dan Duyu he Yin Mingzhu (Old News from the Filmdom - Dan Duyu and Yin Mingzhu)* (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House), 1982). pp. 19-30.

¹⁴⁹ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)*. p. 36.

every studio aimed at maximising the marketing potential of these actors through cultivating and establishing their status and image as film stars.

In Hollywood's star-centred production, films were often tailored to fit a particular star's image and to represent their 'personalities' in order to firmly establish or enhance that star's image. Such films were called "star vehicles".¹⁵⁰ In the opera world of the Republican period (1911-1949), the writing of new operas for specific opera stars was also not unusual. For example, the script writer Qi Rushan (1875-1962) once wrote new scripts for Peking Opera star Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), such as *The Mandarin Ducks in Prison* (*Laoyu yuanyang*).¹⁵¹ However, in the film world, these 'star vehicle' films did not appear until the late 1930s.¹⁵² Before that, film magazines released by film studios played an important role in star image building and star discourse creation.

The oldest surviving studio publication is *the Morning Star* (*Chengxing*), published from 1922 to 1925 by the Mingxing Film Company in the name of the Chenshe Publishing House.¹⁵³ From 1925, the Mingxing Film Company released the Mingxing Special Issue (*Mingxing teke*) to replace the earlier publication. From the existing film publications, it could be deduced that from the mid-1920s many film studios published their own promotional materials. These materials were not issued periodically, but published along with the promotion of the studio's latest productions, its stars and its filmmakers. Therefore, the term *tekan* (lit. 'special issue') was widely-used to refer to such promotional materials, including *Mingxing tekan* from the Mingxing Film Company, *Changcheng tekan* from Great Wall Motion Pictures (*Changcheng huapian gongsi*);¹⁵⁴ *Dazhongguo yingpian gongsi tekan* (Special Issue of Great China Motion Pictures);¹⁵⁵ *Guoguang tekan* (Guoguang Special Issue) from Guoguang Film Company (*Guoguang yingpian gongsi*).¹⁵⁶ As

¹⁵⁰ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New Edition (reprinted) (London: BFI, 2002). p. 60.

¹⁵¹ A.C. Scott, *Mei Lan-Fang: The Life and Times of a Peking Actor* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1971). p. 69.

¹⁵² For example, from the late 1930s film studios tailored sing-song films for Zhou Xuan when she gained fame in both the singing and the film world.

¹⁵³ Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying qikan quanmu shuzhi* (*Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts, 1921 - 1949*). p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the industry grew, special issues consisting of thin booklets or a newspaper became periodical magazines published mainly by the bigger studios, capable of sustaining regular production, such as *Film Monthly* (*Dianying yuebao*) by the Liuhe Film Studio,¹⁵⁷ *Mingxing Monthly* (*Mingxing yuebao*) by the Mingxing Film Studio¹⁵⁸ and *Danton* (*Diantong*) by the Danton Film Studio.¹⁵⁹

Studio publicity departments - normally comprised of editors, illustrators, journalists, and advertisers - took charge of presenting a positive image of the studio, introducing new products as well as building a film culture through their publications.¹⁶⁰ Regular topics included film plots, film criticism, interviews with filmmakers, reports on the filming process, introduction to affiliated film schools as well as details of new production plans. But film stars always comprised the majority of such publications. Still shots of seductive female actors would often adorn the cover page under the magazine or sometimes film title, with the actor's real name, and in some cases their character's name, printed in a smaller font but placed in a conspicuous location so as to draw readers' attention. More film stills and portraits of leading actors were displayed on the inner pages to reinforce readers' impressions about them. Such promotional strategies support deCordova's claims that "the recognition of a specific actor's image was basic to the emergence of the picture personality".¹⁶¹

Beyond the name and physical appearance of actors, another important aspect of star actor image construction was personality - deliberately manufactured through reports on actors and their off-screen goings on. The logic being that, by suggesting that an actor's personality was the same as their on-screen persona, under the discourse of filmic verisimilitude, such similarities would lend credence to a film's claims of representing reality.

A backstage story footnote about the film, *President of the Flower Kingdom* (*Huaguo dazongtong*, 1928), published in the *Special Issue for the President of the*

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁶⁰ Lianhua yingpian gongsi (Lianhua Film Studio), "Lianhua yingpian gongsi sinian jinglishi (Experiences of Lian Hua Film Company in These Four Years)." p. 941.

¹⁶¹ deCordova, *Picture Personalities: the Emergence of the Star System in America*. p. 85

Flower Kingdom (*Huaguo dazongtong tekan*), vividly evidences the studio's promotional strategy, aimed at underwriting the quality of the new film by highlighting the shared personality between both character and actor.¹⁶² It was reported that at the beginning of casting, the director was in a dilemma as to whether to choose Yang Naimei or Mao Jianpei (1907-1930) as the protagonist for this film. Yang's performance skill and professional experience were unquestionable, but there were concerns that her unruly and romantic personality could destroy the film. Supporters of the other candidate, Mao, declared that although not as rich as Yang in professional experience, her acting skill of performance was comparable and, more importantly, she was much more amenable. Yang however, whose stubborn and unruly individuality might bring difficulties to film production, e.g. if she did not comply with the production schedule, the studio would lose time and money, had an unusual personality which, so her supporters asserted, qualified her for the leading role as a courtesan star who, according to public opinion, should also be as wild, unruly and romantic as the film star Yang Naimei. After a week of hesitation, the studio decided to talk to Yang about their concerns. Yang agreed to the studio's regulations and director's guidance and it was reported that the film ended up with a most excellent performance from Yang: "Naimei is always well-known for her romantic style of performance which has also been displayed perfectly in this film".¹⁶³

This story indicates that the actor's performance style was believed to have stemmed from her real-life personality and was wonderfully represented in her film role. This article functioned as a clever advertising tool which, on the one hand, lent credence to the new film's quality due to careful casting choices and serious production processes, and on the other, confirmed leading star Yang Naimei's ability to play a believable character. In this case, her 'unruly, romantic, and wild personality' became her professional persona and was also the major contributing factor in the success of her acting career.

¹⁶² Zhang Weitao, "Shezhi 'Huaguo dazongtong'zhi jingguo (Making the Film 'President of the Flower Kingdom ')", *Huaguo dazongtong tekan* (*Special Issue for "President of the Flower Kingdom"*) (1927).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

In many cases, an actor's 'individuality' was constructed by their personalities and/or physical features and quite often, rather than professional skills, that were valued, branded and marketed by studios. For example, the film star Tan Ying (1915-2001) was known as 'the star with black eye-shadows (*heiyanguan mingxing*)'¹⁶⁴ for her unique make-up style and Wang Renmei (1915-1987) was given the nickname 'wild cat (*yemao*)' for her lively and unruly personality.¹⁶⁵

Although 'star vehicles' did not appear until the late 1930s, films about movie stars had started to appear in China in the late 1920s-early 1930s. A number of films, e.g. *A Female Film Star* (*Dianying nümingxing*, 1926), *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (*Yinmu yanshi*, 1931), and *A Female Star* (*Yige nümingxing*, 1933), exaggerated the materially luxurious, sexually indulgent, and morally degenerated life of female movie stars. Most of these films are now unavailable, but from film plots in written materials such as film magazines and film advertisements, it could be presumed that the myth of the exotic and erotic life of a film star was still a major attraction to audiences. Interestingly, a quote from the censor committee for *A Female Film Star* (*Dianying nümingxing*, 1926) approves of the film: "...truly telling anecdotes of filmdom, it is worth watching".¹⁶⁶ This comment not only implies that this committee member saw the film as a reflection of reality, but also highlights how these exaggerated film stars were perceived by the wider public. These films about star might have been inspired by popular films about gold-diggers in Hollywood, such as *Hollywood* (1923), *My Stars* (1926), *The Movies* (1926) and *A Star is born* (1937), which could collectively be regarded as a kind of studio-created star discourse which not only established the glamorous and almost mythical/intriguing image of the rising movie star, but more importantly, would heighten audience curiosity leading to increased commercial value of the stars.

Film studios were the most active star makers because their stars were crucial in their struggle for survival in a highly competitive market. However, studios were not

¹⁶⁴ "Tan Ying," *Shanghai nianhua* (*Shanghai Memory*), accessed September 24, 2012, http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/star/star_index.jsp?starId=046.

¹⁶⁵ Ye Si, "Jia mao -- Wang Renmei (The Domestic Cat - Wang Renmei)," *Yi Sheng* (July 16, 1947).

¹⁶⁶ Sun Shiyi, "Duiyu shengjiaoyuhui de dianying shencha shuohua (Speaking to the Provincial Film Censor Committee)," *Yinxing* (*Silver Star*), no. 2 (1927).

the only star makers. Social forces, especially the mass media, also contributed to the creation of the Chinese film star.

1.4.3 The Invention of the Cross-Media Star and the Creation of a Film Star Culture

From the early Republican period, the entertainment industry started to entice consumers not only through various new leisure forms, such as reformed Peking opera, dancing halls, and gramophones, but also through the glamour of film stars - enabled by the help of the prevailing mass media.¹⁶⁷ Entertainers, such as courtesans and opera actors, previously marginalised in Chinese society, were now very much centre stage in households throughout the country and in society in general.

Towards the late Qing the entertainment press began to realise that within the persona and private activities of entertainment figures there was both news and commercial value. Tabloids such as *Entertainment* (*Youxibao*, 1897-1908) and *World Vanity Fair* (*Shijie fanhua bao*, 1901-1910) functioned on the one hand as promotion agencies, helping establish entertainers' reputations as public celebrities by publicising their images, names and private and social activities, and public forums on the other where readers and stars could contact each other through fan letters and reader-engagement events like star contests (which will be discussed in chapter 4). This process of bringing entertainers to the centre of public attention was mutually beneficial for the press and the stars in terms of commercial profits that were made out of reader interest in stars. This commercially interdependent relationship between the press and entertainers has been maintained in the film industry.

Entertainment tabloids maintained their popularity among readers in the early years of Chinese film culture. In the 1920s, tabloids turned their focus to new emerging entertainment stars such as dancing girls, cabaret artists, and, of course, film stars. Film stars' on-and-off screen activities were hot topics in tabloids like *Diamond* (*Jingangzuan*, 1923-1937) and its digest *Diamond Monthly* (*Jingangzuan yuekan*), *Film and Dance News* (*Yingwu xinwen*, 1935-1937), and *Entertainment Weekly* (*Yule zhoukan*, 1935-1936).

¹⁶⁷ Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. p. 220.

Unlike tabloids, film magazines also focused on ‘serious topics’ such as acting skills and future career plans that were important components in film magazines. These magazines were published by publishing houses and film studio propaganda departments with the express purpose of disseminating film knowledge and enticing audiences into cinemas. In contrast to the aim and function of studio-founded film journals, which was to promote new pictures and stars, many non-studio-founded magazines were organised by groups of intellectuals often sharing the same aesthetic and political views towards film art. For example, *Film Art (Dianying yishu)* was established as a mouthpiece for leftist writers who believed in the film magazine’s ability to “...advance audiences’ film knowledge, urge filmmakers to go along the way (of film production), and display the relationships between film and society...”,¹⁶⁸ while *Modern Film (Xiandai dianying)* was founded by a group of novelists, with a firm belief in art for art’s sake, to “research film art, boost the Chinese film industry...correct the bad taste of the Chinese film industry”.¹⁶⁹ Despite these differences in ideology and aesthetic taste, these magazines all allocated a large amount of space to film star-related items: including images, interviews, articles discussing new films, biographies and so on.

In the meantime, more and more newspapers had started to publish film supplements as a complementary to social, political and economic news, such as *Film Special Issue (Dianying zhuankan)* in *Shenbao*, *Drama and Film (Xiju yu dianying)* in *Dagongbao*, *Film and Drama (Dianying he xiju)* and *Filmdom (Yingtian)* in *Minbao*, *Daily Film (Meiri dianying)* in *Chenbao*, and *Film Weekly (Dianying zhoukan)* in *Dawanbao*. These film supplements also functioned as advertisements attracting local audiences into cinemas. For example, *Special Issue of Film* in *Shenbao* was included in its *Local Supplements (Bendi zengkan)*, released only in the Shanghai area where the film industry was based. A few pages of film-related news - film reviews, studio/star news - were followed by several pages of local cinema advertisements and business announcements. The posters for newly released films, notices with updates on projection devices in cinemas, items detailing

¹⁶⁸ “Dai fakanci (Editorial),” *Dianying yishu (Film Art)* (1932).

¹⁶⁹ Huang Jiamo, ““Xiandai dianying yu zhongguo dianyingjie: benkan de chuangli yu jinhou de zeren, yubei geiyu duzhe de jidian gongxian (Modern Film and Chinese Filmdom--the Foundation of Our Journal and Our Duties in the Future--several Contributions Offered to Readers),” *Xiandai dianying (Modern Film)* (1933).

new services and ticket prices of certain cinemas (see Figure 1.1), all of which occupied a large chunk of these publications, clearly state that the film supplements of daily newspapers served as advertising to promote the local film market.



Figure 1.1 Film advertisements published in *Shenbao*. The advertisement at the top-right corner also lists the ticket price.¹⁷⁰

The appearance of film supplements in the commercial press proved that the film industry, as well as other entertainment industries, had become an indispensable institution of Chinese society and that entertainment news - including that about film stars - had become an important part in the social life of Republican Shanghai.

The reputations of film stars and a film's particular selling-point (e.g. sound, special effects) were well utilised by supplements to attract readers as well. Sometimes images of specific film stars would accompany articles; other times images appeared alone without any accompanying text. On the one hand, these star images without text references could be seen as graphic decoration of pure texts, while on the other, it could be presumed that these names and pictures also contained an inherent information/news value that was deemed worthy of publication. By commanding and sharing knowledge and information on film stars, film audiences, as well as press readers, were able to establish a certain common identity. Therefore,

¹⁷⁰ *Shenbao* (November 15, 1932).

the ability to recognise stars became a major source of pleasure to film fans, which could be provided by the film press with new pictures and new information.

The establishment of film stars' off-screen images also relied heavily on pictorials and lifestyle magazines, which often bore clear social opinions and ideologies, e.g. the women's lifestyle magazine *Linglong*, and the pictorial, *The Young Companion* that reported international and domestic news and advocated a modern lifestyle through pictures. Pictures and reports about stars appearing in such magazines often addressed issues about contemporary life, including fashion and beauty, sports and health, marriage and family, and career choices. The display of the film star lifestyle in these magazines was indicative of the magazine's ideology. The illustrative function of images of film stars also allowed stars access to mainstream society. This will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

Publications solely devoted to film stars also appeared, such as entertainment tabloids on stars' personal lives; e.g. *Stars' Families* (*Mingxing jiating*, 1933-1935)¹⁷¹ and *Compilation of Film Stars' Lives* (*Yingxing shenghuoji*, 1936),¹⁷² in which stars' family members, interior designs of their homes, hobbies and other details of their personal lives would be magnified and introduced; collections of star pictures, e.g. *Film Star Picture Collection* (*Yingxing zhaoxiangji*, 1935)¹⁷³ and *Film Stars Pictorial* (*Dianying mingxing huakan*, 1934).¹⁷⁴ Such publications that used images and details of the personal lives of stars as the main attraction to readers testify to the popularity of film stars.

Film sound technology, ushering in a new era for the film industry in general, also presented opportunities for the film star system. The reputation of the film star was no longer solely based on the circulation of names, images and personalities constructed in texts and silent motion pictures. The dissemination of vocal features through film songs and film dialogue also provided another means of propagating film stardom. The application of film sound technology, gramophone discs and

¹⁷¹ Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo Xiandai Dianying Qikan Quanmu Shuzhi* (*Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts*, 1921 - 1949). p. 78.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁷⁴ See the advertisement of this pictorial at the back of the book *Nümingxing riji* (*A Female Star's Diary*). Yingxue, *Nümingxing riji* (*A Female Star's Diary*) (shanghai: Shanghai Young Companion Publishing House, 1934).

wireless broadcasting all expanded the media sphere, allowing film stars a much broader playing field while consolidating and further heightening their fame.

The film industry embraced technological advancements by testing the capabilities of the new sound system with a view to maximising profits. And so, the musical genre was born soon after sound technology was introduced to the Chinese film industry. The first sound film actors were either opera actors, such as Yuan Meiyun (1917-1999) and Xue Lingxian (?-1944), or skilled singer/dancers trained by and previously performing in singing-and-dancing troupes, such as Li Minghui (1909-2003) and Hu Jia (?-?). Some of them were already well-established as popular singers and dancers before starting their film careers; Violet Wong (Ziluolan 1915-?), a professional dancer who acted in the film *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (*Yinhan shuangxing*, 1931); members from Bright Moon Singing-and-dancing Troupe (*Mingyue gewutuan*), like Bai Hong (1919-1992), Zhou Xuan (1920-1957), Wang Renmei, and Gong Qiuxia (1916-2004). These stage stars not only carried their established star reputations onto the screen, but also bridged the film and recorded music industries, which further expanded their star reputation to different groups of fans. At first, film songs sung by actors comprised opera songs sung by opera stars and recorded on the same gramophone disc, but soon after, film stars' film theme songs were made as separate compilations. Gramophone discs *Stars' Collections* (*Mingxing jinji*), published by Pathé and including the most popular film songs sung by stars like Chen Yumei, Hu Die and Wang Renmei achieved high levels of popularity in the 1930s.¹⁷⁵ Stars were also introduced to households by the gramophone disc catalogues and covers, where their names appeared in print. Another medium that broadened stars' fame by utilising sound technology was wireless broadcasting. Shanghai saw the first public wireless broadcasting on January 23rd 1923. In the mid-1930s wireless broadcasting reached its peak in terms of popularity,¹⁷⁶ which was at a time when domestic sound films were developing rapidly. Peking Operas, local operas and popular songs, including film songs,

¹⁷⁵ Ge Tao, "Shengyin jilu xia de shehui niantian-20 shiji chuye zhi 1937 nian de Shanghai changpianye (Sound Recorded Social changes--Shanghai Recorded Music Industry from the Beginning of the 20th Century to 1937)," *Shilin (Historical Review)* no. 6 (2004): p. 7.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

constituted the daily broadcasted programmes.¹⁷⁷ Wireless broadcasting singers often became film actors, e.g. Zhou Xuan. Film actors began to sing film songs in wireless broadcasting stations like Hu Die and Chen Yumei (1910-1985). Dancing halls and cabarets often invited popular film actors to sing film songs, and live film song shows were also a new promotional tool deployed at the opening of a new film.¹⁷⁸

As Bettig and Hall suggest, “the history of the mass media is intimately bound up with the history of advertising”.¹⁷⁹ With the development of the mass media in China, film star reputations began to be exploited to endorse commercial products and to spread the virtues of consumption. Star images were utilised in advertisements that were published in newspapers and magazines. Film stars’ appearances in lifestyle magazines and contemporary-themed films legitimised their authority as models of a modern lifestyle and arbiters of consumption. At the same time, and as a result of this new consumer culture, images of stars entered into households on advertising calendars, cigarette tins, and confectionary packages and so on. This high degree of public exposure further strengthened their fame. Images of stars in advertisings will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

With the popularity of film stars, imaginations were aroused, finally resulting in the emergence of star fiction, a subgenre of popular stories focused on film stars’ personal lives. These stories normally adopt first person narrative and, e.g. *History of Film* (*Yinhai chungiu*),¹⁸⁰ *Life in Film* (*Yinquan baitai*)¹⁸¹ were supposed to disclose the ‘real lives’ of film stars. They were found mainly in film journals and women’s magazines, e.g. *Modern Cinema* (*Shidai dianying*) and *Linglong*. But they were also occasionally published in book form, such as the novel, *A Female Star’s Diary* (*Nümingxing riji*), published by Young Companion Publishing House in 1934.

The narrator of *A Female Star’s Diary* claims to be a contemporary female film star who is also an acquaintance of other stars in real life. There is no discernible

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 10-12.

¹⁷⁹ Ronald Bettig and Jeanne Lynn Hall, *Big Media, Big Money: Cultural Texts and Political Economics* (Lanham & Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002): p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ Hou Ping, “Yinhai chungiu (History of the Filmdom),” *Shidai dianying* (*Modern Cinema*) (January 1936).

¹⁸¹ Pan Jienong, “Yinquan baitai (Life in the Filmdom),” *Shidai dianying* (*Modern Cinema*) (November 1935).

plot, rather the novel amounts to trivia about ‘a star’s daily life’, including descriptions of her daily routines, social activities, family issues and so on. The novel takes cosmopolitan Shanghai and its entertainment industry as the setting where the narrator lives and works. Through references to real people and places, the novel creates a sense of reality. For example, real-life film stars like Gao Zhanfei and Xu Lai befriend the fictional narrator¹⁸²; entertainment places such as the Dahua dancing hall and Wing On department store in Shanghai become the playground for the protagonist;¹⁸³ social trends were also worked into the stories, including film critics’ debates over “soft and hard film”.¹⁸⁴ It also touches upon the different aspects of a fashionable material life in an urban city like Shanghai. The narrator functions as a guide to city life, leading readers to explore the city with her. Such details include the dress code in the top dancing hall, Paramount,¹⁸⁵ and the menu from an ocean liner restaurant.¹⁸⁶ These descriptions do not fulfil any narrative function, rather their purpose is to showcase city life and by doing so, the fashionable image of the film star is created.

Although this diary style novel made efforts to create an authentic real-life atmosphere, it is actually a reflection of society’s popular imagination towards stars that was rooted in the media-created star image. For example, stories in tabloids such as lesbian relationships and love triangles between stars and filmmakers are mentioned in the story as ‘truth’; film stars’ activities reported by the mass media, including spending time and money in luxury entertainment places and attending social gatherings constitutes a major part of the novel’s content. Popular topics in magazines such as whether or not female stars should have children and marriage issues are also discussed by the stars ‘themselves’ to underscore the seriousness of such topics. The whole picture of the star’s life depicted in the book is very similar to the star image established through the mass media. The emergence of such a genre of fiction indicates that the film star had become a noticeable cultural phenomenon,

¹⁸² Yingxue. *Nümingxing riji (A Female Star’s Diary)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Young Companion Publishing House, 1934. pp. 22-23.

¹⁸³ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

sustained not only by the films in which they appeared, but also by the popular imagination created and aroused by the media surrounding them.

Due to the rise of the mass media, actors began to become famous for their frequent exposure in different media - more precisely, they were famous for being famous. This recurring presence in the media established their status as cross-media stars and social stars. Also, with mass media efforts to report stars' off-screen stories, film stars' influence had gone beyond film, and started to influence the sphere of social life and audiences/readers' daily lives. The intimacy between actors and audiences thus increased due to the emergence of cross-media stars who were more 'real' to audiences than ever before. This led to an increasing acceptance of actors as ordinary people from mainstream society. However, in order to maintain the charm and attractiveness of stars, as well as audiences' persistent interest in them, the mass media also made efforts to keep a distance between stars and audiences by emphasising a star's unique charm and career success.

1.5 Conclusion

The Chinese film star phenomenon was rooted in the entertainment industry that developed from the late Qing onwards, and it was influenced by the global expansion of Hollywood.

It was in the late Qing teahouse culture that the first Chinese films appeared. The opera star, as an attraction to audiences, appearing in these stage performance films fulfilled the theory of 'cinema of attraction' in Chinese film culture – film technology's ability to transfer objects from the real world onto the film screen fascinated early audiences. However, the opera stars who appeared in these documentary-style early films were neither film actors nor real film stars.

Film acting appeared along with the emergence of Chinese film production in the late 1910s and early 1920s.¹⁸⁷ The first feature film actors came from the theatre -

¹⁸⁷ Yueh-yu Yeh, 'Wenyi' yu zhongguo zaoqi dianying de shengchan yu yinxiao: yige fangfalun de kaiqi ('Wenyi' and the Production and Marketing of Early Chinese Films: The Start of a Methodology)', in *Huayu dianying gongye: fangfa yu lishi de xin tansuan (Rethinking the Chinese Film Industry: New Histories New Methods)* (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2011). p. 55.

a common practice in early film production across the globe at the time. With further developments in filmmaking techniques, especially the advent of the close-up, the exaggerated stage performance style was considered ill-suited to the new film art. The debate on the verisimilitude of film performance called for professional film actors whose performance style could meet the requirements of the film medium. This led to the training of professional film actors which began with film studios and film schools (many of them affiliated to film studios). Such professional training programs also provided greater numbers to meet the varied needs of the fledgling film industry.

The formation of the Chinese film industry along with the rise in cinema attendance during the early 1920s enabled actors' images to become familiar to regular audiences. This signalled the appearance of the 'picture personality'. The coming of Hollywood star culture along with further developments in the mass media, which used the private lives of film stars as a major selling point, served to increase the appetite among audiences for stars' 'real' life stories. Thus, various collective imaginings about stars started to appear, which was reflected in various mass media including fan magazines, lifestyle magazines, novels and films about stars. The circulation of stars' images and voices, and audiences' fantasies about them, were linked to the rise of a film star culture in Chinese society.

Along with the formation and development of such a film star culture, the social recognition on film stars started to increase in Chinese society. Stars' influence on society was facilitated through different images portrayed through various media forms; firstly, through film; then, the mass media. In the next chapter, the screen image of stars, established through their on-screen performances, and the media promotion surrounding the characters they played will be discussed.

Chapter 2 Nationalist Discourses and Film Star Screen Images

2.1 Introduction

Film is experiencing a golden time in which the medium of film is connected to society. This idea has been acknowledged by every country in the world. Therefore, actors occupy an important position. Generally speaking, actors are the model for social reform.

-- Yu Xiake, 1927¹

As the above quotation shows, film actors were seen as one of the forces for social reform in Chinese society. Some actors were actively involved in social reform through taking part in political movements, such as the famous civilised play stars and early film actors the Xia Brothers. Others wrote journal articles to express their political views, especially actors who were involved in the practice of spoken drama before they worked in the film industry,² such as civilised play stars Gu Wuwei (1892-?), Wang Youyou (1888-1937) and left-leaning actors Jin Yan (1910-1983) and Wang Yin (1913-1974). However, most actors' social impact lay in the characterisation of their screen roles to deliver the filmmakers' social and political ideas to audiences.

Although screen images of stars were fabricated, audiences took them very seriously. For example, audiences saw the fragile leading actresses and gentle leading actors in films as "a reflection of the weaknesses of the Chinese national character".³ The portrayal of Chinese images in Western films such as *Welcome Danger* (1929) often stirred up public discontent and created boycotts from Chinese audiences and the KMT authority. Why then, were characters in films taken seriously? How did the prevalent nationalist discourse impact the film star image in the early

¹ Yu Xiake, "Dui dianying yanyuan zhi ganyan (Reflections on the Film Actor)," *Dianying zazhi (Film Magazine)*, 1927.

² Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975). p. 118.

³ Cao Jin, "Zhongguo dianying yu yishu (Chinese Film and Art)," *Zhongguo dianying zazhi (China Film Magazine)* 1, no. 8 (1927).

Chinese film industry? What kinds of film star images were welcomed by Chinese audiences at that time?

This chapter argues that the dissatisfaction of Chinese audiences towards Western actors' and stars' negative portrayal of stereotypical Chinese characters in Western films urged the demand for Chinese stars to represent an 'authentic' image of Chinese people and the nation. Such nationalist discourse not only influenced the development of the star phenomenon but also shaped varying images of film stars.

The first part of this chapter will analyse how in the popular nationalistic ideology the film star image was related to the international image of the Chinese nation. The second part will examine how the various nationalist discourses that emerged and changed in different social contexts affected Chinese film stars' screen images.

2.2 The Film Star's Screen Image, the Nation's International Image

The relationship between film stars' on-screen images and nationalist discourse in Chinese society is well illustrated by the famous '*Bupasi shijian (Welcome Danger Incident)*', a very influential and well-known boycott towards the distorted representation of the Chinese people in the Hollywood film *Welcome Danger* (1929) which not only saw active participation from cinephiles and people in film circles, but also saw KMT authorities join the alliance of indignant audiences.

On 21 February 1930, the release of a new Hollywood film, *Welcome Danger* in the Shanghai Grand Theatre (*Shanghai daguangming xiyuan*) and Capitol Theatre (*Guanglu daxiyuan*) caused an unexpected social and diplomatic disturbance. The film tells the story of a botany student, Harold Bledsoe, played by one of the most popular American stars at the time, Harold Lloyd, who helps the police investigate a criminal group in San Francisco's Chinatown. The negative portrayal of overseas Chinese in this film — drug dealers and addicts, women with bound feet and men with pigtailed and long nails — provoked Chinese audiences, finally leading to a

public protest.⁴ On the second day of screening in the Grand Theatre, the dramatist and filmmaker Hong Shen, a returned student from America, interrupted the performance angry at its unrealistic representation of Chinese immigrants. He saw this film as “an insult to Chinese people” and encouraged audiences to ask for refunds. The cinema manager called the Shanghai municipal police and had Hong arrested for over three hours.⁵ Hong’s protest received immediate support from audiences, especially college students. His employers at the Mingxing Film Company and dramatists from the leftist drama group *South Drama Society* (*Nanguoshe*) visited him at the police station. The next day, after his release, he published the whole story in detail in the nationalist-run newspaper *Republican Daily* (*Minguo ribao*, 1916-1932).⁶ Afterwards, he sued the cinema for illegal arrest and urged the cinema to promise to stop showing “Films insulting the Chinese nation”.⁷

The KMT authorities soon intervened⁸ and the Shanghai Film Censorship Committee responded quickly to the mass appeal deciding that all cinemas showing *Welcome Danger* should stop screening immediately, destroy the film prints, and apologise to Shanghai’s citizens. The committee would censor every film before screening from that time on. It also decided that Harold Lloyd’s films could not be shown without further permission from the committee and, before such times as the star apologised to Chinese audiences, none of his films could enter the process of censorship – meaning all of Lloyd’s films were effectively banned. The committee also requested support from the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs and the Ministry for Interior and Education Affairs. The film was subsequently banned, while at the same

⁴ Wang Chaoguang, “Bupasi shijian zhi qianhou jingwei jiqi yiyi (The Incidence of Welcome Danger and Its Significance),” *Si yu Wen: Zhongguo xiandai sixiang wenhua yanjiu* (Contemporary Chinese Culture Studies), Website accessed on 6, December, 2011, <http://www.chinese-thought.org/shgc/003312.htm>.

⁵ Hong Shen, “Bupasi! Daguangming xiyuan huan xibu juwo ru bufang zhi jingguo (‘Welcome Danger!’-- the Details of the Grand Cinema Asking Western Police to Arrest Me),” *Minguo ribao* (*Republican Daily*) (Shanghai, February 24, 1930).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shen Hong, “Hong Shen zhengshi tiqi susong (The Formal Lawsuit of Hong Shen),” in *Hu Shi riji quanbian* (*The Completed Diary of Hu Shi*), vol. 5, 8 vols. (Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu chubanshe (Anhui Education Publishing), 2001). pp. 714-716.

⁸ Wang Chaoguang, “Bupasi shijian zhi qianhou jingwei jiqi yiyi (*The Incidence of Welcome Danger and Its Significance*),” *Si yu Wen: Zhongguo xiandai sixiang wenhua yanjiu* (Contemporary Chinese Culture Studies), Website accessed on 6, December, 2011, <http://www.chinese-thought.org/shgc/003312.htm>.

time the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs expressed their concerns to the United States consulate in Shanghai. With government intervention, not only were the two Chinese cinemas that screened this film fined and forced to issue official apologies to audiences, but Harold Lloyd also sent a letter of apology to the Chinese consulate in San Francisco in May 1930. After the KMT foreign minister Wang Zhengting informed domestic audiences of Lloyd's apology, the Shanghai Film Censorship Committee resumed the censorship of Lloyd's films on 22 August 1930, eventually lifting the ban on 30th September the same year.⁹

The social protest directed at *Welcome Danger* led to one Chinese actor's professional life being transformed permanently by this patriotic trend in society. Shao Zhuanglin (1900-?, Figure 2.1) was an early film comedian, active in the film industry in the 1920s. He was known for his imitation of Harold Lloyd's (Figure 2.2) style, appearance and performance.¹⁰



Figure 2.1. Shao Zhuanglin



Figure 2.2. Harold Lloyd

The social protest against Harold Lloyd led Shao to abandoning his imitation of the Hollywood star. Thereafter, popularity of Shao's later films began to wane – due partly to the loss of his unique style that ensured his place in the Chinese film industry, and also partly due to the trend of slapstick films falling out of favour with audiences. Shao abandoned his film career forever in 1934 when the last comedy

⁹ Wang, "Bupasi shijian zhi qianhou jingwei jiqi yiyi (The Incidence of Welcome Danger and Its Significance),"

¹⁰ Shen Ji, *Shanghai dianying (Shanghai Cinema)* (Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing, 2008). pp. 6-7.

film that he wrote, directed, and performed in, was still not able to revive his popularity.¹¹

Wang Chaoguang's study on the '*Welcome Danger Incident*' argues that this event represents "the highly sensitive nationalism" of Chinese people.¹² Ren Wei's more recent research demonstrates that Hong's protest was in fact a pre-organised plot, which was orchestrated by left-wing dramatist Tian Han (1898-1968) and left-leaning actor Jin Yan, receiving further legal assistance from the lawyer, Wu Chengyu (1889-?),¹³ who worked for the Mingxing Film Company.¹⁴ Ren's analysis focuses on the response of the mass media, the attitude of the nationalist government, merchants' commercial activities under the influence of the nationalist discourse and audience reception.¹⁵ He points out that the nationalist discourse aroused by this event was targeted at discriminatory stereotypes on the one hand, while the incident, launched by leftists in the first place, was used by the KMT government to improve the construction of the KMT government's authority on the other.¹⁶

While most scholars focus on the social impact of this affair, the film censorship of the KMT, and the individual heroic behaviour of Hong Shen, two questions relating to the nationalist discourse and film star image have yet to be sufficiently analysed. First of all, why was the patriotic sentiment of Chinese audiences and Hong Shen himself stimulated by a commercial comedy film with a fictional plot? As the western policeman who arrested Hong questioned:

"You [Hong Shen] are too sensitive. This picture [*Welcome Danger*] is only for fun. We Westerners only laugh about it. It is not necessarily meant to insult Chinese people. What's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wang, "*Bupasi shijian zhi qianhou jingwei jiqi yiyi (The Incidence of Welcome Danger and Its Significance)*."

¹³ Shanghai difangzhi bangongshi (Shanghai Chorography Office), *Kangyi fangying ruhua dianying (Against Films of Insulting to the Chinese Nation)*, Shanghai tong, Website accessed on 20, November, 2012, <http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/node4/node2249/huangpu/node35504/node35509/node35511/userobject1ai20442.html>

¹⁴ Ren Wei, "Yule, shangye yu minzuzhuyi - yi 1930nian 'ruhua' dianying 'Bupasi' yinqi de fenzheng wei zhongxin) Entertainment, Business and Nationalism——Counting on the Dissension Caused by film 'Welcome Danger' in 1930)," *Xueshu Yuekan (Academic Monthly)* no. 02 (2011). pp. 138-147.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

more, one of the good people in the film is a Chinese doctor.
But the head of the gangsters is an American”.¹⁷

Hong Shen obviously took a different view and saw the film in a much more serious light, insisting “...for us, we have sympathy towards overseas Chinese, [seeing] the ugly representation [of these Chinese overseas], how could the film make us laugh?”¹⁸ Hong also worried that American audiences would associate the Chinese criminals and crimes they committed in the film with a real-life legal case, the Gao Ying opium case (*Gao Ying tu'an*)¹⁹, that had caused a social sensation not long before the film's release. This begs the question, on what basis did Hong Shen (and other audiences) relate this fictional film to social reality?

Another perspective that has been ignored is the role of the Hollywood star in this event. Most of the public's discontent was directed at Harold Lloyd. For example, the KMT government asked the star to apologise to Chinese audiences and increased censorship of his films. However, in terms of film production, Lloyd was not as responsible for the development of the story as others, such as script writers and the director. Indeed his contribution to the film script was not even credited.²⁰ Why then did he, rather than the film's director, the screen writer or the studio, become the focus of resistance from Chinese audiences? How did audiences understand the relation between the film star and the political ideas that a film delivered?

In a personal statement on this protest in the Grand Theatre, published in *Republican Daily*, Hong expressed the motivation behind his boycott. He explained that the filmic representation of Chinese immigrants as dishonest people in Hollywood films was fabricated. What's more, he worried that the American youth, constituting the greater part of Lloyd's fan base and easily influenced by film media, would gain negative impressions of the Chinese from this film. He was afraid that it

¹⁷ Hong, “Bupasi! Daguangming xiyuan huan xibu juwo ru bufang zhi jingguo ('Welcome Danger!' -- the Details of the Grand Cinema Asked Western Police to Arrest Me).”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gao Ying was a Chinese consul to San Francisco sent by the Beiyang Government. He used the convenience of his diplomatic position to smuggle opium into the US, which was a piece of breaking social news at that time. See: Cai Dengshan, “*Hong Shen danao daguangming xiyuan (Hong Shen Stirred Up Trouble in the Grand Theatre)*,” *Minjian lishi* (Folk History), Website accessed at 20. November, 2012, <http://mjlsh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/book.aspx?cid=6&tid=169&pid=3004>.

²⁰ “Full cast and crew for ‘Welcome Danger’”, *IMDb*, Website accessed on 20, November, 2012. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020572/fullcredits#writers>.

would worsen racial discrimination faced by Chinese ethnic groups in the United States.²¹ Consequently, further questions can be raised, e.g. how was a star's image related to bigger issues like the image and dignity of a nation, and to what extent could star power influence society? All these questions raised by the 'Welcome Danger Incident' will be discussed in following sections.

2.2.1 The Image of the Star, the Face of the Nation

On the 3rd of November 1930, the law of film censorship was officially introduced by the KMT government. The regulations on domestic films mainly focused on moral issues, and any film scenes that were seen as anti-KMT or had the potential to cause social disturbance. In terms of foreign films, the censorship incorporated two perspectives: "amorous and erotic films" and "films insulting the Chinese nation", as the censorship committee termed them.²²

Wang Chaoguang explains that "films insulting the Chinese nation" were films that portrayed negative images of Chinese people, such as "...short in stature, weird looking, either criminals that kill and steal...or short on brains, vulgar...", and [American films] "mocking Chinese people by portraying their images of long pigtailed and bound feet".²³

In his research on the portrayal of Orientals in classical Hollywood films, Richard Oehling confirmed and elaborated on the distortion of the image of the Chinese, concluding that:

"...after 1910 and until the 1930s ...with very few exceptions, films about Orientals treated them largely as 'aliens' in the United States and no strong attempt was made to separate Chinese from Japanese. Several negative prejudices and stereotypes were common to both and were repeated frequently...persistent from the earliest films was

²¹ Hong, "Bupasi! Daguangming xiyuan huan xibu juwo ru bufang zhi jingguo ('Welcome Danger!-- the Details of the Grand Cinema Asked Western Police to Arrest Me)."

²² Wang Chaoguang, "30 niandai chuqi de minguo dianying jiancha zhidu (The Film Censorship of KMT Government in Early 1930s)," *Dianying Yishu (Film Art)* no. 03 (1997). pp. 60-66.

²³ Wang Chaoguang, "Fan zhengzhizhuan de guanzhao - Zhongguo yingping zhong de Meiguo dianying, 1895-1949 (Pan-political Reflection: American Films in Chinese Film Critics, 1895-1949)," *Meiguo Yanjiu (American Studies)* no. 2 (1996): pp. 78-92.

the idea of diabolical Orientals. ... Another common film theme in these decades (was) the widespread abuse of women by Orientals”.²⁴

Although after the 1911 Revolution, there were social and cultural changes happening within China, such social changes were not reflected on American film screens until the late 1920s:

“... by the mid-thirties clearly a new set of images – prejudices, stereotypes, standardized plots were emerging... When Americans finally did notice (Chinese civil war) ... a model of the new stereotypes ... was emerging. China is portrayed as a strange, exotic land of contrasts... until the 1938 release of the *Good Earth*, most films on China focused on the warlords, their troops, and the rising revolutionary movement – all in negative tones. The warlords were tyrannical beasts, generally lustful, proud, greedy, cruel, and ignorant. ... Their soldiers, the same as the imperial troops they had defeated, were miniature versions of the worst features of the warlords.”²⁵

The exoticism in the portrayal of Chinese images in films provoked Chinese audiences, who considered such films as insulting to Chinese people.

The most well-known Chinese faces in foreign films were all exotic and unauthentic, such as Dr. Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, and the Hollywood “Dragon Lady” Anna May Wong. Dr. Fu Manchu, a master criminal created by the British novelist Sax Rohmer, first appeared in 1875. It was at the time when the so-called “Yellow Peril”²⁶ was engulfing Western countries. The story first arrived on the big screen in the 1923 British silent film serial *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu*, going on to serve as the archetypal evil criminal genius.²⁷ Charlie Chan is a fictional Chinese-American detective created by American novelist Earl Derr Biggers (1884-1933) in

²⁴ Richard A. Oehling, “Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental, 1910-1959, Part II”, *Film and History* 8:3 (September 1978). pp. 34-36.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-65.

²⁶ The “yellow peril (or yellow terror)” means the supposed racial threat to the West from the Asian, which combines the racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, the competition to the white labour force from Asian workers and the military invasion from Asia. This term originated in the late nineteenth century when a large number of Chinese immigrants arrived in Western countries. It then became a literary theme that appeared in a number of fictions. See: William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940* (Hamden: Archon Book, 1982). p. 1. Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 1993). p. 2.

²⁷ Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940*. p. 164.

1919.²⁸ The Charlie Chan story was first adapted into film in *The House without a Key* in 1926. Although Charlie Chan is a positive character who often investigated and solved many crimes, the characterisation of Chan (such as his make-up of long-narrow eyes) was still based on stereotypical racial biases. Additionally, both Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu were played by Western actors - something that Chinese authorities and many critics found wholly inappropriate. Firstly, their representation was not authentic, so their performance was seen as an insult to the Chinese nation.²⁹ Secondly, Chinese audiences consequently questioned the ability of Chinese actors and the cultural capability of the nation: “with the long history and abundant culture, isn’t there any Chinese actor good enough to play a Chinese in a film?”³⁰

Anna May Wong was the best-known pioneering Chinese-American star who played Chinese roles in Western films.³¹ Born into a Chinese laundryman’s family in America, Wong often portrayed stereotypical roles of non-white women and Chinese concubines in Hollywood films. Chinese audiences criticised her for her stereotypical roles and her erotic appearance in films. She was seen as a traitor who sold her soul and the dignity of her motherland for money. Although the characters Wong played were different, they were all alien and exotic to Western audiences. More importantly, Chinese audiences considered those images of Chinese people incapable of representing modern Chinese people, especially after the fundamental social changes that took place after the fall of Qing Dynasty.³²

It is worthwhile noting that other nationalities also protested against such negative stereotyping in films: in his complaint to the Grand Theatre, Hong Shen listed several films that were challenged by foreigners living in China, which were considered insulting to those nations and to have caused discontent. For example, the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Gailiang Zhongguo yingpian shiye zhi xiansheng -- faqi zhe wei shiyejia yu zibenjia (the First Voice of the Reform of Chinese Film-initiated by Industrialists and Capitalists)”, *Shen Bao* (Shanghai, August 22, 1922).

³⁰ Zhen Hua, “Di erge Zhongguo nǚmíngxing? (The Second Chinese Film Star?),” *Shen Bao* (Shanghai, November 7, 1923).

³¹ Wang Yiman, “Anna May Wong: Toward Janus-faced, Border-Crossing, ‘Minor’ Stardom”, in *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers UP, 2010). p. 159.

³² Pei Juan, “Dianying yu minzu jingshen (Cinema and the National Spirit),” *Dagongbao* (Shanghai, August 6, 1929), sec. *Dianying zhoukan (Film Weekly)*.

Hollywood film *Broken Blossoms* (1919) was banned by the Shanghai Municipal Council due to its characterisation of Chinese as being better than the Britons, and some Italian sailors in Shanghai burnt film reels containing scenes of Italian prostitutes.³³

Due to complicated political and cultural conditions in metropolitan Shanghai where the foreign concessions were located, the political tension between foreigners and the Chinese often heightened nationalist sentiment. Both Western and Chinese film censors³⁴ paid close attention to two aspects of films: moral regulations and the dignity of the nation.³⁵ Sometimes the image of a nation was also taken into account as part of the moral consideration for film censors. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Council forbade any obscene scenes appearing in films in the regulation rules under the category of “cinematography” in the *Handbook of Licence Conditions* (1921).³⁶ The definition of ‘obscene’ however was unclear, potentially referring to amoral behaviour or anything that was deemed to dishonour the nation. According to Tang Weijie, what concerned the council were not obscene or indecent scenes in films, but that white women (film actresses on the screen) should not expose their nude bodies to Chinese audiences.³⁷ He further points out that “Shanghai Chinese

³³ Hong, “Hong Shen zhengshi tiqi susong (The Formal Lawsuit of Hong Shen).”

³⁴ There were two major censorship institutions in Shanghai in the pre-war years – the Western censorship institutions -- mainly, the Shanghai Municipal Council, which started to censor films that were shown in foreign concessions from as early as the late 1910s or early 1920s. The Chinese Institutional Film Censorship Committee was set up in 1931 after the KMT came to power. Before the official Chinese censorship board was established, the mass media, college students, commercial organisations, educational institutions and overseas Chinese actively took part in criticising and sometimes protesting against certain films that were considered inappropriate. See: Tang Weijie, “Shanghai gonggong zujie dianying jiancha zhide de jianli (The Establishment of the Film Censorship in Shanghai International Settlement),” *Shanghai Wenhua (Shanghai Culture)* no. Autumn Supplement (2009): pp.110–130. Wang Chaoguang, “30 niandai chuqi de Minguo dianying jiancha zhidu (The Film Censorship of KMT Government in Early 1930s),” *Dianying yishu (Film Art)* no. 03 (1997). pp. 60-66. Wang Chaoguang, “Minguo dianying jiancha zhidu zhi lanshang (the Beginning of the Film Censorship System in the Republican China),” *Jindaishi yanjiu (Modern Chinese History Studies)*, no. 3 (2001): pp. 203–226.

³⁵ Yang Changxi, tran., “Lun dianying jiancha de yiyi (The Significance of Film Censorship),” in *Zhongguo Dianying Nianjian 1934 (Chinese Film Year Book 1934)*, Reprint (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe (China Radio and Television Publishing House), 2007). pp. 475-483.

Note: this article was a translation, however, the original title and author cannot be found. It is also unclear whether the translation sticks to the original article, because many translators at that time liked to add and delete some information from their translation according to their own interests.

³⁶ Tang Weijie, “Shanghai gonggong zujie dianying jiancha zhide de jianli (The Establishment of the Film Censorship in Shanghai International Settlement),” *Shanghai wenhua (Shanghai Culture)* no. Autumn Supplement (2009): pp. 110–130.

³⁷ Ibid.

audiences were seen as a social group with special moral conditions. No matter if the film was shown to Western audiences only or to both Chinese and white audiences, the ‘unique conditions of Shanghai’ insured the necessity of the existence of film censorship”.³⁸ Tang’s “unique conditions of Shanghai” reflect the conflicting space of foreign concessions, where the political power of different nations struggled and confronted each other.

It was in such complicated colonial cultural circumstances that different ethnic groups were claiming that the filmic representation of Chinese people was related to the dignity of the Chinese nation. Those Western films that portrayed Chinese people negatively urged the Chinese domestic film industry to create positive images of Chinese people.

2.2.2 The Social Power of Stars’ Screen Images

The serious attitudes of audiences towards film stars’ screen images were also partly due to their expectations of the social function of the film media. It was widely understood by early Chinese film audiences and filmmakers that the function of film was as an effective propaganda tool to a) model national identity and to b) represent the national spirit.³⁹ The willingness to establish a positive image of the nation appeared to be more urgent when considering the national humiliation that China had been facing since the late Qing. Contemporary Chinese film critics valued the social impact of films, including commercial movies, which could “inform peoples of other nations about the cultural characters of our country and preventing misunderstandings”⁴⁰ and “stimulate the patriotism of thousands and millions of

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ It was actually a universal phenomenon. Considering film mediums can reach mass audiences, early film critics all devoted much attention to its social function in both Western countries and China. As stated in *Early Cinema: From Factory Gate to Dream Factory*, in Western countries (including Britain, US and some other European countries), “many commentators began to make direct connections between what was seen on the cinema screen and trends in social behaviour” and “social commentators also advocated the use of cinema as a means of social instruction.” See: *Early Cinema: From Factory Gate to Dream Factory* (Simon Popple & Joe Kember, London: Wallflower Press, 2004). pp. 46-53.

⁴⁰ Yuwen, “Dianying de jiazhi jiqi shiming (The Values and Missions of Cinema),” *Yingguang (Silver Lights)* 5 (1927).

audiences”.⁴¹ For example, the film commentator Yuwen argues in a 1927 article that the functions of film are promoting the national characteristics of one’s own country, promoting the national culture for foreigners, introducing national customs and portraying the national spirit to foreigners.⁴² Therefore, film stars who gained a high degree of recognisability due to frequent appearances in films were seen as the active and effective agents to represent the ‘national spirit’.

Indeed, Hollywood star Harold Lloyd’s fame played an indispensable role in the engagement of the whole society in the social protest at the ‘*Welcome Danger Incident*’. Lloyd became an immediate target of social critics due to his high recognisability in Chinese society. This fame was of course partly due to the star-centred marketing strategy of the classical Hollywood studio system, where the star was the major selling point of a new film and thus the most well-known by general audiences. Due to Hollywood marketing strategies, Chinese audiences knew the star better than anyone else involved in film production. Thus, audiences would see Lloyd, the star, as the person responsible for the negative representation of overseas Chinese in this film. Lloyd also caught the attention of politically sensitive Chinese like Hong Shen, who worried that the star’s reputation would increase the positive reception of this film in foreign countries, reinforcing the discriminative stereotypes of Chinese in the minds of foreign audiences. This incident thus revealed that the impact of a stars’ social power was embedded in the degree of his or her recognisability.

Acknowledging that the star is also a real person, audience dissatisfaction with fictional screen characters was sometimes transformed into discontent towards the star. As Dyer suggests, although no audience would take the film star for the character he or she plays, they still consider “the roles and or performance of a star in a film were taken as revealing the personality of the star.”⁴³ The Harold Lloyd case revealed that audiences tended to blur the boundary between the screen image of the star and the star as a real person. Lloyd’s appearance in this film thus led Chinese audiences to consider him more or less embodying and endorsing the political

⁴¹ Li Bojin, “Lun dianying yu jiaoyu (On Cinema and Education),” *Yinxing (Silver Star)* no. 12 (1927).

⁴² Yuwen, “Dianying de jiazhi jiqi shiming (The Values and Missions of Cinema).”

⁴³ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979). p. 20.

message of racial discrimination towards overseas Chinese. Considering the visibility of film stars in society, the influence of their screen images (which was also constituted by inter-textual information from their previous films) often went beyond the silver screen.

Further illustrative of the relationship between the nationalist discourse and star images and fame, is the case of the Chinese-American star Anna May Wong, whose peculiar circumstances led to adoration and loathing in equal measure – an ambivalent reception clearly revealed by the respective responses from the Chinese media and the KMT government on the occasion of her trip back to her motherland.

2.2.3 Fame and Face: a Case Study on Chinese Audiences' Reception of Anna May Wong

Anna May Wong was the most well-known Chinese-American actress in early Hollywood films. Her career, spanning 30 years from the 1920s to the 1950s, covered different fields, including silent and sound films, and stage performance and TV and radio broadcasting in both America and Europe, which built her reputation as one of the first successful Asian-American actresses.⁴⁴ Chinese audiences saw her as “a Hollywood Chinese star”.⁴⁵

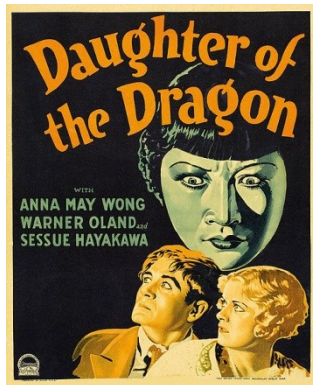


Figure 2.3. Poster of *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931)⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Karen J. Leong, “Anna May Wong and the British Film Industry”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, no. 23 (2006). pp. 13-22.

⁴⁵ Chen Binhong, “Cong Haolaiwu huilai (Come Back from Hollywood),” *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)* 1, no. 6 (December 1933). p. 37.

⁴⁶ “File:Poster - Daughter of the Dragon 01.jpg”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Poster_-_Daughter_of_the_Dragon_01.jpg.

Wong was born into a second-generation Chinese-American family in Los Angeles in 1905. She could not speak Mandarin Chinese, only Taishan Cantonese, the dialect her parents spoke, and she never visited China until 1936, at the age of 31.⁴⁷ Her early film career began with portrayals of stereotypical images of Oriental female characters, such as a Mongol slave girl (*The Thief of Baghdad*, 1924), an American Indian (*Peter Pan*, 1924) and an Eskimo (*The Alaskan*, 1924). Her Chinese roles were also stereotypical, mainly reflecting Hollywood's Oriental fantasies, including the 'Dragon Lady', the Oriental femme fatale in films like *Old San Francisco* (1927), *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) and the Madame Butterfly-type of tragic Oriental woman whose love toward a white man was always doomed (*Java Head*, 1934).⁴⁸ The characterisation and American and European media reports of Wong offer rich pickings for scholarly analysis, including issues such as the filmic representation of orientalism, America - China relations, and the racial policy of the Hollywood and European film industry.

I agree with Leong's observation that Anna May Wong raised "American concerns with race and Chinese concerns with nationalism".⁴⁹ Although Wong was recognised as highly Americanised, to the Chinese public her ethnicity and nationality were unquestionably Chinese – something that was emphasised in Chinese journal writings about her.⁵⁰ The fact of her Chinese descent accompanied by her international fame attracted Chinese audiences. For example, both Chinese audiences and the KMT government obsessed over Wong as her personal success in a film career could gain China a position in the global film industry,⁵¹ while at the same time, the Chinese public saw potential in her visibility on the world stage to help promote a positive image of China to overseas audiences. The Chinese press were often inclined to portray Wong as a cultural ambassador who introduced

⁴⁷ Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2005). pp. 59, 89.

⁴⁸ Wang Yiman, "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era", *Camera Obscura* 23, no. 3 (2005). p. 159.

⁴⁹ Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*. p. 93.

⁵⁰ Yiman Wang, "The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong's Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era", *Camera Obscura* 23, no. 3 (2005). p. 165.

⁵¹ Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*. p. 93.

Chinese culture to her social circle in Hollywood by hosting social occasions, such as accommodating guests in her house filled with Chinese antiques⁵² and treating them to dinner in an authentic Chinese restaurant.⁵³

This elevation to the pedestal of unofficial Chinese cultural ambassador is in sharp contrast to the reception Wong's stereotypical roles in Hollywood films received. Such roles were a constant source of disappointment to Chinese audiences, being condemned as insulting to the Chinese nation with the press criticising her low moral standards and lack of patriotism for trading national dignity for money and fame. For example, Wong was labelled a "[Chinese] daughter who lost her national soul (*guohun*)", a "Han traitor in Hollywood"⁵⁴ and one article in *Shenbao* described her as "a follower of mammon, without any sense of nationalism".⁵⁵ Even the journalist Chen Binhong, who had visited Wong and interviewed her family in Hollywood, criticised her for playing roles insulting to China in return for money and the reputation of a star.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, the Chinese press never abandoned their expectations of Wong's international reputation and always anticipated her 'self-awakening', hoping that one day the lost Chinese daughter would realise her love for the motherland and re-establish a positive image of Chinese people on screen. In line with this, the media sometimes falsely claimed that Wong had realised her faults and corrected them through learning authentic Chinese culture and restoring her identity as a person of Chinese descent.⁵⁷

Indeed Wong herself noticed the advantage of her international reputation and Chinese audiences' discontent towards her roles. In an interview during her visit to

⁵² Huang Jiamo, "Huang A-Mei nüshi de fannao (Lady Huang A Mei's Worrying)," *Dianying yuebao (Film Monthly)* no. 5 (August 1928).

⁵³ Zhen Hua, "Huang Liushuang sheyan (Huang Liushuang Hosting a Banquet)," *Shenbao* (Shanghai, December 25, 1932), sec. Dianying zengkan (Film Supplements).

⁵⁴ "Shile guohun de nü'er-Huang Liushuang (the Daughter Who Lost Her National Soul)," *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)*, 1933.

⁵⁵ Ailian, "Duiyu Huang Liushuang de xiwang (Some Hopes for Huang Liushuang)," *Shenbao* (Shanghai, December 22, 1932), sec. Dianying zengkan (Film Supplements).

⁵⁶ Chen Binhong, "Huang Liushuang zhide huanyin ma (Is Huang Liushuang Worthy (Our) Hospitality)," *Xiandai dianying (Modern Cinema)* no. 2 (February 15, 1936): pp. 22–23.

⁵⁷ Wusi, "Banxiaoshi fangwen Huang Liushuang (Half an Hour Interview with Huang Liushuang)," *Shenbao* (Shanghai, May 5, 1936), sec. Dianying zengkan (Film Supplements).

China in 1936, she claimed that her trip to the motherland was to learn more about the “real conditions of China” and that she was “hoping to contact various people, especially women in Chinese families”.⁵⁸ She also told the media that she would not want to play negative Chinese roles anymore, and at the same time she showed interest in taking part in films “portraying modern Chinese society and family”.⁵⁹ Wong’s statement implied that she followed the logic that knowing the real social conditions of China could help her portray more authentic Chinese characters in films. It also suggests that she felt that contemporary stories could better represent more authentic Chinese culture, which would be more popular with Chinese audiences at the time.⁶⁰

The criticism received by and expectation placed upon Wong by Chinese audiences reveals something about the popular understanding of the relationship between the on-screen image of a film star and nationalist discourses. Due to their high social visibility, stars’ on-screen images were not only restricted to fictional film characters, but were also considered ‘real’ and functional in terms of building the image of a nation that a particular star portrayed. Both Lloyd and Wong were Hollywood stars. Therefore, the Chinese could only attempt to control their social influence in reflecting the image of China and the Chinese through passive means such as censorship and outright bans. However, by creating its own stars, the Chinese film industry was able to create and represent an image of China and Chinese people which the Chinese public would like to see and identify with.

2.3 Different Nationalist Discourses and Types of Chinese Star Images

The Chinese film industry was formed and developed in a historical context when the country had been facing national humiliation from imperialist forces and domestic turmoil since the late nineteenth century. And it was also out of this same historical

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ However, Wong never made such films as she claimed in China. Her film roles in Hollywood and European studios were mostly limited to stereotypical characters. It is possible that this interview was her response to Chinese audiences and film commentators’ criticism of her.

context that nationalism, as the response to such national crises, began to emerge and proliferate.⁶¹ As Zhao Suisheng puts it, “modern Chinese history has been punctuated by numerous crises caused by domestic turmoil and foreign aggression. The resolution to all these crises had required nationalist action”.⁶² Thus, although nationalism is one of the central themes in modern Chinese history, its content and ways of expression were varied - different social forces, based on their different political interests, promulgated different types of nationalism.⁶³ The focus of nationalism was also shifting along with the changing political circumstances.

The issue of nationalism had an important role in the film industry, encouraging the creation of the film industry as a modern national industry and influencing the production and content of films. As stated above, as the content and expressions of nationalism changed in relation to shifting social circumstances, so too did the nationalist discourse reflected in the film industry change from time to time. Many film scholars have examined the issue of nationalism in the Chinese film industry, such as Hu Jubin’s account of the national cinema before 1949,⁶⁴ Zhang Yingjin’s discussion on Chinese national cinema from its beginnings to the modern day,⁶⁵ and many more on the cinema movements that were driven by different political parties (e.g. the CCP and the KMT) in the 1930s.⁶⁶ It is a shared view by film scholars that the content and perspective of nationalism in the film industry changed in relation to different stages in the film industry’s development and to varying social circumstances.

⁶¹ R.Keith Schoppa, *The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History*, The Columbia Guides to Asian History (New York: Columbia UP, 2000). p. 71.

⁶² Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2004). p. 19.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁴ Hu Jubin, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003).

⁶⁵ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶⁶ Such as: Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-37*, East Asian: History, Politics, Sociology, Culture (New York & London: Routledge, 2005); Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham & Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002); Laikwan Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s”, in Song Hwee Lim & Julian Ward. eds., *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London: BFI, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

This section will discuss the relationship between the changing nationalist discourses and film production. Firstly, I will articulate how performers were legitimised as advocates and representations of nationalistic discourses in their performance. Then I will examine how and what kinds of screen images of film stars were shaped in their socio-political context.

2.3.1 Nationalist Discourses on Actors: from Stage Drama to the Silver Screen

The discussion on actors and nationalism should be examined in the context of the reform of the traditional play and the spoken drama movement beginning in the early 20th century. Modern intellectuals of the 20th century saw drama as an effective way to enlighten society.⁶⁷ As early as 1904, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) had already “equated the reform of society with the reform of drama.”⁶⁸ The nationalist discourse on film stars appeared and was influenced by the social discourse on Peking Opera and spoken drama actors.

Younger performers of Peking Opera such as Mei Lanfang, along with new scholars, endeavoured to promote the traditional entertainment form as a symbol of Chinese national culture. Actors of Peking Opera then became the protectors, promoters and carriers of the legacy of national culture and national pride. In a 1936 journal article, Sun Danhan declared that “*Jingju* (Peking Opera), it propagates our nation’s ancient moral values. It uses the remnants of history to rectify the hearts of people in this modern era...Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and their kindred actors have carried it across the ocean”.⁶⁹ Peking Opera star Mei Lanfang’s performances overseas in Japan (1919 and 1924), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union

⁶⁷ Gilbert C.F. Fong, “*Western Influence and the Rise of Modern Chinese Drama*”, in Yun-tong Luk, *Studies in Chinese-Western Comparative Drama* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1990). p.1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Sun Danhan, “Jingju? Pingju? Jiuju? Guoju? (Peking Opera? Ping Opera? Old Opera? National Opera?),” *Xiju Shuangzhoukan (Drama Biweekly)* (1936).

(1935) also consolidated his reputation as a representative of Chinese national culture.⁷⁰

The first participants in the practice of spoken drama were students from Western-style schools⁷¹ - the same place, including universities, where spoken drama found its most supportive audiences and from where many actors also appeared.⁷² These educated actors were not satisfied with their role as “moulders of public opinion” (to reform the society through their performance in educational plays), so they “participated, both politically and militarily, in revolutionary movements”.⁷³ New intellectuals who patronised this drama and dominated the mass media had also made efforts to create positive discourse on it and its actors. Thus, a patriotic image of spoken drama actors was established. When spoken drama performers joined film production, their patriotic image and political appeals were automatically transferred to the film world. During the Left-wing Film Movement (1932-1937), former left-wing drama performers like Wang Yin and Shu Xiuwen (1915-1969) also worked in the film world.⁷⁴

It was in such a cultural background that actors were recognised by society as the legal representative of Chinese people, and their images were seen as the representation of the national spirit. That is not to say that the nationalist discourse on film stars was a simple extension and appropriation of the same discourse on spoken drama and opera stars. The film medium and the industry’s immanent characteristics presented a different nationalist discourse on images of film stars compared to images of stage stars. The screen image of the film actor was seen as more realistic, whereas the stage actor’s performance was more dramatic and

⁷⁰ A.C. Scott, *Mei Lan-Fang: The Life and Times of a Peking Actor* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1971). pp. 103-113.

⁷¹ The earliest spoken drama group – the Spring Willow Dramatic Society (*chunliushe*) was founded by overseas Chinese students in Tokyo in 1906. Mackerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day*. p. 117.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁷⁴ Ouyang Sheng, “Nining zhongde zhandou:yingshi huiyilu (The Battle in the Mud:Memoire on Film Caer),” in *Zhongguo Zuoyi Yundong (Chinese Left-wing Film Movement)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1993). p. 862.

exaggerated.⁷⁵ And, with film's ability to reach far bigger audiences, the image of film stars was conceived as the more ideal representation of the authentic image of Chinese people and the national spirit.

2.3.2 Screen Images of Stars in the 1920s⁷⁶

Hu Jubin argues that the major concern of the early Chinese film industry was to strengthen the Chinese economy, terming Chinese national cinema of the 1920s as "industrial nationalism",⁷⁷ reflective of a period when Chinese filmmakers endeavoured to make films in order to increase competitiveness with imported Western films in the domestic market. While refusing to use the same terminology, Zhang Yingjin makes a similar observation that by the 1920s, film had become an emergent cultural industry in China.⁷⁸

In the initial stage of the Chinese film industry's development (the first half of the 1920s), the main purpose was to build a national film industry to protect the domestic market - something which could be regarded as a nationalist endeavour. Therefore, Chinese filmmakers created a range of Chinese equivalents of screen images from popular Western films, especially Hollywood films. The "industrial nationalism" did not necessarily concern itself with inserting nationalistic ideologies into the narratives of films themselves.⁷⁹

From the mid-1920s, the focus of nationalism shifted due to changing socio-political circumstances, and the new focus influenced film production. New focuses of nationalist sentiments were then represented in new film genres as well as new stars' screen images.

⁷⁵ Zheng Zhengqiu, "Xinjujia buneng yan yingxi ma (Couldn't New Dramatists Play in Films)," *Mingxing gongsi tekan "Feng Dashaoye" hao* (Special Issue for Film "Feng Dashaoye" from *Mingxing Studio*) no. 4 (1925).

⁷⁶ The scarcity of original 1920s film texts creates much difficulty in discussing the screen images of stars in this time period. There are only a few film titles available nowadays, and the biggest stars like Yang Naimei, Zhang Zhiyun, and Wang Hanlun rarely appear in these existing films. Therefore, I have to depend on comparatively more accessible written materials, such as film promotional materials, fan magazines, film stills and film reviews to discuss stars' screen images.

⁷⁷ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 20.

⁷⁸ Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. p. 57.

⁷⁹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 48

2.3.2.1 Early to mid-1920s: 'Europeanised' Star Images

Both Hollywood films and Shanghai's popular literature and drama which were influenced by foreign literature and ideologies had an impact on the production of Chinese cinema in the first half of the 1920s.

To compete with Hollywood and defend the domestic film market, the Chinese film industry adopted the strategy of imitating popular Hollywood films and creating Chinese versions of popular Hollywood stars, e.g. Chinese slapstick stemmed from American popular slapstick.⁸⁰ Film studios hoped the 'Chinese Harold Lloyd' would compete with his more-famous Hollywood counterpart. Considering the huge popularity of D.W. Griffith's melodrama films in the Chinese market,⁸¹ the Mingxing Film Company started to make their own melodramas. *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (*Gu'er jiuzuji*) was a hugely popular family melodrama that saved the studio from bankruptcy.⁸² As Sha Dan notes, owing to the reception in China for Griffith's star Lillian Gish, and her importance for film marketing, Mingxing's founder, Zhang Shichuan, also started to look for his own 'Lillian Gish'.⁸³ The eventual lead actress in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* was Wang Hanlun, who went on to become known as the "Chinese Lillian Gish".⁸⁴

Adaptations of popular literature were also common in this period. Many films adapted translated literature and set the story in a Chinese city, for example, the storyline of *A String of Pearls* (*Yichuan zhenzhu*, 1925) was based on Maupassant's short story *Necklace*,⁸⁵ and the film *Orchid in the Valley* (*Konggulan*, 1925) was

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸¹ Dan Sha, "Lilian Jixu de meiying: qingjieju, beiju nümingxing yu Zhongguo dianyingye de chuxing (The Shadow of Lilian Gish: Melodrama, Tragedy Female Stars and the Beginning of Chinese Film Industry)," *Yishu pinglun* (*Art Criticism*) no. 7 (2010). pp. 35-40.

⁸² Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1997). p. 62.

⁸³ Sha, "Lilian Jixu de meiying: qingjieju, beiju nümingxing yu Zhongguo dianyingye de chuxing (The Shadow of Lilian Gish: Melodrama, Tragedy Female Stars and the Beginning of Chinese Film Industry)."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 57

adapted from Japanese novelist Kuroiwa Ruikou's story.⁸⁶ Popular writers also adapted their popular fictions into film scripts and wrote scripts for film studios, e.g. *Jade Pear Spirit* (*Yulihun*, 1924),⁸⁷ and *Little Friends* (*Xiaopengyou*, 1925).⁸⁸ It is a shared view that many popular writers were influenced by both traditional Chinese vernacular literature and other popular urban fiction in foreign countries that emerged during the Industrial Revolution.⁸⁹ Therefore, Western influences were could also be found in films written by writers of this literary school.

As mentioned in chapter 1, Shanghai's drama culture also influenced the production of early films. Playwrights of civilised plays like Zheng Zhengqiu also participated in film production. They made film adaptations of popular civilised plays (e.g. *Zhang Xinsheng*, 1922), and wrote stories for films which contained similar themes in their earlier civilised plays, such as family melodrama "expressed Western ideas such as free courtship and the emancipation of women".⁹⁰

From the accounts above, it is clear that many films made in the first half of the 1920s were more or less influenced by foreign culture. Director Shi Dongshan noted (1902-1955) that learning from foreign culture was termed as "*ouhua* (Europeanised)" in his time.⁹¹ *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* also defines *ouhua* in a similar way. It shows that films made by filmmakers who had received Western-style education and preferred American films were "Europeanised", because their "Europeanised" background determined their production principles.⁹² 'Europeanised' characteristics could be found in film stories, costumes (modern and often Western

⁸⁶ Yueh-yu Yeh, "'Wenyi' yu Zhongguo zaoqi dianying de shengchan yu yinxiao: yige fangfa lun de kaiqi" ('wenyi' and the Production and Marketing of Early Chinese Films: The Start of a Methodology)," in *Huayu dianying gongye: fangfa yu lishi de xin tansuan* (*Rethinking Chinese Film Industry: New Histories New Methods*) (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2011). pp. 46-47.

⁸⁷ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*). p. 64.

⁸⁸ Yeh, "'Wenyi' yu Zhongguo zaoqi dianying de shengchan yu yinxiao: yige fangfa lun de kaiqi" ('wenyi' and the Production and Marketing of Early Chinese Films: The Start of a Methodology)." p. 46.

⁸⁹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 55

⁹¹ Shi Dongshan, "Ouhua zongshi buhao de ma? (Is Europeanisation Always Bad?)," *Xiandai Dianying* (*Modern Screen*) no. 3 (1933).

⁹² Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*). p. 76.

fashion)⁹³ and settings (e.g. setting in the metropolitan Shanghai including dancing hall)⁹⁴. In this context, ‘Europeanisation’ actually means Westernisation or modernisation. Thus, ‘Europeanised’ (actually modernised or Westernised) star screen images were created for these film genres.

Stars in these films were often advertised as ‘modern’ men and women well acquainted with a Westernised lifestyle and education, reinforced through their characters’ ‘modern’ values. For example, the film star *Miss FF* (Miss Foreign Fashion) [Yin Mingzhu] was well-known for her Western fashion, Western-style education, and liberal, and sometimes bold behaviour including horseracing, car-driving, swimming and dancing.⁹⁵ In her debut film, *Sea Vows* (*Haishi*, 1922), she portrayed a young girl who falls in love with a poor artist. Although she was once tempted by her rich cousin and was about to marry him, she finally awoke to the call of her true love and reunited with her penniless lover.⁹⁶ As in this example, the pursuit of true love and free courtship and marriage were all popular topics raised during the New Culture Movement. Ying’s portrayal of the love-pursuing modern girl in the film was all the more convincing due to her personal reputation as a fashionably dressed, educated, modern beauty.

Further examples of such ‘modern’ figures of the 1920s were to be found throughout the media, e.g. *Film Magazine* (*Dianying zazhi*).⁹⁷ It promoted actresses Zhuang Chanzhen (?-?) and Fu Manli (?-?) as ‘new women’ who had received a

⁹³ Shi, “Ouhua zongshi buhao de ma ? (Is Europeanisation Always Bad?).”

⁹⁴ Yu Dafu, “Ruhe jiudu Zhongguo de dianying (How to Save Chinese Cinema),” *Yinxing* (*Silver Star*) no. 13 (1927).

⁹⁵ Zheng Yimei, *Yingtian Jiuwen - Dan Duyu he Yin Mingzhu* (*Old News from the Filmdom - Dan Duyu and Yin Mingzhu*) (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House), 1982). p. 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Dianying zazhi* (*Film Magazine*) was a monthly film magazine firstly published in May 1924. It was published by *Chenshe* (The Morning Society), and stopped after 13 issues in 1925. In the reprinted version from microfilm, there was no information of publishing date available.

See: quanguo tushuguan wenxian weisuo fuzhi zhongxin(china national microfilming center for library resorces), *Zhongguo zaoqi dianying huakan* (Early Chinese Film Pictorials), vol. 2, *Zhongguo wenxian zhenben congshu* (Series of China Rare Documents) (Beijing: China national microfilming center for library resorces, 2004). pp. 167-169.

“*Dianying zazhi* (*Film Magazine*),” *Shanghai Memory*, accessed June 18, 2012, http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/book/book_introduction.jsp?bookId=11248.

modern education and graduated from girls' schools.⁹⁸ Another actress Zhao Jingxia promoted by this magazine, graduated from the most prestigious Shanghai girls' college, McTyeire School (*zhongxi nüshu*), and once taught at Qinghua Girls' School (*Qinghua nüxiao*).⁹⁹

2.3.2.2 Mid-1920s to Early 1930s: Stars of Traditional Costume Films and Martial Arts Films

The mid to late 1920s saw traditional costume and martial arts films become popular. There were many sub-genres of these two main categories. Traditional costume films were extremely popular during 1925-1927, comprising mainly of adaptations of popular history (*yeshi*), classical literature, folktales, legends and traditional operas.¹⁰⁰ Another similar genre popular at the same time was *baishi pian* (films based on popular accounts of history), which adapted the same content as costume films. The difference between the two genres is that *baishi pian* were often set in modern times while using a storyline from ancient China whereas traditional costume films were mainly based on classic stories and used traditional costume.¹⁰¹

Martial arts films, which began to flourish from 1927,¹⁰² are considered to have developed from traditional costume films by introducing martial arts content into the original costume film format. Although not all martial arts films were adapted from traditional legends (e.g. the film *The Great Knight-Errant of Aviation* (*Hangkong daxia*, 1928) was set in modern times), this genre expressed a "chivalrous (*xiayi*)" sense rooted in Chinese folk tradition in the form of "righting wrongs in accordance with heaven's decree" (*titian xingdao*), "having a strong sense of obligation" (*yiqi weixian*), "suppressing the strong and aiding the weak" (*chuqiang furuo*), and "taking

⁹⁸ "Zhuang Chanzhen nüshi xiaoshi (A Brief Biography of Mrs Zhuang Chanzhen)," *Dianying zazhi* (Film Magazine), no. 7, 1924. "Fu Manli Nüshi Xiaoshi (A Brief Biography of Mrs Fu Manli)," *Dianying zazhi* (Film Magazine), no. 7, 1924.

⁹⁹ "Zhao Jingxia nüshi (Mrs Zhao Jingxia)," *Dianying zazhi* (Film Magazine), no. 10, 1925.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009). p. 25.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*. p. 131.

up the cudgels for the injured party” (*lujian buping badao xiangzhu*).¹⁰³ The ghost-spirit films (*shenguai pian*), which contain fantasy elements, appeared around the same time as martial arts films, including *The Cave of the Silken Coil* (*Pansi dong*, 1927), an adaption from the classical fantasy tale, *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*, 16th century). The subsequent hybrid genre, martial arts-ghost spirit film (*wuxia shenguai pian*), also achieved huge commercial success.

The fashioning of traditional costume and martial arts films was partly a result of commercial competition. When films with contemporary themes and European-style costumes and sets dominated the market in the early half of the 1920s, the Tianyi Film Company continued, as it had done since its foundation in 1925, to specialise in traditional costume films and martial arts films to compete for its market share.¹⁰⁴ These films not only became popular in the domestic market, but also had a considerable share in the South East Asian film market.¹⁰⁵ Tianyi’s success inspired more companies to begin the production of such genres with more Chinese features.

Regarding the ideological aspect, Hu Jubin maintains that the prevalent socio-political circumstances influenced the emergence and popularity of these genres, arguing that nationalism served as the trigger for the traditional costume film movement.¹⁰⁶ He suggests that the May 30th Movement¹⁰⁷ directly influenced the production and popularity of traditional costume films as national anti-imperialist sentiment and patriotism caused by the movement led to dissatisfaction with the earlier “Europeanised” films and further inspired the film industry to make films that embodied more apparent characteristics of Chinese culture and spirit.¹⁰⁸ Such a production trend was seen as the film industry’s response to audience demands for

¹⁰³ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949*. p. 70.

¹⁰⁴ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. pp. 24-25.

¹⁰⁵ Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005). p. 199.

¹⁰⁶ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 62-74.

¹⁰⁷ On May 15th 1925, owners of a Japanese cotton mill murdered a communist worker Gu Zhenghong who had been active in the CCP-led strikes earlier the same year in Shanghai. His death stirred up further social discontent and a larger-scale protest supported by college students. On 30th May, the Shanghai Municipal police arrested leaders of a student protest and fired into marching students and workers on Nanjing Road. This massacre shocked the whole nation and led to demonstrations and riots across China.

¹⁰⁸ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 62-65.

“spiritual comfort” after the May 30th Movement.¹⁰⁹ Hu also argues that the Northern Expedition, waged by the KMT and the CCP to eliminate warlords and achieve national unification, inspired the production of martial arts films.¹¹⁰ Although these commercial genres were entertaining, they simultaneously served the contemporary national project by retelling the heroic deeds of China’s past.¹¹¹

These films often claimed that their goals were to establish positive images of Chinese historical legendary heroes, which could encourage audiences who were disappointed by the real social circumstances of imperialist oppression and the turmoil caused by wars among warlords. The traditional costume film delivered the message that the Chinese people, although currently facing the prospect of military and political failure, had maintained a great national spirit since ancient times. Many film studio publications expressed a desire to make traditional costume films that displayed their patriotic sentiment and sense of national pride. For example, Mingxing studio expressed such ideas in one of their 1926 promotional magazines:

...we could send them (Chinese-made historical films) overseas and show them off...to let those who never understand us know (our history)... (And) to surprise them that we also have a powerful, heroic and brave national spirit.¹¹²

...European and American countries, they all know that China is an ancient country, and (they all) want to learn about the great people from Chinese history. When they are short of convincing resources and evidence (of these Chinese historical figures and legends), the historical films of big production...with concise Western language subtitles...would let European and American people know the (national) spirit from our history and heroes...I suppose that the European and Americans’ attitude toward Chinese people would

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 65-68.

¹¹⁰ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 69-74. Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*. pp.131-133.

¹¹¹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 62-74.

¹¹² Chen Zhiqing, “Duiyu shezhi guzhuang pian zhi wo jian (My Opinions on Making Traditional Costume Films)”, “*Daoyi zhi jiao*” *te kan (Special Issue of “Daoyi Zhi Jiao”)* (1926).

change from disdain to respect (after viewing these films)...¹¹³

Chinese audiences saw Hollywood historical costume adventure films adapted from fiction as genuine historical accounts, e.g. *The Prison of Zenda* (1922) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924),¹¹⁴ and considered these films to “bring the situations of the past to contemporary audiences.”¹¹⁵ By the same logic, the traditional costume film was still seen as a representation of the Chinese national character, despite the fact that the classical Chinese literature and folktales that such films were based on contained few historical facts.

The popularity of Hollywood adventure, fantasy and action films such as *The Three Musketeers* (1921) and *The Thief of Baghdad*,¹¹⁶ also inspired Chinese producers to make martial arts and traditional costume films.¹¹⁷ Predominantly based on commercial considerations, “Chinese filmmakers attempted to cash in on the popularity (of Western adventure epics and costume pictures) by creating a Chinese equivalent of these same genres”¹¹⁸ while simultaneously declaring that the production of Chinese martial arts and costume films was due to a sense of national pride. To make and watch Chinese martial arts films was seen as a method to inherit the heroic spirit from warriors and great people of the past – a spirit expected to help restore national pride. Filmmaker Chen Zhiqing (1897-?) discusses the necessity of making traditional costume films with such objectives in mind in a 1926 article:

We see (costume films, historical films and adventure films made by Westerners) and admire how mighty other people’s ancestors were, and what great success they achieved...It seems we do not know the great achievements that our fathers and ancestors reached. If we now could make sound

¹¹³ Tian Xiao, “Lishi yingpian zhi taolun (Discussions on Historical Films)”, *Mingxing gongsi tekan* (*Special Issues of Mingxing Film Studio*) (1926).

¹¹⁴ Zhu, “Lun guzhuangju - shenguaiju yu lishiju (Discuss Traditional Costume Films - God-Spirit Films and Historical Films),” “*Meiren ji*” *tekan* (*Special Publication for “Sexual Trap”*) no. 1927

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. p. 24.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

traditional costume films, then those (who admire foreigners)
would not only admire others...¹¹⁹

Although not explicitly stated here, it could be concluded that Cheng was discontent with the popularity of Hollywood adventure and action films among Chinese audiences and hoped to encourage and restore a sense of national pride and self-confidence through making films about Chinese historical heroes for contemporary audiences to identify with.

These films did not aim to represent the details of history, but to emphasise the spirit of the Chinese nation. Therefore the historical facts, including costume design, characters and events, were not required to be accurate or authentic. Both filmmakers and audiences had even greater tolerance for flexibility in adaptations based on classical literature and folktales. Accordingly, film studios normally employed two production strategies: “*xiju hua* (use of costumes and sets from traditional opera as the model for film production)” and “rewriting classic stories for the needs of the contemporary situation”.¹²⁰ Filmmakers admitted that neither audiences nor actors had first-hand experience of such historical figures and so impressions and portrayals thereof – in terms of dress and demeanour – were informed mainly by traditional performing arts.

In terms of the storyline, modern ideologies were often added to classic stories. For example, when considering adapting the story *Fengyi Pavilion* (*Fengyi Ting*) from the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*, 14th century). Mingxing Film Studio filmmakers and consultants agreed to rewrite the story. The heroine, Diao Chan, was to be portrayed from their modern point of view as a “patriotic and affectionate woman”.¹²¹ This approach seems to have been supported more generally with film critic Tian Xiao concluding that when adapting a classic

¹¹⁹ Chen, “Duiyu shezhi guzhuang pian zhi wo jian (My Opinions on Making Traditional Costume Films)”.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Tianxiao, “Lishi yingpian zhi taolun (Discussions on Historical Films)”, Mingxing gongsi tekan (Special Issues of Mingxing Film Studio) (1926)

story, it should be done “according to new morals and new ideology, and not to stick to the outdated (classic) novels.”¹²²

Before this trend of adapting traditional stories reached film screens, it had already appeared on the stage. From the late nineteenth century, contemporary social issues, especially politics, had been addressed in stage performances of classical stories. For example, playwright and actor Wang Xiaonong (1858-1918) played a role from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in 1895 which criticised the contemporary politician Li Hongzhang and his foreign policy.¹²³ His later Peking Opera script, *The Revolutionaries' Tombstone* (*Dangrenbei*, 1901), implied the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) through a story set during the Song Dynasty.¹²⁴ This trend in drama also continued into the 1920s as many writers produced new scripts with social and political messages lacking in traditional Peking Opera.¹²⁵ Familiar narratives of classic stories about China's past now received a “critical twist” to convey new moral messages.¹²⁶ For example, in theatre reformer Ouyang Yuqian's (1889-1962) new Peking Opera script, *Pan Jinlian* (1927), the beautiful but evil female protagonist, Pan Jinlian, from the classic novel *Water Margin* (14th century), who poisoned her husband in an arranged marriage, is presented as an oppressed woman, resistant of the feudal system, struggling for her life.¹²⁷ The contemporary theme in classical stories also appeared in the world of spoken drama. For example, Guo Moruo's (1892-1978) historical drama *Zhuo Wenjun* (1926) added “the new life of modern times to historical facts.”¹²⁸ As Shanghai opera theatre and vaudeville normally had close relations with the film industry, the production trend in drama might also influence the film adaptations of classical stories.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Natascha Gentz, “The Appropriation of Tragedies in Meiji Japan and Late Qing China,” in Olga Lomová, ed. *Paths Toward Modernity: Conference to Mark the Centenary of Jaroslav Průšek* (Prague: Charles University in Prague, The Karolinum Press, 2008). p. 227.

¹²⁴ Yan Quanyi, “Qingmo jingju gailiang wenxue de chengguo yu buzhu (the Achievements and Disadvantages of the Peking Opera Reform in the Late Qing)”, *Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of College of Chinese Traditional Opera* 26), no. 2 (May 2005). p. 85.

¹²⁵ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870 - 1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 180.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

¹²⁸ Chen, “Duiyu shezhi guzhuang pian zhi wo jian (My Opinions on Making Traditional Costume Films)”

All in all, most traditional costume films had a modern core, which aimed at fulfilling the needs of contemporary audiences. Martial arts films were also designed to meet the requirements of contemporary audiences. Heroes who punished villains and brought peace to good people in films satisfied audiences, because such things generally did not happen in real life.¹²⁹ As Hu argues, “the martial arts films of the 1920s invoked not so much the martial arts themselves, but a martial spirit that could be used to boost the morale of the Chinese public.”¹³⁰

Accordingly, the making of the star image of traditional costume and martial arts film stars was in fact to create an idealised image of Chinese men and women for the contemporary imagination which had less to do with traditional aesthetics. For example, the much-loved, delicate, gentle, sometimes fragile, traditional ideal female beauty and gentleman were considered wholly unsuitable for both traditional costume and martial arts films. According to film critics in 1927:

Those beautiful men who could be blown down when walking, and beautiful women who are small and delicate, could not find roles in traditional costume films...directors of traditional costume films should base their casting choices on the position and personality of the characters in films and choose “robust and sound beauty”. (Directors) should never take the currently popular “sick beauty”, as the measure.¹³¹

The national character of Chinese people is too peaceful, too agreeable, too cowardly, too conservative, and too inanimate, with too much emphasis on the soul and ignoring the flesh. Those disadvantages are reflected in films. Leading actresses look ill from ‘much sorrow and much sickness’ (*duochou duobing*)...while leading actors are featured as ‘feminine’ and gentle. This is the legacy that our Eastern culture bestows on us. Filmmakers, if you were all to agree that film is art, and art is the pioneer of the times, you should abandon the former actors of sickness. We need physically strong, spiritually heroic, emotionally passionate, and lively attractive characters.¹³²

¹²⁹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 69.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³¹ Cheng Zhiqing, “Lun she zhi guzhuang ying ju (Discussions on the Production of Traditional Costume Films)”, (*Maiyou Lang Duzhan Huakui*) *Shen Zhou Film Company Special Issue* (1927).

¹³² Cao Jin, “Zhongguo dianying yu yishu (Chinese Film and Art),” *Zhongguo dianying zazhi* (China Film Magazine) 1, no. 8 (1927).

From the quotations above, we see that filmmakers and critics transformed their dissatisfaction with social reality (e.g. China's reputation as the Sick man of the East) into expectations of film characters and actors. Therefore, robust men and women trained in different physical techniques including martial arts became popular. The most famous among them were Wu Lizhu (1908-74), nicknamed "the Oriental female Fairbanks", and Xu Qinfang (1907-1985), known by her role in the series of films, *The Swordswoman from Huangjiang* (*Huangjiang nüxia*, 1930).

A publicity story supporting starlet Li Dandan's (1910-1998) role in the costume martial arts film *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan congjun*, 1928) discloses the main trends in star image-making. Like many other daughters of middle-upper class families in the city, Li Dandan graduated from the prestigious McTyeire School for Girls.¹³³ As mentioned before, earlier generation of stars who graduated from the same school, such as Yang Naimei and Yin Mingzhu, were promoted as Europeanised. But when Li Dandan took part in the Minxing Film Company's new take on the classic legend of the woman warrior, Hua Mulan, in *Mulan Joins the Army*, she was described as a brave and courageous girl with martial arts skills and a warrior's spirit. It was reported that when 18 years old, Li had received training in archery, boxing, fencing, horse-riding and the use of knives, spears and sabres in preparation for her role as the female warrior. A story in the press just prior to the film's release added to the much-hyped martial spirit of the young actress. The story detailed how whilst on location, one night a pair of thieves stole a strongbox containing the money to finance the production and sped off in the accountant's car. When the alarm was sounded, Li Dandan jumped onto a horse, chased the thieves and, taking a short cut blocked their escape route over the bridge. It was reported that the petite girl with "special martial arts skills" and "heroic courage" confronted the thieves and tossed them off the bridge and into the river below.¹³⁴

The authenticity of this story is unclear and it is interesting to note the focus on Li's extraordinary courage and martial arts skills – attributes also integral to the classical image of the woman-warrior Mulan. The whole story reads more like an

¹³³ Patti Gully, *Sisters of Heaven: China's Barnstorming Aviatrices: Modernity, Feminism, and Popular Imagination in Asia and the West* (San Francisco: Long River Press, 2008). p. 125.

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 130-131.

action segment in a movie of a popular hybrid martial arts genre, full of horse car-chasing and martial arts scenes. It also seems reasonable to suggest that the story was most likely fabricated publicity conjured up by the film studio. Another aspect casting doubt on the story's provenance was that driving was not a common skill in China during that time and driving bandits, while not impossible, seem somewhat unlikely.

The male villains who relied on the modern automobile to commit the crime were defeated by the girl who was skilful in traditional Chinese martial arts and depended on pre-modern horse-riding skills. It coincided with the potential theme of the film version *Mulan Joins the Army* and hints at the function of all traditional costume films and martial arts films made in the late 1920s – to create a fantasy in which the cultural and spiritual legacy from the glorious and heroic deeds of China's past could overcome the contemporary social difficulties and oppression brought by advanced Western and modern technology (e.g. modern transportations and weapons) and the looming imperialists of China's present. Although this film did not succeed at the box-office, because a rival film company released another version of *Mulan* just two weeks before Minxing's version, Li Dandan's reputation as a skilful performer and future star was still firmly established.¹³⁵

Although filmmakers had always attempted to promote positive images of costume films and martial arts films, negative appraisals were not uncommon. In more general terms, the production quality of these films was continually questioned by critics. As discussed earlier, filmmakers presented their reasons for adapting opera costumes and modern themes in their traditional costume and martial arts films, yet such production strategies were often seen as low in quality and taste for these films did not respect the historical truth.¹³⁶ More specifically, the acting of martial arts sequences was criticised for being naïve and unspectacular;¹³⁷ the almost pornographic content in some martial arts films, especially those with fantasy

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

¹³⁶ Sun Shiyi, "Dianying jie de gu ju feng kuang zheng (The Traditional Movie Craze in the Filmworld)". *Yinxing (Silver Star)*, no. 3 (1926).

¹³⁷ Li Ying, "Wuxiapian de jiegou wenti- ying tichang de liyou, suo shibai de yuanyin (the Structure of Martial Arts Films: The Reasons for Its Promotion, the Reasons for Its Failure)," *Yingxi shenghuo(movie Weekly)*, 1931.

elements, such as the nearly-nude beauties in *The Cave of Silken Coil*, was deemed “morally corrupt”;¹³⁸ the subject matter - mainly adaptations of historical stories and fantasies - was also attacked for propagating feudal thoughts and for not being sufficiently modern.¹³⁹ From the leftists’ perspective, such films were believed to cater to audiences’ low taste for money¹⁴⁰ and for “transforming revolutionary class struggle into private feuds”.¹⁴¹ The ghost-spirit film was criticised as superstitious for its supernatural content (e.g. flying demons).¹⁴² In addition to the predominantly aesthetic concerns of film commentators and critics, the KMT authority and its supporters shared a grave concern that these genres might spread the seed of rebellion and “a savage heroism” among the young and lower working classes (e.g. factory workers and peasants) creating potentially widespread social instability.¹⁴³

Finally, due to a combination of all these shortcomings, the KMT government began to limit the production and release of these genres, and guide film companies into making new genres from the early 1930s onwards.¹⁴⁴ Subsequently, when the Japanese invaded in 1931, the call for a military and politically strong modern nation became the main theme of popular social ideology. The theme and fashion of film production shifted accordingly.

2.3.3 Screen Images in the 1930s

Mirroring the socio-political landscape at the time, Chinese cinema of the 1930s was in a state of flux. This saw a changing of the guard as the old made way for the new, in terms of film technology, subject matter and personnel. When silent Hollywood films became less readily available due to the advent of sound from 1927 onwards,

¹³⁸ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. pp. 39-40.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁴⁰ Sun, “Dianying jie de gu ju feng kuang zheng (The Traditional Movie Craze in the Filmdom)”.

¹⁴¹ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. p. 40.

¹⁴² Taipu Jin, “Shenguaipian chajin hou - jinhou de dianyingjie xiang nali zou? (after the Ban on Ghost-spirit Films: Where Should the Filmdom Go in the Future?)”, *Yingxi shenghuo (Movie Weekly)*, 1931.

¹⁴³ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*; p. 41. Jin, “Shenguaipian chajin hou - jinhou de dianyingjie xiang nali zou? (After the Ban on Ghost-spirit Films: Where Should the Filmdom Go in the Future?)”. Kristine Harris, “The Romance of the Western Chamber and the Classical Subject Film in 1920s Shanghai”, in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). p. 56.

¹⁴⁴ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. pp. 42-43.

most Shanghai film theatres were not yet prepared with the necessary sound projection equipment to show talkies. And, for those theatres which did show sound films, the English dialogue therein alienated much of the Chinese audience. Shanghai film studios seized this opportunity to make more silent films to fill the market niche, whilst at the same time they began to experiment with Chinese-language sound films.¹⁴⁵ Thus, film actors who could speak the language commonly used in the films - Mandarin Chinese - naturally replaced silent film stars, becoming the new favourite stars of the market.

The changing social circumstances also led to new themes in films in the 1930s. Pang Laikwan observes that “it is now generally agreed that nationalism is one of the key defining features of Shanghai cinema of the 1930s”,¹⁴⁶ a period which saw a worsening of the national crisis due to the Japanese invasion and consequent anticipation of war.¹⁴⁷ The crisis roused nationalist sentiment among the public and the survival of the nation became the major concern of nationalism during this time.¹⁴⁸ The national crisis also drew audience attention from romantic fantasies of swordsmen and swordswomen to social reality. In order to respond to the new market demands, studios began to make films with patriotic messages. New stars

¹⁴⁵ One of the illustrative examples is the rise of the Lianhua Film Company. The mogul of film distribution in Northern China, Luo Mingyou (who owned more than twenty movie theatres by 1930) decided to establish his own studio to make silent films to supply his silent movie theatres when Hollywood, the previous major supplier of Luo’s theatres, changed production interests to the innovative sound films. Luo co-founded the Lianhua Film Company with Li Minwei, the owner of Minxing Film Company in 1930. This new company integrated four existing studios and became the biggest film studio at the time, besides Minxing. The rest were Dazhonghua Baihe, Shanghai Yingxi and Xianggang Yingye. Meanwhile, the astute businessman sent his filmmakers and technicians to Hollywood to purchase new sound film equipment and learned to make sound films. The studio’s integration with music educator Li Jinhui’s Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe into its “Lianhua Song and Dance Troupe” in the early 1930s was not only a preparation for future sound film production, but also trained students of the song and dance troupe who would later become the big stars of the Chinese screen in the 1930s.

See: Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham & Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002). pp. 24-25.

¹⁴⁶ Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s”. p. 57.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 56.

¹⁴⁸ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p.26.

were born with new genres, and some stars from the 1920s managed to change their star images in order to fit into new characters.¹⁴⁹

Although the film star system of the mid-1930s could not yet have been called ‘mature’ (this would not be the case until the late 1930s - early 1940s), the highly competitive filmmaking environment in the 1930s encouraged different studios to cultivate their own stars to attract audiences. A new generation of stars, including Wang Renmei, Li Lili (1915-2005), Zhao Dan (1915-1980), Zheng Junli (1911-1969), Gao Zhanfei (1904-1969), entered the film world in the early 1930s, marking it “the first Golden Age of early Chinese cinema”.¹⁵⁰

2.3.3.1 The CCP and the KMT’s Nationalist Film Movements

The crisis following the Japanese invasion triggered different film movements throughout the 1930s. Although full scale war did not break out until 1937, Chinese society had been under the shadow of Japanese imperialism from the beginning of the 1930s. The Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931 and the bombing of Shanghai on January 28th 1932 both stoked the burgeoning patriotic fires in Chinese society. This national crisis led to the economic recession of the film industry, with most audiences losing interest in purely entertainment films that did not touch on social reality.¹⁵¹ This shift in audience tastes urged filmmakers into creating new film genres.

When discussing the nationalist discourse in relation to the 1930s Chinese film industry, mainstream film history often mentions that film movements launched by filmmakers held different political ideas: the “socialist-oriented film-makers

¹⁴⁹ The swordswomen Hu Die and Xu Qinfang in the martial arts films of the 1920s and the ideal screen lover, the “Rudolph Valentino of Shanghai”, Jin Yan all transformed their images in the 1930s. They started to portray realistic roles, such as oppressed lower class people and revolutionaries.

¹⁵⁰ Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. p. 58.

The golden years of the Chinese film industry were interrupted in 1937, when full-scale war broke out between Japan and China. In fact, the Shanghai film industry in the “Orphan Island period” reached another peak. But at that time the content of nationalism in films shifted again according to the political circumstances and the representation of patriotism in films made during that era was more complicated.

¹⁵¹ Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. p. 28.

advanced a left-wing cinema movement” and “a group of film-makers involved themselves in the KMT-initiated Nationalist Film Movement”.¹⁵²

The term “left-wing film” generally refers to “those anti-imperialist, anti-feudal films” made in the Left-wing Film Movement, which was a part of the Left-wing Culture Movement launched by the CCP’s Cultural Alliance of Chinese Leftists (*Zuoyi wenhua zong tongmeng*).¹⁵³ The manifesto of the Left-wing Culture Movement articulates its nationalist appeals. In the Manifesto of the Chinese Left-wing Dramatists’ League, published in 1931, the principles of class struggle and anti-imperialism were introduced. The manifesto maintains that film scripts tailored for the “proletarian masses in urban areas” should “expose social reality, and point out that in the severe struggle between proprietary and proletarian classes, the decline of the middle-class is inevitable and there will be no final way out (for the middle class)”.¹⁵⁴ It also said that scripts for “revolutionary youth in the countryside” should aim at “exposing the oppression caused by the collusion of the feudalists exploits and foreign capitalism”, which had resulted in the “rapid bankruptcy of the small peasant economics of China”.¹⁵⁵ Themes critical of social unfairness, sympathy towards peasants, anti-class-exploitation, anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism are stated clearly in these accounts. The KMT was seen by the CCP as the representation of the propertied class and the “accomplices of imperialism”.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, targeting of the propertied class was also taken into account in this nationalist discourse as its final goal was to target the imperialists.¹⁵⁷ These themes were addressed in a series of film cultural movements and activities, which had been initiated under the leadership of the League of Left-wing Writers, including the China Film Culture Society (*Zhongguo dianying wenhua xiehui*), the Chinese Left-wing Film Movement (*Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong*), the China Film Cultural Movement (*Zhongguo*

¹⁵² Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s”. p. 57.

¹⁵³ Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. p. 63.

¹⁵⁴ “Zhongguo zuoyi xijujia lianmeng zuijin xingdong gangling (The Recent Active Guidance for the League of the Left Wing Writers).” *Wenxue daobao (Literature Guide)* 1, no.6,7 (October 23, 1931).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p.77.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

dianying wenhua yundong), and the National Defence Movement (*guofang yundong*).¹⁵⁸

As the ruling party, the KMT emphasised the “realisation of social harmony and stability through a revival of traditional Chinese culture and moral principles”¹⁵⁹ in its nationalist discourse, in order to strengthen its own authority in the social crisis when both the Japanese invaders and the CCP challenged its leadership. A number of cultural movements had been launched by the KMT from 1930 onwards including the Nationalist Literature and Art Movement (*minzuzhuyi wenyi yundong*), Education of the Principles of the KMT (*danghua jiaoyu*), Honouring Confucius and Studying Classics (*zun Kong dujing*) and the New Life Movement (*xinshenghuo yundong*) to support its ideological principles.¹⁶⁰ Among them, the Nationalist Literature and Art Movement and the New Life Movement were “regarded as the basic steps towards the national rejuvenation”.¹⁶¹

The China Education Film Association (*Zhongguo dianying jiaoyu xiehui*) established in 1932, which was one result of the Nationalist Film Movement. The Nationalist Film Movement was launched in 1931 as a sub-movement of the Nationalist Literature and Art Movement, which aimed at promoting national spirit and national moral standard. A book written by the senior KMT official Chen Lifu entitled *The New Line on Chinese Film* (*Zhongguo dianying shiye de xin luxian*), published in association with the movement, claimed that film production should take the moral principles of Chinese culture as the main focus of film production, including loyalty (*zhong*), filial piety (*xiao*), benevolence (*ren*), love (*ai*), trustworthiness (*xin*), morality and justice (*yi*), harmony (*he*) and moderation (*ping*).¹⁶² Similarly, the New Life Movement (1934-1949) promoted the four traditional Chinese social bonds of propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), honesty (*lian*), and sense of shame (*chi*).¹⁶³ The KMT’s Propaganda Committee of the Central

¹⁵⁸ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 76-86.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

Headquarters acquired film companies to support this movement by incorporating these principles into the content of their films.¹⁶⁴

The dichotomisation of left-wing and non-left-wing films has been gradually seen as rather problematic by some scholars. Pang Laikwan argues “the demarcations between left-wing movies and right-wing movies were never stated clearly”,¹⁶⁵ and that it is difficult to classify certain filmmakers and their films into specific politically-oriented film movements.¹⁶⁶ Xiao Zhiwei expresses a similar view, and even questions the very existence of the Left-wing Film Movement,¹⁶⁷ pointing out that if the Left-wing Film Movement was supported by the CCP, hence not supported by the KMT, it would be difficult to explain why the classic left-wing film *Fisherman’s Song* (*Yuguangqu*, 1934) was chosen by the KMT government to send to the Moscow International Film Festival in 1935.¹⁶⁸ Left-wing critics praised Zheng Zhengqiu’s film *Two Sisters* (*Zimeihua*, 1932) as having “disclosed the origin of class struggle” in light of its sympathetic stance towards the poor.¹⁶⁹ However, many non-leftist films, including films that were criticised by left-wing critiques, also expressed criticism of social unfairness and sympathy to the poor, such as *Humanity* (*Rendao*, 1932).¹⁷⁰

Rather than distinguishing the differences in political ideology and nationalist discourse between the two parties, it is noteworthy that many common themes expressing nationalist appeals were shared by many pre-war films, irrespective of their categorisation as left or right-wing. Such themes include the advocacy for the advancement of China into a modern nation, and criticism of capitalism, colonialism and traditional culture.¹⁷¹ All of these subjects are expressions of nationalism,

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, p.4.

¹⁶⁶ Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s”, p. 57.

¹⁶⁷ Zhiwei Xiao, “The Myth of ‘Left-wing Films’ in 1930s”, *21 Century Critics*, no. 103 (October 2007), http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/issue/articles/103_0607027.pdf. Website accessed at November 20, 2012.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Li and Xing, *Zhongguo Dianying fazhanshi (The Development History of Chinese Films)*, 1. p. 238.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁷¹ Pang, “The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s”. pp. 58-59.

although the national crisis resulting from the Japanese invasion was not always directly addressed in films.

2.3.3.2 Social Types and Types of Star Image

Although the respective political principles in filmmaking were distinct and strong, there was no clear line drawn between the KMT and left-wing films. In terms of characterisation, some character types often appeared in both so-called left-wing and non-left-wing films.

Yan Kailei's follows the categorisation of traditional Chinese opera characters to classify film star images of the 1930s into five types – Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo and Chou.¹⁷² Yan's categorisation however, is not wholly appropriate for film stars, because it only emphasises the characters' function in the narrative and ignores the social context that shaped these characters, as well as the screen images of the respective stars.

Considering that films in the 1930s often dealt with social problems, the concept of 'social type' is a useful tool for examining star images during this period. Based on O. E. Klapp's definition of social type as "a collective norm of role behaviour formed and used by the group: an idealised concept of how people are expected to be or to act",¹⁷³ Richard Dyer defines social type as "a shared, recognisable, easily grasped image of how people are in society (with collective approval or disapproval built into it)".¹⁷⁴ Dyer maintains that "what is important about the stars, especially in their particularity, is their typicality or representativeness. Stars, in other words, relate to the social types of a society".¹⁷⁵ Stars are thus seen as fulfilments and incarnations of social types.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Yan, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan (Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation on the Republican Film History)*. pp. 103-119.

¹⁷³ O.E.Klapp, *Heros, Villains and Fools*. (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice- Hall, 1962). p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New Edition (London: BFI, 2002). p. 47.

¹⁷⁵ Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. p. 47.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

The images of the new stars in the 1930s often represented certain groups of people who emerged in the new social circumstances. Although a certain type of screen image might lack direct parallels in real life, it might fit with the public's idealised image of the Chinese people. Since the popularity of contemporary themes introduced in the 1930s, the establishment of new screen images were related to the social reality.¹⁷⁷ It is impossible to list all the types of screen image here, but the following comprises a selection of images in earlier films that often appeared in contemporary-themed films of the 1930s.

Gao Zhanfei and the Man with ‘*kangjianmei*’

Gao Zhanfei is an example of a type of male film star, including Liu Qiong (1912-2002), Zhang Yi (1909-1983) and Jin Yan.¹⁷⁸

Gao Zhanfei graduated from Baoding Military Academy (*Baoding junguan xuexiao*) in the 1920s. Before joining the film industry, he was a soldier.¹⁷⁹ Another film star, Wang Yuanlong (1903-1959), who also attended Baoding Military Academy, introduced Gao to the newly-founded Xingguang Film Studio in 1928.¹⁸⁰ Thereafter, Gao began to establish a film career, eventually becoming one of the brightest male stars of the pre-WWII Chinese film industry, appearing in almost a hundred films.¹⁸¹ Success however, was not immediate. Gao had left the lesser-known Xingguang Film Studio and joined one of the most prestigious film companies of the time, the Mingxing Film Studio, in 1929, at a time when many established Mingxing stars were already hugely popular box-office draws.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ Of course, not all films made in the 1930s expressed strong political views, especially films made by ‘soft filmmakers’. There was a famous debate over ‘hard film’ and ‘soft film’ starting from 1933 with critic Huang Jiamo’s essay *Yingxing yingpian yu ruanxing yingpian* (*Hard Films and Soft Films*), claiming that films should be made for entertainment and aesthetic purposes. Huang’s essay actually attacked films with strong political standpoints, especially those made by leftist filmmakers, which were regarded as ‘hard films’. From late 1935, film critics who supported ‘soft films’, including Liu Na’ou and Huang Jiamo, started to make films that could represent their views on cinema.

¹⁷⁸ Jin Yan transformed himself from his 1920s screen image as an ideal lover to a robust revolutionary in the 1930s.

¹⁷⁹ Zhanfei Gao, “5nian qianhou (In Around 5 Years),” *Xiandai dianying* (*Modern Film*) no. 2 (1933).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ “Shanghai nianhuan: Gao Zhanfei,” Website accessed November 25, 2012,

http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/star/xiaozhuan_all.jsp?starId=019&starName=%B8%DF%D5%B C%B7%C7.

¹⁸² Gao, “5nian Qianhou (In Around 5 Years).”

Opportunities for Gao were thus rare. Moreover, the preferred male actor of the 1920s was slight and effeminate, their elegant features often emphasised by heavy make-up. These actors normally portrayed middle-class romantic lovers in melodramas, e.g. Zhu Fei.¹⁸³ In contrast, Gao Zhanfei had a square face, and an athletic muscular build. While he played some martial arts roles in the late 1920s, the martial arts genre was already in decline, so the new actor did not attract much attention from the public.

The turning point in his career came when the director Cai Chusheng (1906-1965) introduced him to the Lianhua Film Studio. Gao's debut for the Lianhua was *Spring of the South* (*Nanguo zhichun*, 1932), in which he portrayed a college student sent to study in Paris by the government where he was to prepare to dedicate himself to the nation building project. Gao's "healthy and robust handsome" (*kangjianmei*) looks¹⁸⁴ well represented the masculine ideal much-desired by the Chinese people during the national crisis with one fan magazine upholding him as "an unquestionable idol for modern young film fans".¹⁸⁵ In both KMT propaganda films and leftist classics, he would go on to play the proletarian hero fighting against the merciless wealthy classes in *Day Break* (*Tianming*, 1933) and *Boatman's Daughter* (*Chunjianü*, 1935), as well as a nationalist revolutionary in the KMT propaganda film *The Classic for Girls* (*Nü'er jing*, 1934), a tied-in film for the KMT's 'New Life Movement'.

Wang Renmei and the 'healthy beauty'

Wang Renmei had achieved fame in Li Jinhui's Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe (*Mingyue gewutuan*) as a teenage star in the 1920s. Besides modern dance and popular songs, this troupe was known for its outrageous performances with teenage actors and actresses performing on the same stage and young girls often wearing costumes revealing bare arms and legs, with founder Li Jinhui insisting that

¹⁸³ "Gao Zhanfei," *Yisheng* (June 1935), Website accessed on November 20, 2012

<http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/star/text.jsp?textId=019003&starId=019&starName=%B8%DF%D5%BC%B7%C7>.

¹⁸⁴ Chusheng Cai, "Guanyu Nanguo zhichun (About Spring of the South)", *Yingxi zazhi* (*Shadowplays Magazine*) 2, no. 3 (1931).

¹⁸⁵ "Gao Zhanfei." *Yisheng* (June 1935), Website accessed: November 20, 2012

<http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/star/text.jsp?textId=019003&starId=019&starName=%B8%DF%D5%BC%B7%C7>.

the healthy body of his young performers represented a young and healthy national spirit.¹⁸⁶ As one of the leading actresses in this troupe, Wang Renmei was well-known for her lively stage performances before joining the film world.

The troupe was annexed into the Lianhua Film Studio in May 1931.¹⁸⁷ In the winter of 1931, Wang was invited to play the lead role of Xiao Feng, a fisherman's daughter, in *Wild Rose* (*Yemeigui*, 1932), which promoted the ideas of anti-imperialism and patriotism. Xiao Feng often played military games with children in the village and taught them to love their country. After the disillusion of her romantic relationship, the patriotic fisherman's daughter joined the anti-Japanese volunteer army.¹⁸⁸ Wang's image as a 'wild rose' – a lively, robust, and optimistic country girl who often with bare legs went running in the countryside, was well received by audiences with one zealous fan writing a passionate letter to her after watching the film:

The wheels of time are travelling on a bumpy road.
Everything is shaken and disillusioned. In these strange times,
I hope you can make an effort to maintain a healthy and
beautiful body, and more importantly, a healthy and beautiful
soul. Intoxication with luxury and money will not let you
escape the wheels of time today. Strive! I expect to see more
films with soul...¹⁸⁹

Compared to other female stars of the time, Wang was not regarded as particularly beautiful. Such praise from her fans revealed the reason for her popularity – her healthy body was related to a healthy soul. In considering the anti-invasion theme of this film, the patriotic image of the character and social background, "the wheels of time" refers to the unstable political situation amidst the Japanese invasion. The war led to widespread shock and disillusionment, especially in a self-interested life that "intoxicated in luxury and money" and indulged in personal romance, as the 'wild rose' once had. In such a situation, the only way to save both the individual and the

¹⁸⁶ Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2001). p. 89.

¹⁸⁷ Renmei Wang and Bo Xie, *Wode chengming yu buxing: Wang Renmei huiyilu (My Fame and Unhappiness: Memoir of Wang Renmei)* (Beijing: Tuanjie Publishing, 2007). p. 78.

¹⁸⁸ Zhenzhen Wang, ed., *Zhongguo yingpian dadian: gushipian, xiqujian, 1931-1949.9 (Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films, 1931-1949.9)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2005). pp. 70-71.

¹⁸⁹ Hong Jiaxun, "Gei yemeigui de xin (A Letter to the Wild Rose)", *Dianying (Film)*, no. 23 (1933).

country was to follow the wild rose's example and reject the pursuit of a personal life and join the anti-invasion movement. Thus, the "healthy and beautiful soul" mentioned in the fan letter might point to the spirit of anti-invasion.

The robust country girl type was not uncommon in films of the 1930s, which tended to represent an innocent, healthy, and optimistic spirit. She was the victim of the imperialists and capitalists, but at the same time, had the hopes of the nation projected onto her. Li Lili, another member of the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe, also exemplifies this character type. Sean Macdonald provides detailed analysis of Li's "lively *Jianmei* (healthy and beautiful) type", claiming it to be an "unprecedented, even revolutionary, star type in early Chinese cinema".¹⁹⁰ Yet another member of the same troupe, Xu Lai, occasionally fitted into this type as well (as in *Boatman's Daughter*). This type of image also appeared in both KMT propaganda films, such as Li Lili in *The Queen of Sports* (*Tiyu huanghou*, 1934, a tie-in for the National Games held by the KMT government in 1934) and films that were considered leftist, including left-wing classics *Song of the Fisherman* (1934) and *Blood on Wolf Mountain* (*Langshan diexueji*, 1936).

Although this type of star could be seen across film studios, most of them were from Li Jinhui's song-and-dance school and performance troupe, such as Xu Lai (Mingxing Film Studio), Wang Renmei and Li Lili (Lianhua Film Studio), and Li Minghui (Yihua Film Studio). The training principles of Li Jinhui's song-and-dance school and troupe partly echoed "some of the grander humanist themes of the New Culture Movement, stressing the emancipation of the body beautiful from the shackles of feudal discipline".¹⁹¹ Therefore, many of Li Jinhui's pupils, who received psychical training under the principle of bodily emancipation and had established such a stage image before entering filmdom, were also known as healthy beauty characters on screen.

¹⁹⁰ Sean Macdonald, "Li Lili: Acting a Lively Jianmei Type," in *Chinese Film Stars* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). p. 61.

¹⁹¹ Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*. p. 88.

The Idealistic Young Intellectuals

The popular realistic 1930s films that exposed social problems created a new type of star image – the idealistic educated youth unable to fit into the rotten, modern society (and often seeking rebellion). By illustrating the gap between the ideal of the passionate (and sometimes naïve) educated youth and the bleak social reality, this genre was targeted at the unfairness and corruption of 1930s Chinese society.

Actors like Zheng Junli, Zhao Dan and Yuan Muzhi (1909-1978) were all well known for this type of character. Many of them came from left-leaning spoken drama groups, e.g. Zheng Junli associated with Tian Han's drama society while Yuan Muzhi was once in Xinyou Drama Society (*Xinyoushe*).¹⁹² Because of their previous training in serious drama groups, these actors were well acquainted with Western stage performance theories and Western literature.¹⁹³ They were known for their handsome, intellectual faces, and often appeared on screen in Western clothes or traditional long gowns indicating the character's educational background, e.g. Zheng Junli, wearing western clothes as a bookish journalist in *The New Woman* (*Xinnüxing*, 1934) and, in a gown, as an idealistic school teacher in *National Style* (1935).

The honest and idealistic college graduates in such films refused to cooperate with the bureaucratic and corrupted society, often paying the price for their ideals, e.g. unemployment, like Yuan Muzhi in *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (*Taolijie*, 1934) and Zheng Junli in *The New Woman*. The unstable economic conditions hampered their future career opportunities, e.g. *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou*, 1937), and due to their "poor health" as "fragile intellectual(s)", once they had lost their job and stable income, they would plummet to the bowels of society to then suffer from chronic disease, e.g. Yuan Muzhi in *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, and Zhao Dan in *Classic for Girls*, 1934.

¹⁹² Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui (China Film Association) and dianyingshi yanjiubu(department of film history research), *Zhongguo Dianyingjia liezhuan (The Collected Biographies of Chinese Filmmakers)*, vol. 1, 8 vols. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1982). p. 278. Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui(China Film Association), *Zhongguo dianyingjia liezhuan (The Collected Biographies of Chinese Filmmakers)*, vol. 2, 8 vols. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1982). p. 287.

¹⁹³ Zheng Junli became a film historian and theorist after 1949.

2.3.4 The Oppressed Woman

Besides the types of star images discussed immediately above, there is another type of star image popular in early Chinese cinema since the early 1920s – the oppressed woman. Film queens like Zhang Zhiyun and Ruan Lingyu were known for their portrayals of naïve and vulnerable women oppressed by family or the social system (or both).

The issue of a woman's fate and the depiction of women in Chinese cinema can be traced back to the 1910s. For example, the first Chinese narrative film, *Difficult Couples* (*Nanfu nanqi*, 1913), did not directly address women's issues, rather it criticised arranged marriage and showed sympathy to the oppressed woman therein. In the 1920s, such characters could be seen in films adapted from popular literature, including *Jade Pear Spirit* (*Yulihun*, 1924), *Lily in an Empty Valley* (*Konggulan*, 1925) and *Resurrection of the Soul* (*Liangxin de fuhuo*, 1926); films made by filmmakers influenced by the New Culture Movement, such as Hou Yao's (1903-1942) *Abandoned Woman* (*Qifu*, 1925) and Pu Shunqing's (1902-?) *Eros' Doll* (*Aishen de Wan'ou*, 1925); and films made by former civilised playwrights, such as Zheng Zhengqiu's *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* and *The Last Conscience* (*Zuihou zhi liangxin*, 1925). The depiction of women became one of the most discussed topics of films of the 1930s. Filmmakers with different political and social standpoints all depicted the image of oppressed women in their films to express their views on culture and society, e.g. Dabao in *Two Sisters*, Li Cuifen in *Cosmetic Market* (*Zhifen shichang*, 1933) and the mother in *Goddess* (*Shennü*, 1934).

2.3.4.1 A Recurring Theme in Early Chinese Cinema

The creation of the image of oppressed woman in films was partly due to audiences' aesthetic preferences, as well as the socio-political context of the film industry.

In 1920s, melodramatic films enjoyed huge popularity with Chinese audiences, so no filmmaker could ignore their commercial potential.¹⁹⁴ The commercial success of Hollywood's melodrama films, and its stars, especially Lillian Gish in the Chinese

¹⁹⁴ Ellen Widmer, David Der-wei Wang, and Paul G. Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema", in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993). p. 301.

market, influenced the creation of such characters in Chinese films.¹⁹⁵ Domestic filmmakers made Chinese melodramatic films and Chinese versions of Lillian Gish to cash in on the popularity of this Hollywood genre, gaining favour with Chinese audiences.¹⁹⁶ Melodramatic literature and film are characterised by extravagant representation,¹⁹⁷ sensationalism, emotional intensity, rhetorical excesses, moral polarities, and the clear-cut demarcation of good and evil.¹⁹⁸ Chinese filmmakers created a range of oppressed women characters in films, whose miserable life stories always gained the sympathy of audiences.¹⁹⁹ In the 1920s, those female stars often playing oppressed women were usually given the title of *beidan* by film critics. In traditional Chinese opera, “Dan” is a general name for female roles. From the 1910s, with the popularity of tragedy in spoken drama, the tragic role was also invented and was given a term for famous actors who were particularly famous for such roles: *beidan* (tragic dan). The term was also used as praise for famous tragic actors.²⁰⁰ Although melodramas usually have a happy ending, the title *beidan* was still given to melodrama stars whose characters often experienced misfortunes in film stories. For example, Wang Hanlun gained a title of *beidan* for such a character in the melodramatic film *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*.²⁰¹ Into the 1930s, although this title appeared less and less in film publicity, such screen images nevertheless remained.

The figure of women is traditionally the ideal personification of the tragic spirit in Chinese literature because women often occupied the lowest position in society.²⁰² When China was facing a national crisis and threats from the imperialist powers in

¹⁹⁵ Sha, “Lilian Jixu de meiyong: qingjieju, beiju nümíngxíng yu Zhongguo dianyingye de chuxing (The Shadow of Lilian Gish: Melodrama, Tragedy Female Stars and the Beginning of Chinese Film Industry).” pp. 35-40.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ellen Widmer, David Der-wei Wang, and Paul G. Pickowicz, “Melodramatic Representation and the ‘May Fourth’ Tradition of Chinese Cinema”, in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993). p. 301.

¹⁹⁸ Wimal Dissanayake, “Introduction”, in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). pp. 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Natascha Gentz, “The Appropriation of Tragedies in Meiji Japan and Late Qing China,” in Olga Lomová, ed, *Paths Toward Modernity: Conference to Mark the Centenary of Jaroslav Průšek* (Prague: Charles University in Prague, The Karolinum Press, 2008). p. 228.

²⁰¹ Sha, “Lilian Jixu de meiyong: qingjieju, beiju nümíngxíng yu Zhongguo dianyingye de chuxing (The Shadow of Lilian Gish: Melodrama, Tragedy Female Stars and the Beginning of Chinese Film Industry).” p. 38.

²⁰² Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham & Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002). p. 115.

the twentieth century, the image of oppressed women was again depicted in modern Chinese literature to represent the suffering of the nation. Thus such an image had regularly appeared in Chinese modern literature, such as Xianglin's wife in Lu Xun's *New Year's Sacrifice* (*Zhufu*, 1924) and Huniu and Xiaofuzi in Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*, 1936). The stereotype of tragic women was seen as the evidence of China's backwardness.²⁰³ Chinese reformers believed that national salvation and nation-building projects could solve gender issues and bring about women's emancipation.²⁰⁴ So they often advocated their own ideological assertions such as anti-traditionalism and anti-imperialism by depicting oppressed women and discussing gender issues.²⁰⁵ Therefore, the issue of women's emancipation in China was part of the agenda in the social revolution and national salvation, rather than a result of a feminist movement.²⁰⁶ This same agenda – using the oppression of women to represent the suffering and backwardness of China, was also borrowed in films. The left-wing and non-left-wing filmmakers were all inclined to use the image of the oppressed woman to promote their political views.

2.3.4.2 Tears of the Woman, Anger of the Nation

Many female stars established their image as good women treated unfairly at the hands of society or familial patriarchy and their personae share some similar features, e.g. vulnerability, innocence, kind-heartedness and beauty. They still could be differentiated however by the different 'personalities' of the stars themselves. The most popular female stars, such as Ruan Lingyu, Chen Yanyan (1916-1999), Hu Die, and later Zhou Xuan, all shared this type of screen image. Where Ruan Lingyu's image was more fragile and sentimental,²⁰⁷ Chen Yanyan, whose nicknames included "the little bird from the South" and "the queen of students", more often portrayed romantic and naive female students,²⁰⁸ while Hu Die's screen image was often

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Cui Shuqin, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Hawaii: Hawai'i UP, 2003). p. 13.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Such as in *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (*Yi jian mei*, 1931), *The Peach Girl* (*Taohua qi xue ji*, 1931), *Goddess* (*Shen nü*, 1934), *New Woman* (*Xin nü sheng*, 1934).

²⁰⁸ Such as in *The Spring in the South* (*Nanguo zhi chun*, 1932), *The Light of Maternity* (*Muxing zhi guang*, 1933).

associated with familial responsibility.²⁰⁹ To portray their screen image as pitiful women, close-ups were often used to draw audience attention to sadness expressed through facial expressions.²¹⁰ This was also a cinematic language, often adopted for melodrama, which aimed at raising the compassion for and identification with characters among audiences.

Those films with strong ideological standpoints tended to impute the tragic fate of female characters to the backwardness of the society and national crisis. Therefore, the obstacles to personal happiness for the films' heroines are not simply the villains they encounter, but, like all personal tragedies, are caused by society, including the Japanese invasion, the authority of political regimes (warlords, KMT government), and the feudalistic forces. One striking example is the death scene in *The New Woman* (*Xinnüxing*, 1934), in which Ruan Lingyu plays a single mother and school teacher, Wei Ming, who left her family to pursue personal happiness but failed to survive in the patriarchal society, on her death bed. She shouted out her last words: "Save me (Figure2.5)!... I want to live (Figure2.6)... I want to live... I want to live!"



Figure 2.5 Save me! (*Nin jiujiu wo!*)



Figure 2.6 I want to live! (*Wo yao huo a!*)

(Ruan Lingyu in *The New Woman*. Wei Ming shouts to her friends and the doctors, as well as the audience: "Save me! I want to live!")

A montage sequence showing Wei Ming's neighbour, a proletarian female worker teaching other female factory workers to sing revolutionary songs, is inserted into this scene (see Figure 2.7). The contrast between these female workers and Wei Ming, and the scene of united workers singing that is inserted between Wei Ming's

²⁰⁹ Such as in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923), *Twin Sisters* (1933), *The Cosmetic Market* (1933).

²¹⁰ Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*. p. 8

second and third call of “I want to live”, all imply that another possible way for Wei Ming to survive (and other women in the same social predicament) was to join the proletarian revolution and be transformed into a revolutionary new woman. Thus, the tragic heroine clearly represents the victim of the ruling propertied class, and her personal tragedies of the failed free marriage, the death of her daughter and losing her job are all ascribed to society.



Figure 2.7 When Wei Ming is struggling for survival, her neighbour is teaching singing to female factory workers. From *The New Woman*.

The star Ruan Lingyu’s screen image of oppressed women in past films and her miserable private life, all lent credence to the character Wei Ming in this film. When discussing the star as character, Dyer points out that audience foreknowledge about the star’s previous roles and true personality would help signify and endorse the new character.²¹¹ In this instance, Ruan Lingyu’s image bridged the gap between her character Wei Ming and social reality, where Ruan’s private life was also entangled with unfaithful men. Because of audience identification with the star’s image, and their compassion for the character, their anger at the villains in the films was thus directed towards society. This example shows that star power was crucial to audience identification with the potential political messages in the plot.

The nationalistic ideology in melodramatic films was not ubiquitously concealed in narrative and characters, as in *The New Woman*, but was also delivered in a very direct way. For example, characters would occasionally and suddenly repeat revolutionary slogans completely irrelevant to the narrative and the characters

²¹¹ Dyer, *Stars*. p.126.

themselves would try to directly persuade other characters in the film, as well as audiences, to join the project of national salvation. Left-wing director Cai Chusheng's *Spring of the South* (*Nanguo zhi chun*, 1932) provides a good example. Most of the story is a love tragedy targeted at arranged marriage. By the end, the college student Hong Yu, played by Gao Zhanfei, is finally released from his unhappy arranged marriage with his cousin. He rushes from Paris, where he was studying, to meet his lover in South China. His lover, Xiao Hong, played by Chen Yanyan, however, has been nearly traumatised to death by lovesickness and her own unsuccessful marriage. When the two suffering lovers finally reunite upon Xiao Hong's death bed, she persuades her lover: "Do not feel sorry for me...the nation is in crisis...build up your courage...to save the nation...to annihilate our enemies." After these last words, she closes her eyes and Hong cries out "My dear, I must summon all of my courage to make your final request a reality." The grieved lover has decided to fulfil Xiao Hong's last will, i.e. to fight against the Japanese enemies. The social background of the Japanese invasion is only implied once in the film through the juxtaposition of two news reports in a newspaper: one is that students (Hong Yu and his friends) depart to France, and the other is about Chinese civilians humiliated by the Japanese (Figure 2.8).

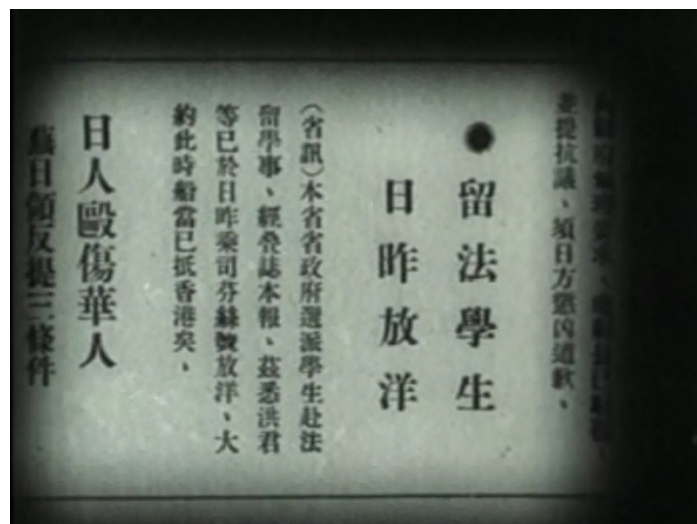


Figure 2.8. Two titles in the newspaper read: "*Liufa xuesheng rizuo fangyang* (Students going abroad to France Departed Yesterday), *Riren oushang huaren* (Japanese Beat and Injured Chinese)"

The last dialogue between the lovers seems abrupt and unexpected compared to the preceding storyline. It is the star text that supports the dialogue and addresses the dry political slogan here. Chen Yanyan's venerable and fragile image is expected to wake the audience's compassion and a desire for protection whereas Gao Zhanfei's past revolutionary roles, e.g. *The Soul of Freedom* (*Ziyouhun*, 1931), and his personal experience of military service all strongly imply this character's patriotic decision to attempt to save the nation.

2.4 Conclusion

The ideological aspect of a film stars' screen image was valued by Chinese audiences and filmmakers at a time when the nation was experiencing crisis and the image of China and its people had been consistently distorted in Western films. Those undesirable images of the Chinese in films such as Dr. Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan were felt as a kind of national humiliation, and evidenced the nation's weaknesses.

The potential of film as a medium of social influence was taken into serious consideration by both filmmakers and audiences. Therefore, many foreign films were labelled as films that humiliated China and received public boycott for negative portrayals of Chinese people. Audiences, as well as the KMT government, hoped that film stars, especially those with international reputations, would create a positive and idealised image of Chinese people, the goal of which was two-fold. First, they considered such screen images would gain respect for China from the international community. Second, they hoped such images would strengthen the Chinese people and to correct China's reputation as the Sick man of the East.

The character of popular screen images was changing along with the shifting focus of nationalist appeals - appeals which were constantly changing within the unstable social context. When a national film industry was required to defend the Chinese economy from the 'invasion' of Hollywood films in the early 1920s, to make the Chinese equivalent of screen images from popular Hollywood films was the major goal of filmmakers' nationalist sentiment at that time. Many films in the early 1920s were adapted from civilised plays and popular literature, containing

modern themes like free courtship and the emancipation of women, and they were often set in a contemporary urban environment. These screen images of actors were often modernised (or, as in its contemporaries' terms, 'Europeanised'). The traditional bias against performers became an obstacle for the development of the film industry as very few educated people from respectable family backgrounds would seriously consider film acting as a profession. To encourage more talent to join the film industry and to establish a good reputation for the profession, early film actors often attempted to create the image of a modern-thinking man or woman, who took their profession seriously and paid special attention to the social didactic function of cinema. Such a professional image of early actors also endorsed their screen characters of contemporary dressed and modernised men and women.

From the mid-1920s, traditional costume films and martial arts films became popular. This could have been the result of market competition, for film companies could attract audiences by using more advanced special effects to bring fantasies and legends from classical Chinese stories to theatre screens. From the ideological angle however, this popularity more likely stemmed from the fact that the deepening anti-imperialist sentiment caused by the May 30th Movement and the military spirit that was waged by the Northern Expedition led to the production of such films with more obvious Chinese features and a sense of chivalry and righteousness (*xiaoyi*) that was rooted in traditional Chinese literature. Although commentators criticised such films for spreading messages of superstition and often low production quality, filmmakers themselves always claimed these films created positive images of physically strong Chinese heroes with high moral standards. In contemporary film publicity, the physical skills of the actors were often emphasised to support their screen images.

The martial arts films craze declined due to a range of factors: the KMT's increased censorship of the genre and its subsequent request to develop other different genres, and the deepening national crisis post-Japanese invasion, which drew audiences' attention away from fantasy to social reality. To foster the survival of the Chinese nation as a united people, anti-imperialism and the re-building of China as a strong and modern nation became the main theme of Chinese nationalism from 1931 to 1937. After war had broken out between China and Japan, both the

KMT and the CCP actively claimed their film production principles through different film movements. However, there was no clear line drawn between the Communist-oriented leftist films and the films made by rightist filmmakers. Many themes were shared in 1930s films such as sympathy for the poor, anti-capitalism and criticism of traditional culture. Some new types of star images appeared in these realistic films of the 1930s, including male stars who were healthy, rugged, and handsome, and female stars regarded as healthy beauties and idealistic intellectuals. These screen images revealed society's aspiration to the ideal images of Chinese people, and reflected filmmakers' social concerns.

Another star screen image that had been used to express nationalist sentiment was the oppressed woman. Many stars in both the 1920s and 1930s were known for their characterisation of this type of role in films. Since women's issues were often associated with China's pursuit of modernity and nation-building,²¹² cinematic depiction of the oppressed woman usually aimed at disclosing social problems.

The appearance of stars in films, values and meanings embodied in their images, compose and deliver social, cultural and political messages behind the film storyline. Since the screen images of film stars often represented an idealistic image of Chinese people and, sometimes, the incarnation of a sense of national spirit, the positive social discourse surrounding them also increased.

²¹² Pang, "The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai Films of the 1930s". p. 61.

Chapter 3 Off-screen Images: Social Models of a Modern Nation

3.1 Introduction

Film stars' off-screen images were an integral part of film star culture. Stardom was not only achieved through acting, but also by promoting an image and life stories via photographic articles, journalistic interviews, and advertising.¹

Hollywood began to publicise the personal lives of stars in the mid-1910s through fan magazines and studio publicities.² Because of the print media's continuous exposés on stars' lives, including details relating to forms of entertainment and leisure activities, fashion and grooming, Hollywood stars became educators who provided fans with models on modern selfhood, including individual behaviour and the relationship between self and society.³

Chinese popular magazines had translated and published Hollywood stars' personal lives that were firstly published in Hollywood publications since the early 1920s. They also imitated on Hollywood magazines to create the off-screen images of domestic film stars. From the mid-1920s, domestic film stars' names, images, "personalities", and personal lives (such as their hobbies, social circles, affairs, and family issues) were circulated in various popular media, including film studio publicity, fan magazines, the film section of major newspapers (like *Shenbao* and *Chenbao*), pictorials, tabloids, commercial calendars and advertisements. As in Hollywood, film stars also became trendsetters, lifestyle models, and social celebrities.

Although many details of stars' lives were openly disclosed to the public, much of it was not real. Their images were often deliberately crafted and designed by different social groups based on their different objectives and interests. Public discourses on stars' off-screen images were shaped in different ways: through studio

¹ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour - A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008). p. 183.

² Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York & Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) pp.35-36; Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility*. pp. 2-3.

³ Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity*. p. 36.

promotion materials, journalistic independent reports, the stars' autobiographical writings, and comments from audiences and critics. Because their interests and aims differed, naturally, public discourses on stars varied. For instance, studio publicity material promoted stars in order to benefit the industry, whereas mass media sought the commercial value of star news, which occasionally led to digression from the standpoint of stars and studios. In some extreme cases, journalistic reports would note that the contents and the views expressed in an article were not in line with the studio's publicity agent.⁴ Comments from the public were often based on a false sense of reality. Once, a *Shenbao* editor noted that criticism of stars' lavish lifestyles was unfair, for such criticism resulted from the audience's perception of film stories and stars' lives as seen in Hollywood magazines.⁵ Nonetheless, all sources claimed to be true. To audiences, the value of these exposés on stars' personal life details was built on the exploration of stars' true stories in real life. However, these reports actually reflected the general image of stars' personal lives in the public discourse.

It is a universal phenomenon that the general image of film stars' private persona and lifestyles sometimes reflect the public opinion of an ideal lifestyle in a given society. For example, the general image of Hollywood stars is seen as a reflection of the 'American Dream' with themes of consumption, the pursuit of individual success and so on.⁶ Thus, an analysis of film stars' off-screen images would not provide an account of their real lives, but rather the ideal image that stars and their studios hoped to present to the public, and consequently the public perception.

In this chapter, I will discuss three different aspects of film stars' off-screen images: 1) their consumption, 2) career, and 3) private life, all of which will serve to examine what kinds of off-screen images were presented to the public and their potential influence.

⁴ Lixia, "Cao Xuesong xiang Huang Naishuang Qiuhun (Cao Xuesong Proposed to Huang Naishuang)" *Qingqing dianying (Qingqing Film)*, August 1935.

⁵ Han, "Ti mingxingmen jiaoqu (Declaration for Stars)" *Shenbao* (November 12, 1932).

⁶ Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars*, New ed. (London: BFI, 2002). p. 35.
Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility*. p. 3.

Through analysing the three aspects of stars' off-screen images, I argue that Chinese star makers (i.e. studios, popular magazines, stars themselves) used different agendas of popular social ideologies to interpret and promote stars' personal images, portraying them as ideal citizens in a modern nation.⁷

Even though film stars were promoted as social role models in pro-star discourses, their lifestyles and personalities also met with doubts and irony from different social groups with their own ideological assertions. The star life style which comprised abundant (often imported) goods, was criticised as being indulgent. Some critics also claimed that as a result of financial temptation, stars would degrade themselves and become concubines and dancing hostesses (sometimes considered as prostitutes), which proved dangerous to their morality and harmful for the development of the film industry.⁸

Ideologies held by different social groups competed through their portrayal of film stars' off-screen images. The contradictory opinions on stars' private images revealed their status as social role models in society. Both positive and negative discourses on stars clearly showed that stars were significant public figures whose personal behaviour was considered to be influential to the culture and moral standard of society.

It is notable that most stars portrayed as trendsetters and lifestyle promoters were females. There were more images and articles featuring female stars than male stars in the press. This suggests that female stars more often became the objects of public fantasy and imagination, and also that women constituted the primary fan group of film stars. Both real stories about female students' willingness to become film actors,⁹ and fictional stories depicting young girls' efforts to get involved in the

⁷ With regard to the term "modern", this research will not deal with different definitions and connotations of modernity. Many diverse, and sometimes conflicting ideas and opinions, were appropriated and shaped into a discourse of modernity in the Republican period, such as antitraditionalism, nation-building, science, individualism, enlightenment, women's liberation, and professionalisation. This research will use the term "modern (*modeng*)" in the same way as it was used in its original context.

⁸ Andrew David Field, *Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Chinese UP, 2010). p. 120.

⁹ Chen Juanru, "Zuixin dianying zhi shizuhun (Sorrows Caused by the Passion for Film)," *Linglong*, Issue 104, 1933. p. 1221.

film industry hoping to become film stars¹⁰ evidence the film industry's attraction and the star culture's influence on women.

3.2 Film Stars: the Most Visible Social Models in the Mass Media

Film stars were not the first social group to introduce new fashions and influence public perceptions on lifestyle. Nor were they the only group with the potential to be recognised as fashion leaders in contemporary society. However, I would argue that film stars were the most visible and influential social models in the mass media.

Shanghai courtesans, active from the 1860s to the turn of the twentieth century, were the earliest fashion leaders in the city, whose personae and lifestyles advocated and emblematised the culture of Shanghai Settlements.¹¹ Courtesans were relatively free from social constraints, especially in the Foreign Settlements, where many of their businesses developed. They often appeared in western style entertainment sites with their clients.¹² In addition, they were traditionally associated with the unusual and the innovative. This image allowed them to embrace western material culture and thus set the benchmark of Westernised fashion to their Chinese followers.¹³ As a result they modelled modernity through their lifestyle and daily activities, and using modern media to promote their business.¹⁴ Whilst courtesans were once popular and regarded as “modern” in late Qing and Early Republican China, their popularity declined from the 1920s onwards, and they gradually withdrew from public life.¹⁵ Since then the association between courtesans and the “old, outdated image of ‘traditional’ China” grew gradually.¹⁶

¹⁰ Yingxue, *Nümingxing riji (A Female Star's Diary)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Liangyou chubangongsi (Shanghai Young Companion Publishing House,) 1934). pp. 59,123.

¹¹ Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, 1st ed. (Seattle&London: Washington UP, 2006). p. 21.

¹² Ibid., p. 26.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 31-33.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 21-95.

¹⁵ Andrew David Field, *Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Chinese UP, 2010). pp. 130-131.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

From the 1920s, the cabaret and dance hostesses, who dressed in trendy clothes and worked in modern entertainment locations, like cabarets and ballrooms, became a new public favourite replacing courtesans.¹⁷ It was often reported that courtesans also changed over to cabaret and dance hostesses.¹⁸ Images of cabaret hostesses appeared frequently in local tabloids as means to ensure their popularity and attractiveness.¹⁹ Occasionally, they were juxtaposed in the press with images of film stars, college girls and other women in public spaces.²⁰ Both their public and private lives were followed in the popular press.²¹ Compared with earlier courtesans, these modernly dressed dance hostesses epitomised the beautiful yet dangerous modern girl (*modeng xiaojie*) in the public imagination.²²

Another social group of fashionable figures that appeared in printed media was the female student, including high school and college students.²³ Their images could be found amongst that of other modern girls, such as film stars and dance hostesses, in magazines like *The Young Companion*, *Linglong* and *Women's Pictorial* (*Furen huabao*).²⁴ They also constituted part of the readership. Female students that appeared in such magazines often had the look of a modern girl, with bobbed or permed hair, wearing fashionable *qipaos*, and sometimes make-up and high heels. Female students able to afford both new fashion clothes and fees for prestigious school, such as McTyeire School (*Zhongxi nüshu*), might normally come from a middle-upper class family. Schools exposed female students to knowledge and modern thinking. Similarly, it provided more opportunities to socialise, be it through sporting events, choir competitions or drama performances. Many newspapers, women's magazines, and lifestyle magazines closely followed their social life.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 130-131.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

²⁰ Madeleine Y. Dong, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl," in Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization, New Directions in Women's Studies* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008). p. 201.

²¹ Field, *Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954*. p. 120.

²² Ibid., pp. 119-120.

²³ Dong, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl". p. 196.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 202-203.



Figure 3.1. *Performance to Celebrate the Eleventh Anniversary of Beiping Liangji Girls' School* (Beiping liangji nǚxiao shíyī zhounian youyihui)²⁵

Figure 3.1 features drama and dance performance in a girls' school in Beiping. In an attempt to promote these young students, their names appeared as part of the text.

²⁵ *Linglong* magazine, Issue 125, 1933, p. 2531



Figure 3.2. Ms Tan Shiquan who loves to read *Linglong* from Changshi (Aiyue Linglong de Changsha Tan Shiquan nüshi) ²⁶

Tan Shiquan, the young lady in Figure 3.2, was a graduate from Shanghai South-East Sports School (*Shanghai dongnan tizhuan*). The qualities of being fashionable shown in this picture: permed hair, high-collar top, short tennis skirt, stockings, alluring pose, crossed legs, eyes fixed on the camera and the deco style set in the photography studio, are all evidence of a modern girl.

In terms of appearance and lifestyle, it is not easy to identify which group first came to influence the rest. Hollywood films, Hollywood fan magazines and foreign women's magazines were accessible in a cosmopolitan city like Shanghai.²⁷ Chinese audiences could easily get inspirations from these films and magazines for new fashion tips. However, comparing the film star group with other groups within fashion circles, the former had its own advantages as role models in society.

²⁶ *Linglong*, Issue 129, 1934, p. 212

²⁷ Dong, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl". pp. 202-203.

Firstly, film stars' positive portrayal in the media enhanced their public impact. Not only did they share media space with school students and dance hostesses, but also occupied a part of the media sphere rarely touched by others: the silver screen. Film stars' frequent appearance in cinema meant they would have greater fame than other college girls who occasionally appeared in mass media. The film medium also projected stars' names to other regions beyond Shanghai, whereas the great majority of dance hostesses remained famous within their working place.

Secondly, exposure of a film star meant that their life story often appeared in more detail. Publicists from their studios were responsible for building their images (as discussed in chapter one). Subsequently, star image-makers, e.g. publicity agents and journalists, often established off-screen stars' images by adding details of their life stories. In contrast, schoolgirls often appeared in magazines with a picture and their name only (as shown above), without any detailed description about their backgrounds or private lives.

Thirdly, in contrast with other celebrated trendsetters, such as schoolgirls and dance hostesses, film stars achieved a respectable career. As discussed in chapter 2, acting was a new career within the film industry, and was often regarded as an art form only and associated with social education (which will be discussed later in this chapter). In contrast, cabaret and dance hostesses "worked precariously between the worlds of entertainment and prostitution".²⁸ Their profession offered opportunities of physical proximity with anyone who bought dancing tickets. Therefore they were often portrayed as playthings of men in the media.²⁹ Generally, magazines did not provide any information regarding students' careers. Presumably, their families funded their fashionable lifestyle and education.

In short, although other social groups shared the same media space, film stars were particularly noteworthy. They were identified individuals, whose names, images, careers and often detailed life stories were all exposed in the public for others to follow. In the rest of the chapter, the media representation of stars'

²⁸ Field, *Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132, 137.

fashionable images, careers and off-set activities will be examined to show how they were portrayed as social role models in the mass media.

3.3 *Models for Consumption*

Now [the word] modern (*modeng*) is almost always associated with star (*mingxing*). To many people 'Modern' reminds us of stars, and vice versa. Thus, an unwritten rule has formed accordingly: the most modern ones are stars; and all stars are modern...

Stars enjoy all the popular fashion in society...

[They have] soft hair, ironed Western suits (*xizhuang*), bright and aromatic lipstick... curled hair... high heels...

--Xu Meixun³⁰

According to Xu Meixun and many others, film stars were seen as “the most modern ones” among fashionable groups, which include high school and college students, professionals, wives and concubines of the upper and middle classes. In public opinion, the film stars’ quality of being “modern” was closely associated with their consumption of fashion.

In this section, I will firstly discuss how Chinese film stars’ fashionable images were established, and how such images were connected to the idea of modernity in public discourse. I would argue that the film industry, the consumer industry and the print media collaborated to create such images of film stars for their own interests. They promoted stars as the master consumers of fashion, and interpreted stars’ fashionable lifestyles according to modernisation-related social discourses.

The consumption of stars was sometimes regarded as being excessive and luxurious. It was seen as reflecting their negligence of social responsibilities. These were all seen as to signaling stars’ moral corruption. This section will also discuss

³⁰ Xu Meixun, “Yige modeng yanyuan (A Modern Actor),” *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)*, October 1933. p. 12.

the negative “modern” images of stars, depicted by different social groups with their own political agendas.

3.3.1 Expert Consumers and Icons of Modernity

Before any Chinese film star appeared as a convincing fashion icon, the idea that film stars are all fashionable and “modern” had already been established among Chinese audiences by the “modern girl” phenomenon that emerged across the globe in the 1920s, as well as Hollywood star-making strategies.

Modern girls who emerged in the first half of the twentieth century around the world could easily be recognised by their use of particular commodities, which gave them a fashionable and often erotic appearance with bobbed or curled hair, painted-face, fancy clothes, and high heel shoes.³¹ In the eyes of their contemporaries, modern girls were undoubtedly associated with fashion.

It is believed that modern girls’ style was inspired by the silver screen. Going to the cinema was popular among modern girls; consequently, their contemporaries regarded their style as an imitation of styles in movies.³² As the most influential film industry in the world after the First World War, Hollywood made great efforts to create unique fashion styles to impress audiences since the 1920s.³³ The appearances and screen personalities of their stars were carefully designed by their studios to represent a range of different ideal images such as European-style decadence, aristocracy, youthful showgirls, and sophisticated city beauties for audiences to choose.³⁴

Hollywood star images were established by the cooperation of the U.S. film and consumer industries. Hollywood stars appeared regularly in magazines and

³¹ The Modern Girl around the world research group, “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation,” in Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008); Dong, “Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl.” pp. 1,196.

³² Ibid., p. 34.

³³ Gundle, *Glamour- A History*. p. 175.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 175.

stores to give fashion and beauty advice, and the fashionable clothing seen on film were made commercially available to the public.³⁵ Advertisements for fashion products featuring Hollywood film stars constantly created and re-confirmed their image as both social celebrities and expert consumers.³⁶ By establishing and re-confirming their status as fashion icons, the film industry promoted both their stars and products for consumption.

Both fashion-pursuing modern girls and Hollywood stars were regarded as the representatives of a range of different “modern” thoughts. Modern girls who appeared to disregard the roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother and pursued romantic love were sometimes seen as the representation of women’s emancipation.³⁷ However, there is always a doubt that the modern girl might be merely an idea that was created by advertising campaigns in a commodity culture.³⁸

The “modernity” that was represented in Hollywood stars’ fashion was in fact an upward social mobility, which was promised to be achievable via consuming fashion. As part of Hollywood’s allure, it offered filmgoers the fantasy that everyone had the potential of becoming a glamorous film star.³⁹ Although several early Hollywood stars, especially in the silent film era, were created like gods or goddesses, since the 1930s Hollywood fully provided a fantasy to audiences that their stars were just a “fabulous everyman or everywoman”.⁴⁰ Film publicities claimed that beauty was more a product of modern make-over techniques than inborn endowment,⁴¹ so every audience was encouraged to obtain inspirations from film star fashion and style by applying those fashion products.⁴² For example, a 1932 article published in the prestigious Hollywood fan journal *Photoplay*, aiming at introducing their readers the fashion tips of Hollywood stars, *Photoplay’s Hollywood Beauty Shop*, suggested that stars like Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, and Gloria Swanson used

³⁵ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁶ Wu Liande, “Deng guanggao (Publishing Advertisements),” *Xin yinxing (Silverland: Chinese Photoplay Magazine)*, no. 3 (October 1928).

³⁷ The Modern Girl around the world research group, “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparasion, Multidirectional Citation.” pp. 1-2.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 2.

³⁹ Gundle, *Glamour- A History*. p. 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 194.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 194,187.

fashion products to change themselves from “unknown child” to “national figure”.⁴³ Although the Hollywood female star was viewed as the glamorous and famous fashion expert, she actually was only “little more than the girl next door”.⁴⁴ In this sense, Hollywood stars, who were glamorous and famous, were evidence of Hollywood’s alluring promise that social mobility could be achieved via applying fashion.

It is not surprising then that the U.S., including Hollywood, had “preeminence in the international distribution of advertising and film”.⁴⁵ Consequently, Hollywood stars and American cultural notions on stars, modern girls, fashion and modernity also arrived in Shanghai via Hollywood films, star advertisements and fan magazines. It was well acknowledged in Shanghai society that Hollywood stars were model modern girls, and modern girls had the qualities to be a film star. For example, in Shanghai’s modernist writer Mu Shiying’s short story “The Man Who is Treated as a Plaything” (*Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi*, 1930), the modern girl protagonist Rongzi, who uses Tangee lipstick, is a combination of Hollywood stars Vilma Bánky,⁴⁶ Nancy Carroll⁴⁷ and Norma Shearer.⁴⁸ In an article that sketched different types of Shanghai women published in *Linglong* magazine, the sexy and fashionable woman who wore fashionable cosmetics and high heels was categorised as ‘Clara Bow Style (*Kelala Bao shi*)’.⁴⁹

Hollywood’s “modern” idea of achieving upward social mobility through fashion consumption was also introduced to Chinese wider audiences. An illustrative

⁴³ Carolyn Van Wyck, “Photoplay’s Hollywood Beauty Shop: All the Beauty Tricks of All the Stars Brought to You Each Month,” *Photoplay*, April 1932. pp. 54-59.

⁴⁴ Gundle, *Glamour- A History*. p. 196.

⁴⁵ The Modern Girl around the world research group, “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparasion, Multidirectional Citation.” p.6.

⁴⁶ Vilma Bánky (1903-1991) was an American silent film actress, whose most known works include *The Eagle* (1925) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), in both of which she co-starred with Rudolph Valentino.

⁴⁷ Nancy Carroll (1904-1965) was an American film actress, who was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *The Devil’s Holiday* in 1930.

⁴⁸ Shiying Mu, “Beidangzuo Xiaoqianpin De Nanzi (The Man Who Is Treated as a Plaything),” in *Shanghai De Hubuwu (The Shanghai Foxtrot)* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2004). p. 13. Norma Shearer (1902-1983) was an American film actress, who won the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *The Divorcee* in 1930.

⁴⁹ Yi nanshi (a gentleman), “Shanghai nüren suxie (Sketch for Shanghai Women)” *Linglong*, 1935. p.332.

example is the article “The Secrets of Make-over” (*Huazhuang de xuanmi*), which introduced how make-over techniques including fashionable dresses, makeup, and hairdos transformed ordinary American girls into stunning Hollywood stars.⁵⁰ The author reminded readers that “the most famous star of today”, Greta Garbo, was not good-looking when she first arrived in Hollywood. However, under the supervision of Hollywood’s make-over experts, Garbo started to wear proper make-up, changed her hair style and dressed in specially designed clothes, which turned her into a most admired film star.⁵¹ The author further declared that the make-over techniques could “transform a country girl into a beauty, and let a beauty become a fairy princess that exists only in imagination”, and such things “were found in Hollywood every day”.⁵²

The creation and promotion of Hollywood fashion images became the model for Chinese film stars. With the help from the print media, the Shanghai film industry also cooperated with the consumer industry to establish and promote fashionable and modern images of domestic stars. Film studios created alluring stars and emphasised their fashionable images in order to attract the public’s attention.⁵³ An example is Mingxing Film Studio that used to publish and release star albums and star autographed pictures through its affiliated company – the Huawei Trading Company (*Huawei maoyi gongsi*) to promote the fashionable images of its own stars.⁵⁴ The stars’ latest fashion became material for the press journalist to stir up reader excitement.⁵⁵ For example, Hollywood female star cross-dressing was reported to be trendy with stars like Li Lili and Wang Renmei in Shanghai – the ‘Oriental Hollywood’.⁵⁶ As fashion icons, stars were invited by advertising agents and shops to join their commercial campaigns for fashion commodities.⁵⁷ Film stars’ endorsement

⁵⁰ Yu Qianli, “*Huazhuangshu de xuanmi* (the Secrets of Makeover)” *Yingxi zazhi* (*The Film Magazine*), April 1935. pp. 62-63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵³ Katherine Hui-ling Chou, *Performing China: Actresses, Performance Culture, Visual Politics, 1910-1945* (Tai Bei: Rye Field Publishing Co., 2004). p. 63.

⁵⁴ Liu Huiqin, *Hu Die huiyilu* (*Hu Die’s Memoir*) (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 1988). p. 35.

⁵⁵ Yan Kailei, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan* (*Stars and Their Times: A New Inspection on the Republican Film History*) (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2010). p. 55.

⁵⁶ “Nümingxing yu kuzi (Female Stars and Trousers)” *Linglong*, 1933. Issue 95, p. 689.

⁵⁷ Yan, *Mingxing he tade shidai: minguo dianyingshi xintan* (*Stars and Their Times: A New Investigation on the Republican-era Film History*). p. 85.

for products in advertising was still seen as a special Hollywood phenomenon in the late 1920s,⁵⁸ until it became popular in the 1930s. Shanghai's modern advertising industry, which served both international and domestic corporations, contributed to creating the link between Chinese stars' images and fashion.⁵⁹ For example, in 1933 an elaborate advertising campaign for Cutex (an American beauty product brand) appeared in the film magazine *Modern Screen* (*Xiandai dianying*), in which the stars Hu Jia and Li Minghui were featured as loyal and contented customers of this foreign brand.⁶⁰

As in Hollywood, the Shanghai film industry and the consumer industry also collaborated to associate different modern-related ideas to stars' images as fashion consumers. Different agendas of "modern" social ideologies were used to interpret stars' fashionable lifestyles. Thus film stars became the representation of modernity.

Hollywood's narrative of turning ordinary girls into glamorous film stars by applying fashion products was also replicated in China. The early Chinese film actress Zhao Jingxia (?-?) once explicitly expressed this idea in a film journal in the mid-1920s:

Maybe pens are sharper than knives and swords, but lip sticks and eyebrow pencils are probably sharper than pens...

...appearance...is one of the most important conditions [of being an actress]...but in fact real beauty among the most popular female stars was rare. Most stars rely on make-up.⁶¹

By offering a seemingly accessible social mobility, the fledging film industry might aim at attracting more fresh talents to work for it.

⁵⁸ Wu Liande, "Deng guanggao (Publishing Advertisements)" *Xin yinxing* (*Silverland: Chinese Photoplay Magazine*), October 1928. p. 40.

⁵⁹ Tani E. Barlow, "Buying in: Advertising and the Sexy Modern Girl Icon in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s" in Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008). pp. 290-293.

⁶⁰ *Xiandai dianying* (*Modern Screen*), Vol.1, Issue1, March 1933; *Xiandai dianying* (*Modern Screen*), Vol.1, Issue3, May 1933.

⁶¹ Jingxia, "Nüzi toushen dianyingjie de zige (Women's Qualifications of Entering the Film Industry)," in *Dianying zazhi* (*Movie Magazine*), in *Zhongguo zaoqi dianying huakan* (vol.2), around 1924, pp. 564-566.

The film industry was also celebrated for promoting film star's fashion consumption as a symbol of women's self-identity. In the film segment from *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (*Yinmu yanshi*, 1931),⁶² the scenes of the heroine Wang Fengzhen applying make-up was stressed to highlight her ambition to pursue success in her career. The once popular film star had fallen out of favour with her husband when she became a housewife after their marriage. When Wang was invited back to the studio to make a film, her husband suddenly rediscovered her attraction and worried he might lose his wife. Before Wang left for the film studio, her husband tried in various ways to stop her from going back to the film industry. However, she did not have the patience to listen to him and instead enjoyed looking into the mirror as she applied make-up. In this film, indulging in her own image and ignoring her husband suggests that the heroine re-gained her confidence and believed in a tangible success promised by a fashionable film star's career. This example promoted the idea that a woman could earn respect from others by being film stars, and her fashionable appearance was a symbol of charm, confidence, and self-respect. By portraying the film star as a fashionable and confident woman, the film industry promoted itself.

Fan magazines also made efforts to advocate fashionable film stars as the icons of modernity in order to gain certain prestige for film stars they were willing to promote. For example, the star Tan Ying who dressed fashionably was seen as the representation of "civilization (*wenming*)".⁶³ Another example is in a translated magazine essay in the film magazine *Silverland* (*Xin yinxing*), originally written by Mary Pickford on her hairstyle. Pickford claimed that the short hair "accords with the aesthetic and represents the spirit of the times (*shihe shidai de mei, daibiao shidai de jingshen*)". She considered short hair suitable for life's fast pace and the freedom of one's thinking.⁶⁴ Therefore, in order to play the role of "genuine modern person (*zhenzheng de xiandai ren*)", she had to have her hair cut shorter to reflect her

⁶² *Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (*Yinmu yanshi*), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1931). The first half of this film was lost at some point in history; the second half is now preserved at the China Film Archive, where I was able to view it.

⁶³ Zhang Zhijuan, "Tan Ying de xuexiao shenghuo -- Tan Ying shoudao de xin (Tan Ying's Life at School -- the Letter Tan Ying Received)" *Qingqing dianying* (*Qingqing Film*), 1934.

⁶⁴ Mary Pickford, Ji Bing and Yan Xingtong, trans., "Qingwen: wo keyi jianfa ma (Excuse me: May I Have a Hair Cut?)," *Xin yinxing* (*Silverland: Chinese Photoplay Magazine*), October 1928. p. 17.

characters.⁶⁵ The Chinese editor of this magazine highlighted and re-stressed Pickford's points - "we now need to free ourselves from any restrictions to our body, including long hair...long hair is not beautiful in modern times, because it does not fit the modern times and should not be included in modern fashion (*xiandai chaoliu*)".⁶⁶ It is not known for certain whether Pickford did write such an article, but it is clear that short hair was recognised as liberation for mind and body, a symbol of embracing the modern spirit and abandoning outdated tradition. Stars who adopted this hairstyle were regarded as supporting these ideologies, and in their own words, becoming representatives of modern people.

In order to sell consumer goods, advertising campaigns also portrayed film stars as loyal customers and asserted that stars shopping for specific products represented their support of different ideas relating to nation building and modernisation. For example, star consumption of China-made spearmint (*liulanxiang*) toothpaste was promoted as being patriotic.⁶⁷ Wearing athletic shoes was viewed as a representation of star's "spirit of healthy beauty (*jianmei jingshen*)",⁶⁸ which was seen as one of ideal characteristics of a modern Chinese woman in the popular physical culture.⁶⁹

An illustration of how the consumer industry and the film industry used agendas from popular ideologies to promote a star's image as a model modern person is Ruan Lingyu's advertising for a skin whitening product *Yidixiang* in *Shenbao*.⁷⁰ The advertisement featured Ruan at the center, and her hand-writing reads that this product helped her "to gain success with acting, social life, and received admiration from others" (see Figure 3.3). Both Ruan's picture, which portrays her as happy whilst enjoying success, and her hand-writing endorsed the product. At the same time, the advertisement also re-affirmed the film star's image as a successful individual. Thus, this advertisement not only promoted the product, but also encouraged female fans to consider their profession and social life. And the star

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁷ "Liulanxiang yagao (Grena's Spearmint Dental Cream)" *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)*, July 1933, p. 16.

⁶⁸ "Xiongdi qiuxie (Brothers' Athletic Shoes)" *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)*, April 1933, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: a History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2004), pp. 91-95.

⁷⁰ *Shenbao* (January 24, 1935).

Ruan Lingyu, whose status as a successful film star was reconfirmed in the advertisement, was both a promoter of consumer industry and an icon of modernity.



Figure 3.3. Advertisement for a skin-whitening product, featuring star Ruan Lingyu⁷¹

3.3.2 Criticisms of the Consumption of Stars

Fashion and its association with stars' modernity also had an adverse effect, and were equally mocked and criticised. For instance, the popular press labeled Hollywood fashion as “an infectious disease (*liuxingbing*)” or “the disease of the times (*shidaibing*)”.⁷² Therefore, stars who closely followed fashion were also regarded as patients who needed to be cured from this disease. In traditional Chinese society performing had been often associated with less respectable professions such as prostitution. This view still lingered on into the 1920s and the 1930s. Young girls left home and joined this notorious entertainment business, which was seen as suspicious. As a result, many critics claimed that women joined the film industry for financial gains and to satisfy their desire for material goods.⁷³

Those who had a strong sense of social responsibility would criticise stars' excessive shopping as a symbol for this lack of social responsibility, which would

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Nümingxing yu kuzi (Female Stars and Trousers),” *Linglong*, 1933. Issue 95, p. 689.

⁷³ Michael G. Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). pp. 139-140.

further demonstrate their moral degradation. This notion was well presented in the fictional illustration *A Female Star's Romance* (Yige nümingxing de luomansi)⁷⁴ published in the fan magazine *Qingqing Film* (Qingqing dianying). The opening scene is set in a fashion shop, where a female star is shopping for “[fashionable] dresses that were ahead of the times (1935) (*1935 nian de chaoshidai zhuangshu*)”. The anonymous star, called Miss (*xiaojie*), finds the most expensive outfit in the fashion catalogue but still asks for something more costly. When she learns from the shop attendant that there are none more expensive dresses available, she then looks down upon all styles within the catalogue, leaves the shop and gets in her Ford without buying anything. After she leaves, the shop attendant immediately raises the prices of all clothes in the catalogue. The remaining story reveals the later whereabouts of this star throughout the evening: she dates a rich man in a cinema who drives a Buick; then the two dance in a ballroom and she makes him promise to shop with her the next day; her night ends with her sharing his bed in his hotel room at the International Hotel. There is a critical message, clearly revealed in the last paragraphs of the story: when in 1935 the moon shone upon the faces of the poor, the Miss who did not see the moon in the hotel room was enjoying a romance with a rich man.

The irony and the criticism of the star's fashion was not only addressed in the narrative of the story, but also shown in the illustrations. As shown in Figure 3.4, the heroine was a sexy modern girl who had bobbed hair, painted face, and wore high heels and a body-revealing dress.⁷⁵ To others her eyesight was blocked by her hair, which covered half of her face. The fact that she did not look at others around her suggested her selfishness.

⁷⁴ Cunyin, “Yige nümingxing de luomansi (A Female Star's Romance),” *Qingqing dianying* (*Qingqing Film*), December 1934.

⁷⁵ Ibid.



Figure 3.4. *Yige nümingxing de luomansi* (A Female Star's Romance)

The heroine of the story only sought material as well as personal pleasures. She only cared about herself; seduced rich men with her sexual attractiveness, and ultimately used her body for material gain. Her fashionable appearance stands for sexual attractiveness, and fashion demonstrates her vanity, which was suggested as degenerating her moral principles. Such notion was also typical in social criticisms towards modern girls. Modern girls were generally criticised as being “superficial”, including being “degenerated (*duoluo*)”, “vain (*xurong*)”, “extravagant (*shechi*)”, and “slavish to foreign [products]”.⁷⁶ Therefore, female film stars, regarded as part of the modern girl group, also became the target of criticism.

In the conservative discourse that believed in traditional gender role of women as good wives and caring mothers saw the stars’ pursuit of fashion as a sign of their

⁷⁶ Dong, “Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl.” p. 214.

vanity, which would threaten the traditional role of women. As mentioned above in Ruan Lingyu's advertisement, she claimed that this product helped her with social life (*jiaoji*).⁷⁷ In the same vein, consumption of fashion products also meant the achievement of a successful social life. Therefore, luxury fashion products and social mobility were rejected as leading to the abandonment of domestic life and traditional gender roles. A film magazine article introducing Yang Naimei's life after her marriage indicated this concern.⁷⁸ According to the writer, when she was at the peak of her performing career, Yang was "coquettish and romantic (*fengsao langman*)" and "loved to make friends (*hao jiaoyou*)". However, after her marriage, she wore simple "cotton-made clothes (*buyi sufu*)", did not buy new leather shoes (*pixie*), never socialized and instead stayed at home all the time. The writer further commented on her current situation in relation to her attitude to life, as it "turned good (*xiang shan*)".⁷⁹ Yang Naimei was known in Shanghai for her outrageous fashion style and for setting trends in the 1920s for other women. In this article, her simple dress was connected to her tranquil domestic life, which was in contrast with her previous image as a fashionable social woman. From conservative discourses, it was clear that a good wife, content with simple dressing and a domestic life, was praised, whereas the fashionable urban woman with her own social circle, was deemed improper. Therefore, within the realm of conservative discourse, the fashionable look of a film star symbolised her nature as a femme fatale.

Sometimes, even film stars, who were often the object of social criticism for their fashion would adopt similar views from the public on vanity and pleasure-seeking⁸⁰ to criticize other companies' stars or other stars. By doing so, they aimed to establish a positive image for themselves. In a magazine article, Gao Qianping criticised some other female stars for not taking acting as a respectable career, and their motivation for joining the film industry was totally driven by vanity

⁷⁷ *Shenbao*, January 24, 1935.

⁷⁸ Kangyou, "Yang Naimei jiahou zhi shenghuo: anfen, jianliang, yuqian panruoliangren (Yang Naimei's Life after Marriage: Quiet, Thrifty, and Have Become a Different Person)," *Dianying xinwen* (Movie News), July 7, 1935.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Michael G. Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s," in Yingjin Zhang, ed. *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). p. 139.

(*xurongxin*).⁸¹ Gao further explained that those stars would use their fame to seduce rich men, who would finally obtain them in exchange for material goods.⁸² She did not single out any particular star in her article, but only tried to separate herself from the vain stars she criticised. This article shows that stars were easily associated with materialistic individuals, but also could use this discourse for self-promotion.

No matter how stars' fashionable appearance was interpreted, it is certainly the case that stars were seen as models who could show how people should or would behave in modern society. Therefore, the different interpretations towards film stars' appearances can be seen as a reflection of the conflicting opinions on the changing culture and social norms in Chinese society.

3.4 Models for Professionalisation

In 1934, director Bu Wancang published an advertisement to recruit a leading actress for his new film *Golden Times* (*Huangjin shidai*). His requirements were as follows:

- (1) Must have studied in a middle school.
- (2) Must not have any bad habits (*e'lie shihao*), and should be able to endure hardship and stand hard work.
- (3) Between 18 and 24 years old.
- (4) Interested in exploring film art.
- (5) Submit a short essay titled "the Future of Domestic Film"⁸³

The press publication that published this advertisement commented: "such strict conditions were unprecedented".⁸⁴ Indeed, the ideal film actor depicted in the advertisement was very different from the image of actors in traditional culture. Traditionally, acting was regarded as *jianye* (mean profession), and actors were seen as uneducated and less respectable people, who belonged to the lower caste of

⁸¹ Gao Qianping, "Dianying nümingxing de qiancheng (Female Film Stars' Future)," *Xiandai dianying* (*Modern Screen*), July 1933.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Bu Wancang zhengqiu 'Huangjin shidai' nüzhujue (Bu Wancang Recruiting a Leading Actress for *Golden Times*)," *Linglong*, Issue 133. 1934. p. 509.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

society. Due to their low social status and poor economic situation, the public often associated actors with “an inherent moral turpitude” in traditional Chinese society.⁸⁵ However, the advertisement presented a very idealistic image of a film actress: an intelligent and educated person (points 2 and 5), a worker who is dutiful and devoted to the film industry (point 2), an artist (point 4) and a person with a good predisposition (point 2). These requirements were idealistic, but not unusual to find in a film studio’s promotional materials and in intellectual essays by film critics.

Since the film industry started to establish itself in the 1920s, in order to earn a good reputation, it dealt with the traditional bias against both actors and the acting profession. It established a range of norms of conduct for actors and standards of professional qualifications of being an actor, aiming at portraying actors’ images as modern workers who served a modern industry.

This section will discuss the different aspects of the professionalization of actors: depicting them as modern workers in a modern industry by articulating the relationship between the filmmaking and modern science and technology; advocating actors as performing artists rather than amateurs; and calling for professional acting ethics. Those who promoted the modernization of the national film industry (as well as the modernization of the country) also actively supported the industry’s agendas for professionalisation. In such discourses, film actors were expected to be model professionals, which, I would argue, brought them prestige and higher social status.

However, it was also not rare to see criticisms that attacked actors if they failed to meet the standards of being qualified and responsible professionals. These criticisms warned that unqualified actors would be harmful for the development of the industry and supported the idea that actors should be qualified professionals.

Michael Chang looks at the social ideologies on female stars in the 1920s and the 1930s and contrasted the concepts of “amateur/starlet” with “star” in public discourse.⁸⁶ He argues that during the 1920s, actresses were characterised as

⁸⁵ Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 23.

⁸⁶ Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s.”, p. 129.

degenerate, corrupted, and deceptive starlets who were morally and sexually suspect.⁸⁷ While this discourse did not disappear during the 1930s, praise for film stars and their artistic merits, as well as innocent “true characters (*bense*)” emerged in their studios’ “promotional discourse” and consequently in fan magazines.⁸⁸ However, the definition of star was rather confusing in the public discourse at that time. Some saw stars (*mingxing*) as the most talented actors,⁸⁹ while others criticised stars, for they were only associated with fame, and preferred to apply the term actor (*yanyuan*) to those who were serious about acting.⁹⁰ However, the term star was indiscriminately used in the press, especially in promotional materials where any starlet could be seen as a star. For the purpose of clarity, the terms “star” and “actors” will have no hierarchical differentiation in the following.

3.4.1 Working with Modern Science and Technology

When the film industry took off in the 1920s, it was straight away confronted with a general misunderstanding within public discourse. According to Mingxing studio manager Zhou Jianyun, and the film history book from 1927, *Filmdom in China* (*Zhongguo yingxi daguan*), the public did not consider working in the film industry as a decent profession since males and females worked together, and some smaller film studios were the result of business opportunism and, were weak in management.⁹¹ Therefore, the film industry always promoted itself as an advanced modern industry whose growth relied on modern science and technology as well as professional workers.

This notion is well illustrated in Figure 3.5 below. The cartoon *Work Hard and Bring Credit to Chinese Films Industry* (*Nuligongzuo wei Zhongguo dianyingjie zhengguang*) was published in Liuhe Film Company’s publication *Film Monthly*

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 128.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 128, 142, 149.

⁸⁹ Shen Qianli, “Xiangei dianying mingxingmen (To Film Stars)”, *Shenbao*, November 17, 1932.

⁹⁰ “Nümingxing he guansi (Female Stars and Lawsuits)” *Linglong*, Issue 84.1933. p. 187.

⁹¹ Jianyun, “Benkan zhi shiming (Mission for Our Publication)”, in *Mingxing gongsi tekan “Zuihou zhi liangxin” Hao* (*Mingxing Studio’s Special Issue on “the Last Conscience”*, 1925; Xu Chiheng, “Hushang ge zhipian gongsi zhi chuanglishi ji jingguo qingkuang (The Foundation and Development of Film Studios in Shanghai)”, in *Zhongguo yingxi daguan* (*The Filmdom in China*) (Shanghai: Shanghai hezuo chubanshe (Shanghai cooperation publishing), 1927).

(Dianying yuekan).⁹² It shows a naked man with spread wings looking through a camera. It seems his wings are helping him move forward. He has one foot standing on a ship and the other on an automobile. The pair of glasses symbolise the intellectual qualities attached to the film industry and its workers. This figure could be interpreted as a devoted film director, but also as the symbol of the developing Chinese film industry, or even as a hard-working member of the industry.

This illustration brings about the similarity with a Taoist deity: Nezha, who flies in the sky by riding his special weapon “wind fired wheels (*fenghuolun*)”. According to legend, the magical wind fired wheels under Nezha’s feet helped him move fast in the sky. In this case, the magical weapon is replaced with modern inventions - the automobile and the ship. It conveys the message that further development of the film industry depends on modern technology rather than imaginary mythical power.

The title of this illustration called for building an honorable national film industry. It shows that the modernization of the film industry was related to the idea of nation-building. To further proving this point, when discussing the demand of domestic cinema, one author claimed that cinema is the latest artistic creation, which depends on the electrical industry (*dianqi shiye*) and photography (*sheyingshu*).⁹³

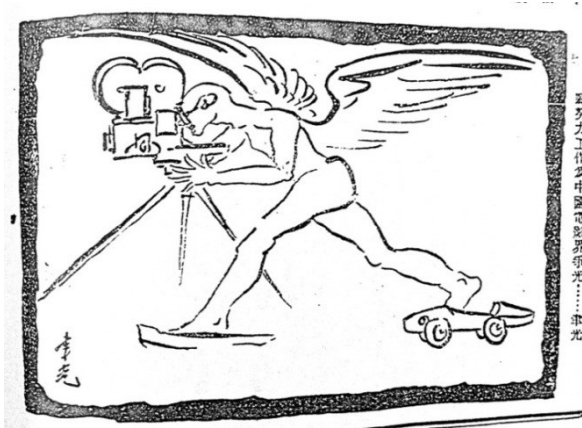


Figure 3.5. *Work Hard and Bring Credit to the Chinese Film Industry* (*Nuligongzuo wei Zhongguo dianyingjie zhengguang*)

⁹² Bingguang, “Nuligongzuo wei Zhongguo dianyingjie zhengguang (Work Hard and Bring Credit to the Chinese Film Industry)” *Dianying yuebao* (*Film Monthly*), September 1928.

⁹³ Ma’er Xiansheng, “Zhongguo yingpian zhi xuyaoliang (the Demand for Chinese Films)” *Mingxing gongsu tekan* “*Weihunqi*” hao (*Mingxing Studio’s Special Issue “Fiancee”*), 1926.

The film industry was regarded an industry relying on advanced modern technology and science. Pictures and photo essays used to show star involvement with the film industry also connected stars with modern science and technology, which would gain a sense of professionalism to stars. As shown in Figure 3.6: two female stars appeared in their working site, surrounded by all sorts of filmmaking equipment.⁹⁴



Figure 3.6. *In Chinese Film Studios (Zhongguo dianying shezhichang zhong)*

Figure 3.7 was one of the pictures in a photo essay titled *Movie: From Screen-writing to Projecting (Dianying: congbianju zhi fangying)* published in *The Young Companion*.⁹⁵ This photo essay consisted of a range of pictures showing the process of film making, from the initial discussions about the making of a film to the final editing of the film. This lengthy process involved building the different sets, arranging the lighting system, directing, acting, filming, printing and editing.

⁹⁴ “Zhongguo dianying shezhichang zhong (In Chinese Film Studios),” *Linglong* no. 116 (1933): p. 1966.

⁹⁵ “Dianying: Congbianju zhi fangying (Movie: From Screen-writing to Projecting)” *Liangyou (The Young Companion)*, March 1935. pp. 44-45.

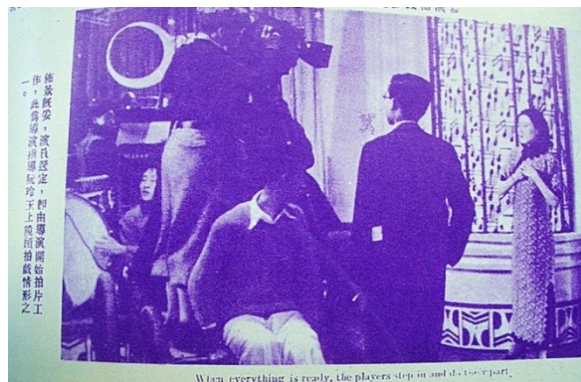


Figure 3.7. “When everything is ready, the players step in and do their part.”

This particular picture shows Ruan Lingyu in front of a camera. The Chinese and English text at the margins describes her stepping into the scene and performing under the director’s cues. Every detail in this picture was modern: the camera was set on a dolly and controlled by several modernly dressed cameramen, the star wore a fashionable *qipao*, the director wore a suite, and even the setting was modernly decorated (the art deco style windowsill and the musical notes on the curtain). This further supported the idea that film studios provided a modern working environment, in which film stars worked with modern machines and other professionals. It should be noted that Ruan Lingyu appears to the right of the picture, while her co-workers and the camera occupy the center. In normal star publicity pictures, the focus was always given to the star. However, the focus of this picture was the working scene. Therefore, this picture may leave the impression with the readers that film star was also associated with modern science and technology, like other film-makers. The above pictures present a modern and promising working environment, which may have inspired and encouraged other young people to join the industry.

3.4.2 Acting Artists

Within the film promotion discourse, the nature of acting was often regarded as a form of art, and film actors were presented as artists. Mingxing Film Studio manager Zhou Jianyun expressed this concept in an essay written in 1925: “an artist’s career is

art”, therefore, all actors and actresses were artists who “sacrificed themselves for art”.⁹⁶ Many early filmmakers and critics held the view that the educational function of films, which was believed to have the potential to transform Chinese society, was often seen as the most important and primary artistic character. Zheng Zhengqiu claimed that art, including film art, is able to “create a vigorous atmosphere to change the deathly still China”.⁹⁷ He argued that “it is the artists’ responsibility to change society”.⁹⁸ Film magazine editor Gu Kenfu also claimed that “film is the guideline for social education and a precious treasure of art”.⁹⁹ The idea of promoting film art in order to educate the public was widely shared by many, including *Silver Star* (*Yinxing*),¹⁰⁰ *Silver Screen Criticism* (*Yinmu pinglun*),¹⁰¹ and *Film Pictorial* (*Dianying huabao*).¹⁰²

Therefore actors were seen as a crucial part in the art of film, as expressed in the quote “the soul of a film”.¹⁰³ In terms of actors’ duties and functions, some critics saw them as directors’ “tools (*gongju*)”, who were used to present the directors/screen writers’ ideas through their acting.¹⁰⁴ However, other critics, including film actors such as Wang Ruilin (1905-1956) and Ai Xia (1912-1934) asserted that actors were not tools but creative artists, because film acting itself is an art.¹⁰⁵ Both ideas saw actors as artists, although the former emphasised actors’ acting skills to express directors’ opinions, whereas the later stressed the creativity in acting. Being “tools” of the director, actors were required to understand the deep thoughts

⁹⁶ Jianyun, “Benkan zhi shiming (Mission for Our Publication)”

⁹⁷ Zheng Zhengqiu, “Mingxing gongsi faxing yuekan de biyao (the Necessity of Mingxing Company to Publish Monthly Journal)” *Yingxi zazhi* (*The Motion Picture Review*), 1922.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Gu Kenfu, “Chuangkanci (Inaugural Editorial)” *Film Magazine* (*Dianying Zazhi*), 1924.

¹⁰⁰ “Juantouhua (Foreword)” *Yinxing* (*Silver Star*), 1926.

¹⁰¹ “Juantouyu (Foreword)” *Yinmu Pinglun* (*Silver screen Criticism*), 1926.

¹⁰² Zheng Boqi, “Dengchang de gaobai (Confessions on Appearance)” *Dianying huabao* (*Film Pictorial*), 1933.

¹⁰³ Wukongsheng, “Dianying Yanyuan Yingyou Zhi jingshen (Opinions That Film Actors Should Have),” *Shenbao*, February 2, 1925.

¹⁰⁴ Yuan Congmei, “Yanji yanjiu (Acting Studies)” *Wenyi dianying* (*Motion Picture Classic*), February 1935. p. 41. Wukongsheng, “dianying yanyuan yingyou zhi jingshen (Opinions That Film Actors Should Have)” *Shenbao*, February 2, 1925.

¹⁰⁵ Zhang Min, “Lun yanyuan (Discussions on Actors),” *Wenyi dianying* (*Motion Picture Classic*), January 1935. p. 6. Wang Ruiling, “Cong biaoyanyishu shudao zhongguo dianyingjie (From the Art of Acting to Chinese Filmdom)” *Yingxi zazhi* (*The Film Magazine*), August 1930. p. 32. Ai Xia, “Zenyang caisuanwei yige ‘yanyuan’ (How to Become an ‘Actor’)” *Shenbao*, November 29, 1932. Wang Ruiling, “Cong biaoyanyishu shudao zhongguo dianyingjie (From the Art of Acting to Chinese Filmdom).” p. 32.

and ideologies of the film and have excellent acting skills to represent them.¹⁰⁶ As creative artists, actors were also expected to have certain qualities that would promise good artistic creation.¹⁰⁷ The public's expectations towards an actor's professional qualities fall into two categories: abundant knowledge and the actor's personality. In a newspaper article, the two categories were termed as "intelligence (*zhineng*)" and "personality (*renge*)".¹⁰⁸

It was believed by contemporary critics and filmmakers that actors should not only have knowledge about acting skills, but also about society and life.¹⁰⁹ For example, one film critic states that actors should not only read books about the film technology and performing art, but also need to understand "basic science", especially "social science".¹¹⁰ The requirement for knowledge in "social science" could be understood in relation to the educational function of films. Since the film industry as the "greatest new industry in Republican China", which could "help educate society"¹¹¹, the mission of an actor was recognised as delivering educational content to the public through film. The actor Wang Ruilin depicted his work as "living images" that represented "nonliving ideas".¹¹² Inasmuch as actors needed to portray different people and different lives, which represented the social conditions,¹¹³ ideal actors were required to understand all sorts of social ideologies and the current situation of society. In the account of the above mentioned film critic, knowledge regarding society was termed as "social science". According to other people's views, knowledge on society was termed differently, such as "consciousness of proliferation in a new society (*xinshehui duoxingtai de yishi*)"¹¹⁴ or

¹⁰⁶ Wukongsheng, "Dianying yanyuan yingyou zhi jingshen (Opinions That Film Actors Should Have)."

¹⁰⁷ Wang Ruiling, "Cong biaoyanyishu shudao zhongguo dianyingjie (From the Art of Acting to Chinese Filmdom)," *Yingxi Zazhi (The Film Magazine)*, August 1930, p. 33.

¹⁰⁸ "Dianyingjia zhuzhong rengezhi lun zhe (Film Masters Who Emphasise Character)," *Shenbao*, September 8, 1931.

¹⁰⁹ Shen, "Xiangei dianying mingxing men (To Film Stars)."

¹¹⁰ Xu, "Yige modeng yanyuan (A Modern Actor)." p. 12.

¹¹¹ Cheng Shuren, "Chuangkanci (Foreword)" in *Zhonghua yingye nianjian (the Year Book of the Chinese Film Industry)*, 1927.

¹¹² Wang Ruiling, "Cong biaoyanyishu shudao zhongguo dianyingjie (from the Art of Acting to Chinese Filmdom)." p. 32.

¹¹³ Huang Jiamo, "Guanyu dianying yanyuan (On Film Actors)" *Dianying yuebao (Film Monthly)*, 1929, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Shen, "Xiangei dianying mingxing men (To Film Stars)."

“social conditions (*shehui qingxing*)”.¹¹⁵ In order to understand society and various ideologies, the educational background was considered crucial to the profession. Therefore, filmmakers and critics called upon the educated, especially young graduates, to attend the film industry and become actors. When recruiting actors for the Central Film Studio (*Zhongyang dianying sheyingchang*), director Huang Tianzuo (1908-1986) called for educated people, especially “male and female students (*nannü xuezimen*)” to take part.¹¹⁶ One critic suggested film schools should recruit high school graduates.¹¹⁷ The same requirement regarding actors’ educational background was also found in Bu Wancang’s recruitment advertisement, as shown at the beginning of this section.

The personality (*renge*) of stars was seen as another crucial factor that would decide their level of interpreting roles.¹¹⁸ It was believed that only actors with a good personality and high moral standards were able to portray a beautiful soul on the screen.¹¹⁹ However, the relationship between profession and personality was not consistent with that of the profession and morality in traditional culture. As mentioned, actors were traditionally seen as immoral. Due to the educational element in the art of film, actors were recognised as artists who had the responsibility to “criticise and guide audiences’ lives (*duiyu rensheng jin you piping he zhidao de shiming*)”¹²⁰ and “enlighten society (*qidao shehui*)”.¹²¹ Being audiences’ guides, and also due to their presence in mass media, actors were considered as social models, who were “the spiritual idols of the public (*jingshen de ou’xiang*)”.¹²²

Therefore, in order to emphasise actors’ positive personal traits, adhering to high moral standards became an important aspect of self-promotion. For example, in order to prove that Shenzhou Film Studio was of high quality, its stars Yan Yuexian,

¹¹⁵ “Dianyingjia zhuzhong rengezhi lun zhe (Film Masters Who Emphasise Character).”

¹¹⁶ Huang Tianzuo, “Zhongyang dianying sheyingchang zhengqiu yanyuan zhi biao zhun (Central Film Studio’s Requirements for Recruiting Actors)” *Shidai Dianying*, January 22, 1935.

¹¹⁷ Huang, “Guanyu dianying yanyuan (On Film Actors).”

¹¹⁸ “Dianyingjia zhuzhong rengezhi lun zhe (Film Masters Who Emphasise Character),” *Shenbao*, September 8, 1931.

¹¹⁹ “Dianyingjia zhuzhong rengezhi lun zhe (Film Masters Who Emphasise Character).”

¹²⁰ Huang, “Guanyu dianying yanyuan (On Film Actors).”

¹²¹ Xu, “Yige modeng yanyuan (A Modern Actor).”

¹²² Tianzuo, “Zhongyang dianying sheyingchang zhengqiu yanyuan zhi biao zhun (Central Film Studio’s Requirements for Recruiting Actors).”

Ding Ziming and Ruan Meiling were especially praised as “having various artistic talents and moral virtues (*duocai shude*)”.¹²³ The star Xuan Jingling from Mingxing Studio used to be an underage prostitute before becoming an actress.¹²⁴ In the promotional material used to announce her film debut *The Last Conscious* (*zuihou de liangxin*, 1925), Xuan was portrayed as a woman with strong willpower. It stressed her motivation for joining the film industry: to seek the development of personal character (*gexing*).¹²⁵ Furthermore, she “did not want to be restricted by the times (*shou shidai de yueshu*)” nor allow others to hold her back in developing of her personal character.¹²⁶ Importantly, her background was not mentioned in the promotional material. Instead, she became a laudable independent woman, who was brave enough to rebel against social restriction towards female professionals.

Such an idealistic image of acting artists with professional competence and high moral standards actually brought some prestige to film actors. It also provided a potential upward social mobility to actors who were at the lower caste of the society in traditional culture.

3.4.3 Calling for Professional ethics

Figure 3.8 is a satirical cartoon published in *Film Monthly* (*Dianying yuebao*), part of United Exchange (*liuhe*) Studio.¹²⁷ In the picture, a shocked man is staring at a female star partly covered by clouds. Each piece of cloud represents a particular aspect that damaged the star’s image, including “inappropriate subsidiary occupations (*buguize de fuye*), non-serious relationships (*lanwushi de lianai*), being romantic (*langman*), and appearing on theatre stages (*qinzi dengtai biaoqian*, which criticises stars for not concentrating on their film career but being keen to earn extra income by using their star fame to attract audiences in stage performance)”.

¹²³ Xu Chiheng, “Hushang ge zhipian gongsi zhi chuanglishi ji jingguo qingkuang (The Foundation and Development of Film Studios in Shanghai).”

¹²⁴ Yan, *Mingxing He Tade Shidai: minguo Dianyingshi xintan (Stars and Their Times: A New Inspection on Republican Film History)*. p. 26.

¹²⁵ Lubo, “‘Zuihou de liangxin’ zhong zhi er nüjue (Two Actresses in the Film ‘the Last Conscious’).”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ding Song, “Concealing the Light (Yangai Guangmang),” *Dianying yuebao (Film Monthly)*, August 1928.



Figure 3.8. Concealing the Light (Yangai guangmang)

This cartoon suggests that the charm and attractiveness of a female star could be desecrated by her wrongdoings, which shocked and disappointed the audience. It delivers a message that in order to be qualified and respectable film stars who maintained their charisma to audiences, actresses need to regulate their personal lives and improve their personality.

This cartoon is a reflection of the film industry's formulation of professional ethics codes for actors. The film industry set up professional ethics codes for actors, as for other professions in other industries, and this was an important aspect of the professionalization of actors.

Professional ethics codes for actors appeared as early as the 1920s. For instance, according to a 1925 essay published in a promotional material of Great China Film Studio (*Dahongguo yingpian gongsi*), all actors and other employers in the studio were required to wear the same uniform at the working site, which would be

“convenient for work”.¹²⁸ It also promoted an equal collaboration between their actors and other members of the studio. It stated that there were no hierarchical differences amongst their employers, so actors also should help other employers to do hard labor such as carrying furniture and sets.¹²⁹ Another example is in filmmaker Zhou Jianyun’s essay on the future development of the Chinese film industry. He particularly singled out actors and actresses (*nannü yanyuan*) and summoned them to correct previous forms of behaviour, cherish and protect their own reputation, work hard to acquire knowledge and new acting skills, and turn away from the temptations outside the film industry.¹³⁰

Although different professional ethics codes were formulated and applied to stars, all of them aimed at increasing the stars’ social recognition and respect from the public, which also bestowed them with some social prestige. Such professional ethic codes also established the images of film actors as modern model workers.

3.4.4 Bad Actors, Threats to the Industry

Although actors were promoted as artists with social responsibilities and professionalism, they also often faced criticism for their performance. It was a widely shared idea that film stars’ inappropriate behaviour tarnished their image in the eyes of fans and even harmed the development of the domestic film industry.

Since actors were seen as fundamental elements in the art of film and the film industry, they were also expected to be dutiful workers and artists and held responsible for boosting the domestic film industry as well as guiding society. As a result, they were blamed for holding back the development of the film industry if they did not exert themselves to progress within their careers. For instance, when a film critic commented and criticised the current situation in the domestic film industry in the late 1920s, he warned that actors’ social lives would hinder their

¹²⁸ Shuangyun Zhu, “Dazhongguo yingpian gongsi zhi yuanqi jiqi jingguo (the Foundation and Development of the Great China Company),” *Dazhongguo gongsi tekan: Shei shi muqin (Great China Company Special Issue: Who Is Mother)*, no. 1 (1925).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Zhou Jianyun, “Jinhou de nuli (Endeavors in the Future),” *Dianying yuebao (Film Monthly)*, October 1928.

progress, and that their “tendency to worship money (*baijin de quxiang*)” will lead to the bankruptcy of the domestic film industry.¹³¹ Another critic commented that many actors were “licentious young men and women”, who not only had low moral standard, but also lacked talent and professional training. He suggested such actors would be harmful for the development of film studios as well as the future of the Chinese film industry.¹³²

The development of the Chinese film industry of course did not only rely on actors. Other filmmakers, including scriptwriters, directors, cameramen, and investors as well as distributors were all considered responsible.¹³³ Blaming actors for their irresponsibility suggests that contemporary critics saw actors’ status in the industry as more important than other filmmakers. These criticisms of actors actually again reconfirmed and re-emphasised the idea that actors should be devoted workers and artists who would have influence over the society. Since film acting was increasingly considered a respectable profession, I would propose that actors’ general social image in the public discourse was much contested.

3.5 Models beyond the Film Set

What stars did in their lives beyond the film set, i.e. details about their private lives, always intrigued fans and followers alike. Studio publicity material portrayed stars’ images in their non-working lives in order to promote them. In addition, fan magazines, driven by the commercial value of stars’ news, were eager to cash in on their private lives. In Richard Dyer’s words “stardom is a reflection of the way stars lead their lives”.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Shen Ziyi, “Jiju ni’er de hua (Some Words That Are Unpleasant to Hear)” *Dianying Yuebao (Film Monthly)*, October, 1928.

¹³² Chunchou, “Zhongguo Dianying Shiye Zhi Qiantu (the Future of Chinese Film Industry),” *Yingguang (Silver Lights)*, no. 10 (1926).

¹³³ Zhiqing Cheng, “Zhongguo Yingjuzhong Jige Zhongyaode Wenti (Several Important Issues in Chinese Cinema),” *Yingxing (Silver Star)*, no. 3 & 4 (1926); Kengran, “Guochan Yingpian Weineng Chongfen Fada Zhi Yuanyin (The Reasons for the Immaturity of Domestic Films),” *Youlian Gongsi Tekan “Yingxiog Er’nu” (Youlian Studio Special Issue “Heroic Sons and Daughters”)* (1927).

¹³⁴ Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. p. 35.

During Hollywood's classic period, film stars' personal stories largely focused on their consumption, success, ordinariness and love.¹³⁵ Much of the space in fan magazines was devoted to introducing the stars' lives beyond the film set, which "is presented as consisting of sports and hobbies".¹³⁶ Stars were also portrayed as idols of consumption whose "private lives are lives of consumption".¹³⁷ Thus, stars and their personal stories reaffirmed values such as entertainment and leisure in a consumer society.¹³⁸ At the same time, film stars' stories of from-rags-to-riches presented and promised the American Dream of upward social mobility.¹³⁹ Stars' love stories, including divorce and related scandals, were seen as the essence of the myth of stardom by Edward Morin.¹⁴⁰ In his research on early Hollywood stardom, Richard deCordova argues that stars' love affairs and marriages became the site for the representation of social moral transgression on the one hand, whilst also constructing their identities on the other.¹⁴¹

Like in Hollywood, audiences' interest in stars' true personalities encouraged Chinese film studios and the print media to reveal stars' private lives. Modelled on Hollywood magazines, the exposés of Chinese stars' personal lives were also managed around topics like consumption, leisure and entertainment and love affairs.

Although focusing on similar topics, the image between Chinese and Hollywood stars regarding their personal lives was different. At the time, Chinese society was not as commercialised as American society, and most stars' salaries could not sustain a lavish lifestyle. This meant that the lives of Chinese stars were not presented as being as costly as those of Hollywood stars. According to Chen Mingyuan, during the 1930s most stars earned similar or slightly less compared to

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 35-46.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

¹³⁸ Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity*. pp. 36-37.

¹³⁹ Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility*. p. 3. Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. p. 42.

¹⁴⁰ Edgar Morin, trans. Richard Howard, *The Stars*, (New York: Grove Press, 1960) pp.175-179, quoted from: Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*. pp. 45-46.

¹⁴¹ Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, 1st ed. (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois UP, 2001). pp. 117-118.

intellectuals, such as writers, university professors and press chief editors.¹⁴² This would suggest that stars' lives were not as luxurious as some may suggest. In addition, due to different social situations and ideologies in the U.S. and Republican China, the personal images of Hollywood stars and Chinese stars were portrayed and valued differently.

This section will examine what kind of private image of Chinese film stars was established in the public discourse in Republican Chinese society. I argue that agendas of different popular social ideologies (e.g. women's emancipation, nation-building ideas, and the shaping of ideal modern individuals) in Republican China partially responsible for influencing stardom were equally responsible for depicting Chinese film stars' image beyond the film set. Next, I will discuss four most common themes regarding stars' personal images: their consumption behaviour, supporting the nation-building project through physical training, their education, and their morality, which all will serve to illustrate how political agendas were adopted in shaping stars' private images.

3.5.1 Stars' Consumption

In commercial campaigns and film studio's publicity photos, stars were portrayed as idols of consumption, whose appeal came from their fashionable looks and status as trendsetters in the fashion circle. By bestowing a range of modernisation-related ideas to both consumption behaviour and consumption goods, stars' shopping for fashion became a representation of their quality of being "modern". In the depiction of stars' consumption in private life, sometimes their image as idols of consumers would be reaffirmed. Sometimes luxury and excessive consumption was reported to be rejected in stars' private lives. Either depiction served to promote the star's image, but with different agendas.

An example is an article on the star Wang Renmei and Jin Yan's wedding. The journalist points out that Wang wore a pair of sports shoes on her wedding reception.

¹⁴² Chen Mingyuan, *Wenhua ren de jingji shenghuo (the Economic Life of Intellectuals and Artists)*, Quanzhen zengxiuban (the New Complemented Edition). (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing, 2009). p. 138.

¹⁴³ Wang Renmei once appeared in an advertisement for sports shoes, and was regarded as “the most healthy and beautiful female star of China” in the advertising text. ¹⁴⁴ Considering the readers’ familiarity with her previous sports shoes’ advertisements, the mentioning of her shoes was again a reaffirmation of her established image as a star who was truly aware of the modern idea of being a healthy beauty.

In the same article, Wang’s image as an icon of modernity was also represented through the report on the star’s rejection of luxury consumption at her wedding celebration. Wang and her husband Jin Yan were portrayed as unconventional modern persons who did not want to be confined by “redundant and tedious traditional custom (*fansu lijie*)” but preferred a simple wedding.¹⁴⁵ They did not hold a wedding banquet nor receive any gifts, but only published a marriage statement in a newspaper and had a small celebration with a few co-workers in their studio.¹⁴⁶ The new couple did not wear traditional wedding dress, such as “long gown and jacket (*changpao magua*)” or “phoenix coronet and red dress (*fengguan hongqun*)”, but chose a casual modern wear, including shirt and western style trousers, an indanthrene blue *qipao* and a knitted jacket.¹⁴⁷ In addition, the couple’s dresses for the wedding celebration were not new, which was interpreted as a symbol of their decision of “working hard for revolution (*kugan geming*)”.¹⁴⁸ The “revolution” does not have any political meaning here, but refers to contributing to the development of the film industry. This implication was revealed by Director Sun Yu’s wedding speech - “the two are very special in our film circles...I hope you two could make some contribution to the industry”.¹⁴⁹ However, according to *Linglong*, Wang’s

¹⁴³ “Xiongdi qiuxie (Brothers’ Athletic Shoes)” *Xiandai dianying (Modern Screen)*, April 1933. p. 22

¹⁴⁴ “Xiongdi qiuxie (Brother's Athletic Shoes)”.

¹⁴⁵ Haitang, “Yiyueyiriyishi Wang Renmei Jinyan Jiehun (Wang Renmei and Jin Yan Married at One O’clock on Januray 1st)” *Dianying (Movie)*, no. 28 (December 1933), Website accessed on November 20, 1021. <http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH/star/text.jsp?textId=005003&starId=005&starName=%CD%F5%C8%CB%C3%C0>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Haitang, “Yiyueyiriyishi Wang Renmei Jinyan jiehun (Wang Renmei and Jin Yan Married at One O’clock on January 1st)”, *Dianying (Movie)*, no. 28 (December 1933).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

family was strongly against their marriage.¹⁵⁰ This could be the real reason behind their ascetic wedding. This article actually celebrated the two as model modern people. To the author of the article, Wang and Jin's qualities of being "modern" were represented in their attitude to consumption: they rejected personal enjoyment and luxury consumption for the wedding (which was considered as their breaking with tradition), and devoted themselves to film production.

3.5.2 Training the Body for the Nation

It was often reported that the personal lives of film stars consisted of various physical activities. Wang Renmei was said to be particularly fond of swimming.¹⁵¹ Jin Yan was known as a hunter.¹⁵² The formation of three major studios' basketball teams (Tianyi, Lianhua, and Mingxing) and competition among them was passionately praised by the press.¹⁵³

Particular preference in introducing film stars' sports-related activities in journalistic reports might have been inspired by modernisation-related ideas, especially since physical exercise was closely connected to the idea of nation-building in Republican China. It was believed that the national body would be strengthened and unified by a fit, competitive and disciplined citizenry.¹⁵⁴ By the 1920s a large group of Chinese modernisers had promoted physical culture as an integral facet of modern society, which could provide "a happy and active life" for China's citizens. Physical culture (*tǐyù*) was also seen as a mean to make Chinese society happy, active, and wealthy equals of their imperialist rivals.¹⁵⁵ It was believed that a healthy China could be achieved only when the whole population was

¹⁵⁰ "Xinhunhou Wang Renmei gen tagege de dabian (Wang Renmei's Debate with Her Brother after the Wedding)" *Linglong*, no. 130 (1934) p. 317; "Huangdie yemao zhi jiehe (the Emperor and the Wild Cat's Marriage)" *Linglong*, no. 127 (1934) p. 126.

¹⁵¹ "Ai youyong de Wang Renmei (the Swimming-lover Wang Renmei)" *Linglong*, no.104 (1933). p. 1264.

¹⁵² "Yingxing shenghuo (The Lives of Film Stars)" *Linglong*, no. 161 (1934). p. 2334.

¹⁵³ "Dianying mingxing de xiaoqian - Aiyundong haoxianxiang (Film Stars' Leisure Activities - Sports-loving Positive Phenomenon)" *Linglong*, no. 81 (1933). p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: a History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*. p. 17.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

healthy and fit.¹⁵⁶ As a result, both men and women were encouraged to attend physical activities. The propagation of physical activities not only appeared in many publications that specialised in promoting physical culture,¹⁵⁷ but also came to general lifestyle magazines. For example, *Linglong* magazine called on its women readers to make progress in physical culture (*tiyu*), as a way “to do some practical work to strengthen the nation (*qieshi de qiangguo gongzuo*).”¹⁵⁸ Physical activity was also regarded as “a way to improve life in new China (*xinzhongguo shenghuo gaishan de fangfa*)”.¹⁵⁹ Film stars, presented as sports’ fans in the media, represented the ideal physically healthy and strong and modern citizens.

An illustrative example could be found in the *Special Issue of Swimming* (*Youyong zhuanhao*) of *Film Life* (*Dianying shenghuo*) magazine.¹⁶⁰ Many female stars appeared in this magazine to introduce the practice. Xu Lai, Li Zhuozhuo (1905-1990), Liang Saishan, Li Mingjian (1916-1979), Diao Banhua (?-?), Ye Qiuxin (1913-1984), Ying Yin (?-1942), and Bai Hong (1919-1992), all wrote articles expressing their passion for swimming and introducing it to readers. In their personal accounts, stars saw swimming as a modern lifestyle to achieve physical health and beautiful figure, required by modern times. Xu Lai claimed her chronic disease from childhood had been cured through swimming.¹⁶¹ Li Zhuozhuo told readers that her general good health and muscled torso all benefited from swimming.¹⁶² Ying Yin once played in the film *Healthy Beauty Movement* (*Jianmei yundong*, 1934) stated her reason for learning to swim:

Indeed, a healthy and beautiful woman of our time should have a pretty physique and be aware of it. Unlike a woman like Lin Daiyu, who looked very fragile and was forgotten with the passing of time.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

¹⁵⁸ “Women cong jintian zuoqi (Let’s start Today)” *Linglong*, no. 64 (August 1932). p. 670.

¹⁵⁹ “Xinzhongguo shenghuo gaishan de fangfa (ways to Improve Life in the New China)” *Linglong*, no. 53 (1932): 130. p. 130.

¹⁶⁰ “Dianying shenghuo: youyong zhuanhao (Film Life: Special Issue on Swimming)” *Dianying shenghuo* (*Film Life*) (August 1935).

¹⁶¹ Xu Lai, “Xiatianli de youyong (Swimming in Summertime)” *Dianying shenghuo* (*Film Life*) (August 1935).

¹⁶² Li Zhuozhuo, “Wode youyongtan (My Opinion on Swimming)” *Dianying shenghuo* (*Film Life*) (August 1935).

Therefore, I should remain a woman of our time, with a beautiful physique ... Physical activity is the only way to achieve it and swimming is the most reasonable sport.¹⁶³

Stars were not only actively involved in swimming practice, but also actively called for more participators. Xu Lai, Diao Binhua, and Bai Hong, all described in detail their time spent with family and friends at the swimming pool, and hinted that swimming should be seen as an ordinary leisure form for all.¹⁶⁴ The dancer-turned-star Liang Saishan even compared the swimming pool with the dancing hall, and claimed that neither of them was mysterious, but ordinary entertainment places for people to do physical exercise.¹⁶⁵

Swimming was associated with the notion of a healthy beauty and modern womanhood. The idea of healthy beauty (*jianmei* or *jiangkangmei*) was seen as a solution to eugenic-related worries for present and future mothers, which had been popular in Chinese public social discourse since the 1920s.¹⁶⁶ Thus, film stars who promoted swimming became active promoters and followers of the discourse of modernisation.

However, some stars promoted swimming as good physical exercise for everyone, whereas others suggested that leisure time in commercial swimming pools was solely exclusive to the poor. Ye Qiuxin mentioned in her article that although country people happily swam in brooks, swimming in commercial pools was an upper-middle class leisure, which could only be afforded by “gentlemen and ladies”.¹⁶⁷ Diao Binhua described her experience of visiting a bathing beach in the outskirts of Shanghai. She gave details of this trip such as making appointment with friends for the date over telephone, preparing soda water, beef and bread as packed

¹⁶³ Yin Ying, “Cong jianmei yundong tan dao wo duiyu youyong (from the Healthy Beauty Movement to My Opinion on Swimming)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935).

¹⁶⁴ Hong Bai, “Youyong manbi (notes on Swimming)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935). Lai Xu, “Xiatianli de youyong (Swimming in Summertime)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935). Diao Binhua, “Haibin yiriyong (One Day at the Seashore)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935).

¹⁶⁵ Liang Saishan, “Youyongchi he tiaowuchang (Swimming Pool and Dancing Hall)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935).

¹⁶⁶ Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: a History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*. p. 91.

¹⁶⁷ Qiuxin Ye, “Xiaoxia (Spend the Summer at Leisure)” *Dianying shenghuo (Film Life)* (August 1935).

lunch, renting a car to the ferry and so on. All these details suggested that she was living a middle-class lifestyle. Therefore, although stars propagated a mass physical culture, they also separated themselves from the masses.

The print media's preference to report female stars' swimming activities may also be due to the commercial value behind the news. By introducing stars' leisure time in the swimming pool, the press was legitimised to show female stars in sexy swimming suits. *Linglong* magazine once mocked female stars by stating that to be a female star, one "does not need to know how to swim, but has to put on sexy swimming suits to show the beautiful curves (*quxianmei*)".¹⁶⁸ The popular ideology of building modern citizenry went hand in hand with commodification and objectification of the female body in shaping stars' off-screen images as sports lovers.

3.5.3 Education as a Process of Professionalisation

The education of stars was also an integral part of exposés on their private lives. It was reported by Chinese journalists that the most successful Hollywood stars were well educated, and many of them were university graduates, including Douglas Fairbanks and Spencer Tracy (1900-1967).¹⁶⁹ The reports on the educational background of Hollywood stars may aim at encouraging Chinese actors to follow their American models. In reality, Chinese stars' educational backgrounds were not always as ideal as the idealistic journalists expected them to be. Therefore pro-star publications portrayed stars as educated persons who were also very aware of how to improve their education.

Any efforts stars made to improve their education was reported and praised. Li Lili for instance was praised for her self-discipline in avoiding socialising during her student life whilst studying at Nanyang College of Commerce (*Nanyang*

¹⁶⁸ "Guochan nüxing he waiguo nüxing" *Linglong*, no. 91 (April 1933): p. 450.

¹⁶⁹ Ouyang Jinping, "Meiguo mingxing de jiaoyu chengdu (American Stars' Education Background)" *Shenbao*, November 22, 1932.

Such information on Hollywood stars' education background was not entirely reliable, but it revealed that to the critic a bookish image of film actors was ideal.

gaoshang).¹⁷⁰ Although it was reported that she did not do well in English, she was still portrayed as a hardworking student who attended every class even during the busiest filmmaking periods.¹⁷¹ Zheng Junli's entry into Jinan University (*Jinan daxue*) was seen as evidence of his ability (*youweide*) and that he was not satisfied with his success as an actor alone – he was eager to learn more.¹⁷² Hu Ping was described by the press as a woman with “abundant knowledge (*xueshi fengfu*)”, who could write screenplays and devote her private time to learning English.¹⁷³ *Linglong* claimed that Gao Qianping and Ai Xia were particularly passionate about writing for newspapers and magazines.¹⁷⁴

As a matter of fact, promoting stars as educated persons began in the 1920s. The manifesto of the resumed *Film Magazine* (*Dianying zazhi*, 1925) announced its plan to publish articles on film stars, an idea which is believed to have taken its inspiration from the Hollywood fan magazine *Photoplay*.¹⁷⁵ *Film Magazine* felt that such articles would allow readers to get to know stars’ “literary talent and knowledge (*wencai yu jianshi*)”.¹⁷⁶

News regarding stars’ talents and studious attitude were especially effective in shaping a distinguished and outstanding star image, in contrast with the on-going public discourse, where film stars were seen as uneducated. Such news celebrated stars’ efforts and achievements in intellectual activities, which were also suggested to be a means of the professionalisation of actors. In a photographic article introducing Gao Qianping throughout one day, “One Day in the Life of a Movie Actress, from Morning till Night” (*Nümingxing yitian daowan de shenghuo*), most activities in the star’s off-screen life were actually preparations for her acting profession.¹⁷⁷ For instance, in the morning, it was said she started the day by spending two hours

¹⁷⁰ “Li Lili de shenghuo (Li Lili’s Life)” *Linglong*, Issue 150.1934. p. 1641; “Li Lili yingwen chi tangtuan (Li Lili Gets a Zero in English Class)” *Linglong*, Issue 191.1935. p. 1555.

¹⁷¹ “Li Lili yingwen chi tangtuan (Li Lili Gets a Zero in English Class).”

¹⁷² “Zheng Junli ru daxue (Zheng Junli Goes to University)” *Linglong*, Issue 73.1932. p. 1099.

¹⁷³ “Hu Ping zizi xueyingwen (Hu Ping Studying English Hard),” *Shenbao*, January 7, 1933; “Congwutai paodao yinmu (From Stage to Screen)” *Shenbao*, January 14, 1933.

¹⁷⁴ “Yingjie xiaoxianhua (Trivia from the Film Circle)” *Linglong*, no. 127 (1934): p. 123.

¹⁷⁵ Ren Jinping, “Benzhi chongkan xuanyan (the Manifesto of Our Resumed Publication)” *Dianying zazhi* (*Film Magazine*), no. 13 (1925).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ “Nümingxing yitian daowan de shenghuo (One Day in the Life of a Film Actress from Morning Till Night)” *Qingqing dianying* (*Qingqing Film*) (March 1935).

putting on makeup.¹⁷⁸ During the day, she “practiced facial expression with a mirror”, which was “a preparation for the shooting in the afternoon”. Then she “read novels and magazines” and “studied facial expressions for film acting”. Writing an article for the press after finishing one day’s work in the studio and learning English after dinner also constituted part of her off-screen life. This article gave importance to Gao’s efforts to improve her education and professional skills, which proved her quality of being a model modern worker. Therefore, the report on her regular practice of professional skills along with other aspects of modern lifestyle of her, such as a healthy diet and hygienic routines made her image as a representation of modern professionals. Similar narrative was also adopted in a journalist interview with star Chen Yumei. In the interview, Chen claimed that both the development of one’s profession and the improvement of education should be endless. Therefore, she always practices professional skills such as learning to make facial expressions and singing.¹⁷⁹

However, stars’ education-related achievements and their motivation to improve intellectual talents were equally questioned. *Linglong* once claimed that “writing articles (*xiewenzhang*)” was a most fashionable activity among female stars in 1933, which replaced the fashion of exercising in 1932.¹⁸⁰ In this account, stars’ writing was seen as merely one wave of fashion, which could be substituted by a different fashion wave. It was reported by *Linglong* that Wang Renmei saw Ai Xia’s articles as a means of self-boasting (*pengziji*).¹⁸¹ Furthermore, publishing articles by stars was regarded as a way of promoting oneself, since the quality of the writing was not always good.¹⁸²

Sometimes, it was the media that pressed stars to present their intellectual abilities. Gao Qianping’s article published in *Film News* (*Dianying xinwen*) only recorded minutiae of a day’s life, such as chatting with colleagues in a dressing

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ “Chen Yumei de zhongzhong (Various Aspects of Chen Yumei),” *Dianying (Movie)*, no. 26 (October 1933).

¹⁸⁰ “Yingjie xiaoxianhua (Trivia from the Film Circule)” *Linglong*, no. 127 (1934): p. 123.

¹⁸¹ “Tantan xiewenzhang de nümíngxíng (Talk About Female Stars Who Write Articles)” *Linglong*, no. 131 (1934): p. 382.

¹⁸² Ibid.

room.¹⁸³ She admitted this article was written upon request.¹⁸⁴ In “Brief Note Written for Yisheng” (*Xiegei Yisheng de duanjian*) Zhou Xuan confessed that “I have no talent and learning (*caixue*) so I do not know how to write”.¹⁸⁵ She further stated that her writing for *Yisheng* magazine was due to the editors’ request.¹⁸⁶ The end of Zhou’s article refers to a slogan that advocates for the pursuit of education and hard work through learning and talent.¹⁸⁷ From these accounts, it is clear that the print media intentionally portrayed stars as educated, intelligent and full of intellectual capabilities.

3.5.4 Love and Morality

Dyer notes that love is a central theme in Hollywood fan magazines.¹⁸⁸ News regarding love and marriage between Hollywood stars had appeared in film magazines in China as early as the 1920s. However, the same topic amongst Chinese stars did not materialize until the early 1930s, when domestic stardom and mass media became more developed. Since more details of their private lives had been revealed from the early 1930s, love-related affairs became a popular topic in the print media. It was a controversial topic, and both praise and criticism of stars’ love-related affairs were not uncommon. In the mass media most concerns for stars’ love life focused on their morality. This research argues that pro-star news would see stars’ love and marriage as a driving force for the future growth of their career and the industry, whereas criticism regarding their relationships would prove chaotic and driven by financial considerations.¹⁸⁹ Such different media representations reflected

¹⁸³ Gao Qianping, “Shigan suibi (Random Thoughts)” *Dianying xinwen (Film News)* 1, no. 2 (July 1935).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Zhou Xuan, “Xiegei yisheng de duanjian (Brief Note Written for Yisheng)” *Yisheng* 2, no. 2 (April 1936).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Zhou, “Xiegei yisheng de duanjian (Brief Note Written for Yisheng).”

¹⁸⁸ Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*, p. 45.

¹⁸⁹ The issue of stars’ love and marriage is very complex and deserves a separate and detailed research. Because it could reflect many different aspects of stardom, such as: the relationship between stars and audiences; the connection between the media representation of stars’ affairs and the changing social opinions of gender roles; love and marriage; stars’ positions in defining and promoting an ideal womanhood; family life and so on. These issues could not be all examined in this thesis. Therefore, I

the film industry's attempt to shape the stars' images as model workers and modern citizens, as well as the reluctant responses received from society.

In positive reports on stars' love affairs, it was often said that their decisions for falling in love or breaking up were for the sake of the film industry. Their pursuit for the art of film even became the legitimate reason for breaking the social conventions on love and marriage. At the same time, star's personality was shaped and their pre-established star image reconfirmed.

An illustrative example is the fan magazine article "Dan Duyu's Success and Yin Mingzhu" (*Dan Duyu de chenggong yu Yin Mingzhu*) on female star Yin Mingzhu and director Dan Duyu's marriage.¹⁹⁰ According to this article, when Dan Duyu first met Yin Mingzhu and invited her to play in his first film, *Sea Vows* (*Haishi*, 1921), she was still a Frenchman's wife.¹⁹¹ It was reported that the social butterfly Yin respected Dan as a genius artist, who was still a poor painter at the time, and their "innocent friendship" was deeply rooted in their shared passion for art. Although they fell in love with one another after collaborating in the film *Sea Vows*, Yin kept silent about her passion towards Dan because she was already married. In the meantime Dan remained single for Yin. When the Frenchman was redeployed back to his country, Yin still promised to reunite with him in the future. She remained a friend with Dan, and became one of investors of his film studio. But the Frenchman never returned to Shanghai. They finally got married since Yin "could not resist Dan's passionate love".¹⁹² In this story Yin was portrayed as a romantic character in a melodrama. She tried to restrain her true love to keep her marry oath to the Frenchman, but abandoned by her white lover she finally married the man with whom she shared the same passion. Although Yin's relationships were to a certain extent outrageous – marrying a foreigner and love out of marriage, all of her behaviour was praised in this article. Her marriage with the Frenchman earned her a

will only explore one aspect of stars' love and marriage, which is coherent to the main argument of this chapter.

¹⁹⁰ Wang Gong, "Dan Duyu de chenggong yu Yin Mingzhu (Dan Duyu's Success and Yin Mingzhu)" *Yinhua* (*Silver Picture*), no. 5 (November 1932).

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

reputation as “a pioneer of breaking the racial boundaries”.¹⁹³ Her love with Dan was praised as “innocent love”, which was based on her respect toward Dan’s artistic talents and her own pursuit of art.¹⁹⁴ However, in Zheng Yimei’s later biography on Yin and Dan, he did not mention Yin’s marriage with the Frenchman at all.¹⁹⁵ The possibly fabricated first marriage reinforced Yin’s established reputation as “Miss Foreign Fashion”. And the magazine article’s accounts on Yin’s marriage to Dan aimed at establishing her image as a legendary and devoted artist whose personal life was motivated by her passion for film.

However, although the noble cause of art was attached to stars’ relationships in some promotional materials, an image of femme fatale was always associated with female stars in the public discourse¹⁹⁶, which was also reflected in media reports on stars’ love and marriage. Female stars were mainly criticised for their money and pleasure-seeking relationships that broke the traditional norms of love and marriage. In a magazine article on female stars’ marriages, the author asserted that female stars would not easily decide to settle down until they find rich businessmen and high-ranking officials.¹⁹⁷ The author further hinted that such a view of marriage caused unmarried female stars to live chaotic personal lives with multiple lovers.¹⁹⁸ A similar attitude could be found in magazine articles on the relationships of female stars. In *Linglong*’s report on Li Minghui’s marriage with an athlete, it tracked back Li’s past love scandals and suggested that the reason for her decision to marry was because she had “played enough and became bored”.¹⁹⁹ *Modern Cinema (Shidai dianying)* considered that Xu Lai’s divorce with Li Jinhui was partly due to her vanity (*xurong*) and searching for a comfortable life, and indicated that Xu had an

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Zheng Yimei, *Yingtian jiuwen - Dan Duyu he Yin Mingzhu (Old News from Filmdom - Dan Duyu and Yin Mingzhu)* (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House), 1982).

¹⁹⁶ Chang, “The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s.” p. 157.

¹⁹⁷ Zhang Dadi, “Nümingxing jiehun mantan (Rambling on Female Stars’ Marriage)” *Dianying Xinwen (Movie News)* 1, no. 7 (August 1935).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ “Luohua youzhu: Li Minghui jia tiyujia (the Falling Flower Is Taken: Li Minghui Married an Athlete)” *Linglong*, no. 134 (1934): p. 567.

affair with the KMT general Tang Shengming (1906-1987).²⁰⁰ The magazine article blamed Xu Lai and some other female stars' chaotic love life on their unprofessional attitude towards the art of film as well as acting.²⁰¹

3.6 Conclusion

As the most visible individuals in society, film stars' personal lives were used by the mass media to illustrate different aspects of the ideal image of modern Chinese men and women.

The film industry shaped stars' images as model workers in a modern national film industry, through advocating the modern and "scientific" working environment of film studios in which actors were working, promoting them as educated acting artists with professional skills, and setting up professional ethics for actors. Through the process of professionalisation, the film industry made efforts to get rid of actors' reputations for being uneducated and morally corrupt as in the traditional discriminations against actors. The improving reputation of actors would gain positive comments to the film industry and attracted more new talents to take part in the industry.

Their private lives, including their consumption in daily life, leisure activities, and marriage also engaged the public's attention. The film industry, including the stars themselves, pro-star magazines, and studios tended to establish stars the image of social role models in all aspects of their private lives: consuming reasonably, training their bodies for the nation-building project, improving professional skills and education in their private time, and marrying to support the profession.

Star makers interpreted all these aspects of the stars' off-screen lives according to agendas of modernisation-related ideologies, such as seeking women's emancipation, contributing to modern-nation-building, and allowing an upward social mobility through career and education. Even marriage and love-related issues

²⁰⁰ Chen Xiaoye, "Xu Lai lihun kao (Examining Xu Lai's Divorce)" *Shidai dianying (Modern Cinema)*, no. 1 (1936).

²⁰¹ Ibid.

were narrated according to the nation-building theme. The main premise that enabled these different ideologies to be applied to stars' images was that they were expected to be acting artists as well as devoted workers for the industry.

Criticisms of stars' personal images were not uncommon. Criticisms were from different social groups, including conservatives who saw the female profession as a threat to their traditional gender role as good mother and wife, the mass media which cashed in on stars' scandals, and progressive critics who attacked stars on the grounds that they did not meet the expectations to be role models in society.

Different social groups had different ideas on stars' personal lives and depicted them with different emphasis. Therefore, actors' off-screen image became the representation of a whole range of issues related to modern society as role models. Such expectation towards stars' position as serious social role models, raised, to a certain extent, their social status as well as improving the image of entertainers.

Chapter 4 Film Stars' Ambiguous Public Role in Promoting Nationalist Ideas

4.1 Introduction

...as to the true 'stimulant in the wave of national crisis', it is called 'patriotic song and dance performance'. The performers claim that "[the performance] represents the activity of the nation, the essence of the song-and-dance circle, [it] encourages fellow countrymen to strive to achieve the final success". Who are these big stars that render such legendary service [to the national salvation]? They are Wang Renmei, Xue Lingxian and Li Lili.

...

If sick men can become soldiers immediately, police dogs can protect the nation, then under the guidance of patriotic artists, [we] should be very confident that the enemies will be annihilated easily. However, one does not have to be young literary intellectuals, even juvenile literary persons can recognise that, those people who are keen on patriotic activities ...were taking advantage of 'the national crisis' or the so-called 'peace' to grab more benefits into one's own purse...Because of doing so, all going with this stream to rise, including stars, masters of literature and arts, police dogs, medicines...

-- Lu Xun¹

In his 1931 essay *Rise of the Dregs* (*Chenzi de fanqi*), Lu Xun criticised various social groups for snatching personal benefits from social activities in the name of national salvation. Stage-and-film stars Wang Renmei, Xue Lingxian and Li Lili were particularly singled out for their 'patriotic song and dance performances'. Lu Xun mocked these stars as "great contributors" to the national salvation movement for their allegedly patriotic performances.

Presumably one of the reasons which caused Lu Xun's dissatisfaction with them was that these 'patriotic events' were not serious political activities but mere commercial entertainments. Therefore, the so called patriotic performance was thought to be merely another method for them to seek personal fame and fortune.

¹ Lu Xun, "Chenzi de fanqi (Rise of the Dregs)," in *Erxin ji* (*Two Hearts*), vol. 4, 10 vols., Lu Xun quanji (Beijing: renmin wenxue chubanshe (People's Literature Publishing House), 1963). pp. 255-256.

Their reaping personal benefits out of the public's patriotic sympathy and national crisis were even more intolerable. Although it is difficult to prove whether Lu Xun's criticism was accurate and appropriate, in this article he certainly pointed out a social phenomenon which was commonly seen in the first half of the 1930s, i.e. film stars were often involved in promoting nationalistic ideas in public.

Many film stars were activists in various social events, which helped establish their reputation as social celebrities. Some of these events were for entertaining and commercial purposes only, such as singing songs and operas either before or during the film screening as a promotion to the film², and taking part in social gatherings like the opening night for a new restaurant, even in a Buddhist event³. Some of the stars' public appearances were claimed to have more than commercial purposes. Many of their public appearances were said to have the intention to deliver nationalistic messages and for the purpose of national salvation, such as 'fund-raising party for buying aircrafts and celebrating [Chiang Kai-shek's] birthday (*gouji zhushou youyi dahui*)'⁴, 'tea dance party for aviation and saving the nation (*hangkong jiuguo youyi chawu dahui*)'⁵, and those 'patriotic performances' that were criticised by Lu Xun. In these public exposures, film stars cultivated a public image both as a professional performer, represented by their glamorous appearance and performance in the public, and a social activist who promoted patriotic ideas, such as supporting anti-Japanese invasion movements and the National Products Movement. With the help from mass media, the social behaviour of film stars was transmitted to a much broader audience.

In those public events, film stars established their images not only through their professional skills, but also through the expression of patriotic messages. Through

² For example, Yang Naimei sang a song *Runiang Qu* (The song of a wet nurse) during the screening of the film *Liangxin Fuhuo* (The resurrection of conscience) in the Central Grand Theatre in Shanghai 1926; the actress Tang Xueqin performed either Cantonese Opera or Peking Opera in the intervals of the first-run screenings of her film *Lang Die* (Butterfly) in the Peking Grand Theatre.

See: Hushang ge zhipian gongsi zhi chuangli shi ji jingguo qingxing (The foundation and history of film studios in Shanghai), in *Zhongguo Yingxi Daguan* (a grand view on Chinese shadow-plays). Shanghai: Shanghai Hezuo publishing, 1927.

³ "Hu Die, Xu Lai Jiang canjia shilun jingang fahui (Hu Die and Xu Lawi are Going to Attend the 'Diamond Cutter Buddhist Religious Assembly')," *Linglong*, no. 139 (1934): p. 890.

⁴ See advertisement for this event published in *Xinwenbao Bendi zengkan* (*Local Supplements*), Sept 27, 1936.

⁵ Zhao Shihui, *Xunfang laoyingxing* (*In Search of Old Film Stars*) (Shanghai: Xuelin Publishing, 2008).p. 12.

these events, film stars received more media exposure and their social recognition increased.

According to the research of Catherine Yeh, the earliest social stars from the entertainment industry were courtesans.⁶ Their tracks into the public stage influenced subsequent celebrities including intellectuals, politicians, as well as film and theatre stars.⁷ The close liaison between courtesans and the flourishing Shanghai printing press generated the entertainment paper in the late 1890s.⁸ These entertainment papers, such as *Entertainment (Youxibao)* and *World Vanity Fair (Shijie fanhua bao)*, learnt from their Western and Japanese predecessors to follow social events and gossips of celebrities.⁹ Courtesans' activities were regular topics in these papers. Their social events such as the "flower competition (*huaxuan*)" and creating the charity "flower cemetery (*huazhong*)" were especially sensational journalistic raw materials to attract readers.¹⁰ Due to the collaboration with print media, the social recognition of courtesans was increased and their images as public figures were established.

Both courtesans and film stars shared some common features in promoting themselves. In particular, they all had a good-understanding of making effective use of the media in self-promotion. As Yeh suggests, courtesan stars' way to the centre stage of society inspired film stars.¹¹ Although courtesans and film stars shared similar media strategies in gaining social recognition, the social images of courtesan stars and film stars were not the same.

Courtesan stars' beauty, professional skills (e.g. singing and playing instruments) and their moral standard were the focus of social attention. They all helped to shape their social image.¹² On the other hand, film stars' sense of patriotism constituted part of their social image in the first half of the 1930s. National crises deepened when the Japanese invasion shook the entertainment industry in the

⁶ Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, 1st ed. (Seattle&London: Washington UP, 2006). p. 220.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 221.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 226-240.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

early 1930s. Many film stars openly expressed their patriotic concerns, although most film stars' ways to address their political opinions were not radical, but often through their entertainment events like singing patriotic songs or shopping for national products.

In this chapter, I will analyse selected film stars' social activities to explore how stars took part in delivering nationalistic messages in social events. Through analysing film stars' function in shaping and delivering social ideologies, the national discourses about film stars will be further examined.

In traditional Chinese society, entertainers obtained a reputation for 'knowing nothing about the sadness of the vanquished country (*buzhi wangguo hen*)' and their knowledge was thought only confined to their professional skills of entertaining.¹³ It is difficult to estimate to what extent film stars were separated from such bias in the 1930s, as it would require a separate research on fandom rather than star culture. Instead, this study will discuss the relation between the nationalistic discourse and their social image as a public persona through analysing some film stars' public events. I would argue that film stars were very aware of their star reputation in the entertainment industry, and they attempted to present a patriotic image in order to overcome bias against them.¹⁴

This chapter is constituted by two sections. In the first section, I examine how stars delivered political messages in entertainment events. The film star contest will be taken as an example to illustrate how stars tried to use their professional image and power over fans to make political statements in these sensational events. The nationalist sentiment used in entertainment events also helped to legitimise entertainment at a critical time of the nation. By portraying themselves as patriotic figures, stars made efforts to support and integrate into mainstream society. This not

¹³ An often cited line that states such bias is from the Tang poet Du Mu's (803-852?) famous poem *Yebo Qinhuai* (Mooring on Qinhuai): Shangnü buzhi wangguo hen, ge jiang youchang "Houtinghua" (the songstresses know not the sadness of a vanquished country, singing *Flowers in the Courtyard* across the river). It is said that *Houtinghua* was one of the favourite songs of the last Chen Emperor, Chen Shubao (553-604), who is known as an incompetent and pleasure-seeking ruler.

¹⁴ Other entertainers such as opera stars also started to change their social image and entered into the mainstream society through supporting the nationalistic ideas and movements. Indeed, it was in the cultural background that different groups of entertainers attended social and political activities that started to change their social reputation.

only strengthened their star power, but also led them to a broader social stage that was beyond their profession.

The second section of this chapter examines how stars contribute to one political movement – the National Products Movement (*guohuo yundong*). They participated in this movement not primarily as entertainers but as social celebrities. Their off-screen image as fashion leader and trendsetter helped to promote this patriotic social movement. However, it was not just another consumption trend led by stars. This patriotic social movement originated from outside the entertainment industry. Film stars used their image as fashion models to support this movement showed their willingness to get involved into mainstream social discourse.

However, film stars were often questioned by the public for their true motivations behind those seemingly patriotic behaviours. The quotation from Lu Xun's writing at the beginning is one of such doubts. Many others also satirised stars' patriotic behaviour. Film stars endeavouring to present a patriotic social image often faced doubts and criticism. The negative social comments on stars' efforts to support the national salvation project will be analysed further to explore the social discourse about stars, and help to better understand their social status at that time.

4.2 The Film Star Contest and Nationalistic Discourses

This section will investigate the history of the contest of film stars and its social impact. I argue that the contest of film stars was rooted in Shanghai's commercial entertainment culture. The media, the film industry and merchants collaborated to produce the sensational entertainment events for their own benefits. New stars rose and gained greater fame from these events, which helped to bring them more fortune. At the same time, winners of such contests often expressed their patriotic concerns in hoping to build positive images for themselves. They attended various charity events, and published their patriotic statements. However, the film star's motivation behind all their patriotic behaviour was often doubted by the public.

4.2.1 From the Flower Competition to the Film Star Contest: a brief history

Before the film star contest came into fashion, courtesan contests were used to promote celebrities. The courtesan contest, known as ‘*hua xuan* (flower competition)’, was firstly invented in Shanghai in 1897 by Li Boyuan (1867-1906), founder of the tabloid *Entertainment*.¹⁵ His competition was said to be “modelled on the Western democratic voting system” and “the result was based on the number of “write-in” votes (for a particular courtesan)”.¹⁶ Along with the ballots printed on the tabloid, a poem or a piece of prose praising the beauty and professional skills of a particular courtesan sometimes also came with the vote.¹⁷ According to Catherine Yeh, the contest was often a mockery of the abolished imperial examination system. For example, the name of these flower competitions, such as ‘Flower Registers (*huabang*)’ or ‘Beauty Registers (*yanbang*)’, came from the term ‘*bang*’ traditionally used in examination competition. The winning courtesans were given the title as ‘*zhuangyuan* (champion)’, ‘*bangyan* (first runner-up)’ and ‘*tanhua* (second runner-up)’ – the title for the top three winners in the Imperial Examination.¹⁸ The courtesan contest using the public ballot rather than few examiners as it was done in the imperial examination system was hailed by Li Boyuan as “democracy”.¹⁹

A new star culture was thus created through these competitions. Local beauties became national stars in the flower competition.²⁰ The competition also created for the reader the figment of a relationship with the star and the tabloid bridged the star and the reader.²¹

The contest of film star was inspired by Shanghai’s flower competition of courtesans. This can be seen in the very first film star contest, known today. It was held by Shanghai New World Recreational Ground (*xinshijie*) in 1926.²² This recreational ground was opened by the film entrepreneur Zhang Shichuan’s uncle

¹⁵ Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*. pp. 226-227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²² Zhao Shihui, “Zaoqi yingtian de dianying huanghou xuanju (The Film Queen Contest in the Early Filmdom),” *Dazhong dianying (Popular Cinema)*, no. 4 (1999). pp. 26-29.

Jing Runsan and a merchant Huang Chujiu (1872-1931) in the early 1910s.²³ After the death of Jing Runsan (?-?), his widow Wang Guozhen (?-?) took charge and built a 'Xinxin Recreational Ground (*Xinxinshijie*)' across the original 'New World'.²⁴ The new entertainment estate housed different entertainment facilities including opera houses, vaudeville, a skating rink and billiard rooms. It also hosted the flower competition to elect courtesan stars.²⁵ It can be seen from the history of courtesan competitions and the case of the first film star contest that the film star contest was inspired by the earlier flower competition once held in the same site.²⁶

The film star contests in the 1930s were also inspired by the international film culture. When Hu Die was elected as the film queen in the 1933 by *Star Daily* (*Mingxing ribao*, 1933-?), her award certificate clearly stated that "film competitions have been popular in different countries (*dianying xuanju, jiu changxing yu liebang*)²⁷". One possible reason for the prevalence of film star contests might be due to the fashioning of the Academy Awards in Shanghai. The first Academy Awards were presented at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles on May 16, 1929. Emil Jannings (1884-1950) was awarded as the best actor and Janet Gaynor (1906-1984) as the best actress.²⁸ However, when Chinese journalists reported this news, the title Best Actress was not translated according to its literal meaning, i.e. 'zuijia nüyanyuan', but as '*dianying huanghou* (film queen)'. For example, the article *Big Events in the Renaissance of Film* (*Dianying zhongxing dashiji*) devoted a separate section to the news of Helen Hayes' (1900-1993) receiving the award as the 1933

²³ Liu Siping, *Zhang Shichuan congying shi* (the History of Zhang Shichuan's Filmmaking Experience) (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 2000). p. 20.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The film queen elected in this event held by the 'New World' was from *Mingxing* Film Studio and the owner Zhang Shichuan was the nephew of the owner of New World, so it can be presumed that this star contest was used to promote Mingxing Studio as well.

²⁷ For the film queen certificate, see: *Zhao Shihui, xunfang laomingxing* (In Search of Old Stars) (Shanghai: Xuelin Publishing, 2008). p. 12.

It is not clear what other countries' film contests were referred to here, but it could refer to the Academy Awards that had awarded its best actors and actresses annually since 1929. See: Oscar Legacy-The 1st Academy Awards (1929) Website accessed on November 21, 2012

<http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/legacy/ceremony/1st.html>

In Hu Die's autobiography she also mentioned that the 1930 Oscar best actress Mary Pickford had a reputation of "film queen" in China. Her visiting to China in the same year fashioned the film queen contest in Shanghai. See: Liu Huiqin, *Hu Die huiyilu* (Hu Die's Memoir) (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 1988). pp. 81-82.

²⁸ See Oscar Legacy- The 1st Academy Awards

<http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/legacy/ceremony/1st-winners.html>

best actress of Academy Awards, under a heading *the Contest of the 1932 American Film Queen (1932nian Meiguo dianying huanghou zhi xuanchu)*. In the same article, under the heading *Hollywood and Shanghai Film Queen and King Contest within a Year Hu Die Jin Yan (Yinianlai Haolaiwu he Shanghai dianying huanghou huangdi daxuan Hu Die Jin Yan)*²⁹, Oscar and the film star contest organised by the Chinese paper *Star Daily* were paralleled in this article.³⁰ These headings and the translation of best actress all suggest the connection between the Academy Awards and the refashioning of Chinese film star contest in the 1930s. When the Academy Awards was introduced to Shanghai, it was integrated into the indigenous local entertainment culture.

4.2.2 The Film Star Contests

The film star contests appeared from the mid-1920s when the Chinese film industry started to grow³¹, it then became a regular feature of the film star culture in the 1930s.

The contest was decided based on the number of ballots a particular star received. The star who received the most ballots would win the contest and received an honorary title such as ‘film star’, ‘film queen’ or ‘film king’. The contest was emphasised to be fair. For example, in the 1934 film queen contest, in order to show the fairness of the contest, the organiser especially invited three lawyers Guo Wei, Jiang Yiping, and Yu Xiangqin to monitor the vote counts.³²

It is hard to count the total number of contests held from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. The earliest contest we know today was the 1926 female film star contest (*dianying numingxing xuanju*).³³ It was part of the Cinema Expo (*dianying bolanhui*)

²⁹ The heading does not make much sense with the names of two Chinese stars included, but the original title is like that.

³⁰ “Dianying zhongxing dashiji(the Memorabilia of the Renaissance of Film),” *Diansheng zhoukan* (Diansheng Weekly) 3, no. 22 (1934).

³¹ Yueh-yu Yeh, “‘Wenyi’ yu zhongguo zaoqi dianying de shengchan yu yinxiao:yige fangfa lun de kaiqi (‘wenyi’ and the Production and Marketing of Early Chinese Films: The Start of a Methodology),” in *Huayu dianying hongye:fangfa yu lishi de xin tansuan(Rethinking Chinese Film Industry: New Histories New Methods)* (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2011). p. 45.

³² “Yingxi Shenghuo juban ershisan nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou xuanju(Shadow Play Magazine Hold 1934 Chinese Film Queen Contest),” *Shenbao*, February 2, 1934.

³³ Zhao, “Zaoqi yingtian de dianying huanghou xuanju (The Film Queen Contest in the Early Filmdom).” p. 26.

held by the Shanghai New World Recreational Ground. Twelve actresses were elected by audiences and awarded a title as Film Star (*dianying mingxing*).³⁴ Zhang Zhiyun (1904-197?) from *Mingxing* Film Studio received the most ballots and won the title of film queen.³⁵ Film star contests then became fashionable in the 1930s. Many fashion magazines and newspapers held film star contests to attract readers' attention, such as the film queen contest (*dianying huanghou xuanju*) sponsored by *Shanghai Star Daily* (*Mingxing ribao*) in 1933, the Chinese film queen contest of 1934 (1934 *zhongguo dianying mingxing xuanju*) by *Shadow-play Life* (*Yingxi shenghuo*)³⁶, the contest of Chinese film stars (*Zhongguo dianying mingxing xuanju*) by *Diansheng Magazine* in 1934,³⁷ and the contest of the film queen of China (*Zhongguo dianying huanghouxuanju*) by *Jiangnan Daily* (*Jiangnan ribao*) in 1935.³⁸ Other organisations outside the entertainment circle also held film star contests. For example, the Lux Soap Company held a Lux toilet soap film star contest in 1933.³⁹ The China Fuxin tobacco company sponsored the 1934 Chinese film queen and top ten female stars contest (1934nian *Zhongguo Dianying Huanghou Ji Shida Numingxing Jingxuan*).⁴⁰ The Rotary Club of Shanghai (RCS) organised a Shanghai film queen competition (*Shanghai dianying huanghou jingsai*) with "Chinese and western film masters and celebrities".⁴¹

The print media provided active support for to the film star contests. They often actively organised or co-organised such events. The contest advertising was normally printed on a newspaper or magazine with blank ballots for readers to fill in and send

³⁴ They were Zhang Zhiyun, received 2146 ballots; Xu Suzhen, 1970 ballots; Yin Mingzhu 881 ballots, the rest were Xu Su'e, Ding Ziming, Li Minghui, Yang Naimei, Wang Hanlun, Xuan Jinglin, Mao Jianpei, Lin Chuchu and Han Yunzhen.

See: Zhao Shihui, "zaoqi yingtian de dianying huanghou xuanju(The film queen contest in the early filmdom)," *Dazhong dianying* (Popular Cinema), no. 4 (1999).

³⁵ Zhao, "Zaoqi yingtian de dianying huanghou xuanju (The Film Queen Contests in the Early Film Circles)."

³⁶ "Yingxi shenghuo juban ershisian nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou xuanju(Shadow Play Magazine Hold 1934 Chinese Film Queen Contest)."

³⁷ Yan Kailei, *Mingxing he tade shidai:minguo dianyingshi xintan* (Stars and Their Times: A New Inspection on the Republican Film History) (Beijing: Beijing UP, 2010). pp. 119-120.

³⁸ "Jiangnan ribao juban ershisi nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou jixiao (the Announcement of the 1935 China Film Queen, Held by Jiangnan Daily)," *Shenbao*, March 4, 1935.

³⁹ "Dianying mingxing jingxuan (Film Star Contest)," *Shenbao*, May 18, 1933.

⁴⁰ "1934nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou ji shida numingxing jingxuan (1934 China Film Queen and Top Ten Female Stars Contest)," *Shenbao*, December 13, 1934.

⁴¹ "Zhongwai renshi zhuban zhi Shanghai dianying huanghou jingsai (Chinese and Western Personages Hold Shanghai Film Queen Contest)," *Shenbao*, March 8, 1933.

back to the organiser.⁴² Results were normally announced in newspapers or magazines after the voting period was closed. Sometimes, the contest results held by one press would be cross-published in on another press. For example, the tabloid *Star Daily* and fan magazine *Shadow-play Life* also had their contest results published on *Shenbao* -- one of the most influential papers in Shanghai.⁴³ Through positive journalistic reporting of elected stars, the mass media established and assured their status as the most successful stars.

The organisers, stars and their studios were direct beneficiaries of these contests. To the organisers, the contest was a self-promotion. The contest and subsequent events such as the coronation ceremony were effective promotions to the winner, the star's film studio, and eventually would be beneficial to the star's next films. As Figure 4.1 shows, the text next to the film still from Hu Die's new film portraying her in wedding dress poses an intriguing question to the readers: "Is the Film Queen married?"⁴⁴ It is clear that the magazine used Hu Die's title as film queen and curiosity about her private life to promote the new film.



Figure 4.1. Dianying huanghou xiajia le (Is the film queen married)

⁴² But sometimes there were other forms of ballots. For example, the ballots of Lux soap star contest were also available from soap sellers. Each ballot would only be valid with a wrapping paper of the soap. See: "Dianying mingxing jingxuan (Film Star Contest)," *Shenbao*, May 18, 1933.

⁴³ See advertisements on *Shenbao*: "Mingxing ribao zhuban: dianying huanghou xuanju zong jiexiao (Star Daily Holds: The Final Announcement of the Result of Film Queen Contest)," *Shenbao*, March 2, 1933. "Yingxi zazhi juban 1934nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou xuanju (Shadow-play Magazine Hold 1934 Chinese Film Queen Contest)," *Shenbao*, February 2, 1934

⁴⁴ *Linglong*, issue 97, 1933, p. 79.

Star contests were very popular among film audiences in the 1930s. The announcement of *Shadow-play Life*'s 1934 star queen, published in *Shenbao*, stated:

“...both local readers and readers outside Shanghai were very enthusiastic. Readers outside Shanghai, not only sent their ballots to Shanghai by airmail, some even especially called/sent telegraph to order our magazines for the ballot...”⁴⁵

The large number of ballots that stars received also showed the popularity of the contest. For example, Hu Die received 21,334 ballots in the contest sponsored by *Mingxing Daily* in 1933 and was awarded as the film queen.⁴⁶ The 1935 queen Chen Yumei received 22,465 ballots.⁴⁷

A newspaper cartoon titled *Such a Row in China over the Two Rival Movie Queens* published in an American newspaper *Ogden Standard Examiner* on May 27 1934 (Figure 4.2) also evidenced the popularity and high competitiveness of the contest. The cartoon featured people fighting outside a theatre with Hu Die's poster hanging on the wall. Her rival star, the 1934 film queen Chen Yumei's picture is located at the other corner of the picture. The fighting crowd is set among the two stars' pictures, which shows the competition between them. The explaining text introduces film fans' passion to such competitions: “it all started when Miss Cheng won the crown in a big popularity contest, whereupon the adherents of that radiant siren, Miss Wu, got mad – and the war was on!”

⁴⁵ “Zhongwai renshi zhuban zhi Shanghai dianying huanghou jingsai (Chinese and Western Personage Hold Shanghai Film Queen Contest),” *Shenbao*, March 8, 1933.

⁴⁶ “Mingxing ribao zhuban: dianying huanghou xuanju zong jiexiao (Star Daily Holds: The Final Announcement of the Result of Film Queen Contest),” *Shenbao*, March 2, 1933.

⁴⁷ “Jiangnan ribao juban ershisi nian Zhongguo dianying huanghou jiexiao (the Announcement of 1935 China Film Queen, Held by Jiangnan Daily),” *Shenbao*, March 4, 1935.



Figure 4.2 Such a row in China over the two rival movie queens

The film star contests brought more public exposure to the winners. The winner became immediate media focus after their success in the contests. For example, the announcement of Hu Die's success in the 1933 film queen contest was published on *Shenbao* on the 2nd of March.⁴⁸ Three days later on the 5th of March, two commentaries appeared on the same newspaper. One of them particularly offered passionate congratulations to Hu Die.⁴⁹

4.2.3 The Patriotic and Nationalistic Claims of Film Queens

After they receiving titles as film queens, many female stars came into public focus. They also expressed their patriotic and nationalistic opinions to gain a positive impression from the public. Two film queens-Ruan Lingyu and Hu Die's accounts on their patriotic and nationalistic concerns will be discussed in this section.

⁴⁸ "Mingxing ribao zhuban: dianying huanghou xuanju zong jie xiao (Star Daily Holds: The Final Announcement of the Result of Film Queen Contest)."

⁴⁹ Muzhu, "Ping dianying huanghou xuanju de jieguo: yidian yousuojian de chenshu (Comment on the Result of the Film Queen Contest: Some Opinions)," *Shenbao*, March 5, 1933; Yang Saiqiu, "Qinzh Hu Die Nüshi shengli (Congratulation on Mrs Hu Die's Success)," *Shenbao*, March 5, 1933.

4.2.3.1 Ruan Lingyu - the Carrier of National Culture

After Hollywood announced its first Academy Awards in 1929, Shanghai held a star contest for both Chinese and foreign films in 1930. This competition was held by the ‘association of united film industry film star contest (*lianye dianying mingxing xuanjuhui*)’ on *The Film Magazine* (*Yingxi zazhi*). Lianhua Film Studio’s star Ruan Lingyu won as the most popular film star. The Hollywood star Lili Damita (1904-1994) was elected as the second most popular star, and Emil Jannings (1884-1950) won a third.⁵⁰



Figure 4.3 *Lianye dianying mingxing xuanjuhui* (united film industry film star contest)

As Figure 4.3 shows, Ruan Lingyu’s picture was in the central part of the magazine page when the result was announced. She was also the only Chinese star in the top five.⁵¹

A raffle for readers who sent contest ballots was also organised by the magazine, and the results for the raffle as well as the competition were published in *The Film Magazine*. In the same issue, an article titled “Mei Lanfang and Chinese Cinema”

⁵⁰ Emil Jannings won the best actor of Academy Awards that year. It would be the reason for him to be elected as a favourite star here. However, the reason for Lili Damita to be chosen is unclear.

⁵¹ *Yingxi zazhi* (The Film Magazine), Vol.1, Combined issue 7-8, 1930, p. 21.

(Mei Lanfang he Zhongguo dianying)⁵² written by the winner Ruan Lingyu was published. Through this article, Ruan articulated her nationalistic concern and willingness to portray a positive Chinese image on the stage.

In this article, Ruan reported her encounter with the opera star Mei Lanfang in Lianhua studio's formal dinner to welcome Mei's back from the American performance tour in 1930. At the beginning of the article, the film star mentioned that Mei Lanfang called her the 'Mary Pickford of China'. The Hollywood star Mary Pickford with a reputation of 'American's sweetheart', was well-known for her award as the best actress in a leading role in the 1930 Awards for her performance in *Coquette* (1929).⁵³ Therefore, this trivia actually indicated that Ruan Lingyu's star reputation was established throughout the whole nation. It also hinted at her recent success in the film star contest.

Ruan reported Mei's speech about his American trip, his opinions on traditional culture and suggestions on film production. When introducing his performances in the States and his experiences in Hollywood studios, Mei emphasised that according to his observation, his popularity in America was due to the Chinese culture and art that were represented by his performance. He noted the most popular Peking Opera episodes he acted were classics that well represented traditional moral standards such as loyalty, filial piety, contingency and righteousness. The patriotic opera star suggested that "if we adapted those virtues in film scripts...naturally we should not need to be worrying about the popularity [of our films] in the world." At the end of this article, the potential purpose of Mei's speech was explored -- the star was invited to be a co-founder of Lianhua Film Studio, and "for the sake of the special time period - the movement of reviving domestic cinema", he delightfully took this challenge. Mei's seemingly naïve and idealistic opinion on the development of Chinese film industry was in fact a clever promotion for the film studio, which used his personal reputation, his success in recently well-received American tour and the discourse of national culture and virtue to establish the positive image of the new studio.

⁵² Ruan Lingyu, "Mei Lanfang he Zhongguo dianying (Mei Lanfang and Chinese Cinema)," *The Film Magazine (Yingxi Zazhi)* 1, no. 9 (1930): p. 26.

⁵³ See: Awards for Mary Pickford Website accessed on November 21, 2012
<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0681933/awards>

The journal article also promoted Lianhua Studio's star Ruan Lingyu. The magazine editor remarked after the article "Ms Ruan's article well reflects Mr. Mei's opinions on Chinese cinema". It hinted to readers that the film star was well received and agreed with the opera star's patriotic willingness to introduce traditional Chinese culture to the world audience. Thus, this article established the new film queen Ruan Lingyu's image with some patriotic sentiments.

This star contest could have been an intentionally orchestrated promotion for Lianhua Studio's star Ruan Lingyu. The organiser of the contest - *The Film Magazine*, was in fact Lianhua's publicity press.⁵⁴ To establish the star's image through her nationalistic expressions very much tallied with the studio's production guideline at that moment – reviving national cinema. Lianhua was aware of "the cultural and economic invasions in the form of imported films", so the company was founded with an aim to "launch the movement of reviving national cinema, so as to save domestic theatres from a shortage of films and to meet the demand of domestic audiences".⁵⁵ The studio saw promoting "Chinese traditional virtues" in films as a way to defend the domestic film industry from the invasion of imported films.⁵⁶ Therefore it promoted its stars as promoters of national culture and traditional virtues. Even this article could have been penned by the studio's publicist for Ruan Lingyu. However, it still shows that nationalist discourse was used to shape the public image of film star.

Four years later, Ruan Lingyu appeared in the KMT's propaganda film for the New Life Movement (xinshenghuo yundong, 1934-1949) -- *National Style (Guofeng)*, 1935), in which she played a primary school teacher who advocated virtues of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame.⁵⁷ Her pre-established social image as

⁵⁴ Shanghai Library, *Zhongguo xiandai dianying qikan quanmu shuzhi (Complete Chinese Modern Movie Periodicals' Abstracts, 1921 - 1949)*, 1st ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Scientific and Technological Literature Publishing House, 2009). pp. 38-39.

⁵⁵ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004). p. 60.

⁵⁶ "Lianhua yingpian gongsi sinian jinglishi (Lianhua Company's Four Years History)," in *Zhongguo dianying nianjian 1934 (the 1934 Yearbook of Chinese Cinema)* (Zhongguo jiaoyu dianying xiehui (Chinese Educational Film Association), 1934); Luo Mingyou, "Wei guopian fuxing wenti jinggao tongye shu (A Public Letter to Co-filmmakers About the Issue of Reviving National Cinema)," *Yingxi zazhi (The Film Magazine)*, Vol.1, Issue 9. 1930.

⁵⁷ Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1997). pp. 352-353.

a patriotic star who would like to spread the national culture added credibility to the film role.

4.2.3.2 Hu Die – Celebrating the New Film Queen and Saving the Nation

In January 1933, a newly founded tabloid *Star Daily* launched a film star contest with its first issue aiming at promoting itself and attracting potential readers.⁵⁸ The contest intended to “encourage female stars’ enterprise and boost the development of the film industry”.⁵⁹ Later, the contest was turned into a media event, an entertainment event, a commercial event and a patriotic gathering. This contest also helped to establish the winner Hu Die’s image as a patriotic film star and social celebrity.

The contest result was disclosed in Dajiali Restaurant (*dajiali caiguan*) in Shanghai on 28 February. The opening evening was attended by “Shanghai celebrities, representatives from the filmdom and famous lawyers”.⁶⁰ The host firstly introduced the contest and their plan for a follow-up crowning ceremony, and then counted the ballots under the supervision of lawyers.⁶¹ Hu Die received 21,334 ballots and was duly elected as the new film queen.⁶² The ceremony was planned to further expand the reputation for this event. But when Hu was informed of her success, she politely rejected this honour and was not willing to attend the ceremony. It was not until the entertainment event was converted to a seemingly patriotic social event – ‘fund-raising tea-dance party for aviation to save the nation’, that she finally agreed to take part in this event and receive the title.⁶³

The crowning ceremony later became a grand and sensational event for three different fields: the mass media, the entertainment industry and commercial circles. All the three fields contributed to the organisation of this event and seized the opportunity to publicise themselves.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁹ Zhao, *Xunfang lao yingxing (In Search of Old Film Stars)*. p. 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 11-12.

The ceremony was a result of the collaboration of Shanghai local entertainment press. Organisers in charge of this event were three tabloid publishers: Chen Dieyi (1907-2007) from *Star Daily*, Feng Mengyun (?-?) from *The Crystal* (Jing Bao) and Mao Zipei (?-?) from *Iron Newspaper* (Tie Bao).⁶⁴ The chief commentator of *Xinwen Bao*, Yan Duhe (1889-1968) was the guest of honour at the coronation ceremony. Liu Xiangting (?-?) from the tabloid *The Crystal* and Lu Dan'an (1894-1980) from the tabloid *Diamond Newspaper* (*Jingangzuan bao*) wrote an essay affiliated with a 'film queen certificate' to praise Hu Die's beauty and success.⁶⁵ All these journalists from Shanghai tabloids used their own fame to promote the event, which in turn reinforced their own reputations.

The traditional collaboration between Shanghai's print media and the entertainment industry from the late Qing continued. The Great Shanghai (*dahu*) dancing hall, which was well-known for ball room dance and western style cuisine and afternoon tea it provided,⁶⁶ was chosen as the venue for the film queen coronation. It located next to the Grand Movie Theatre (*Daguangming*) on Bubbling Well Road in the International Concession.⁶⁷ On the day of film queen crowning ceremony on 28th of March, 1933, ball room dance and stage performances alternated before Hu Die's arrival. The entertainment circle seized the opportunity to enhance the fame of established stars and introduce starlets to the centre stage. Performers attending the event included film actors and actresses from Hu Die's film studio - Mingxing Film Studio, e.g. Zheng Xiaoqiu (1910-1989), Gu Meijun (1915-1989), and Xu Qinfang, singsong girl Yang Huijun (?-?) and Xu Lai (1909-1973), as well as some dance hostesses.⁶⁸ The later film star Xu Lai had not yet entered into the film

⁶⁴ "Zhou Xuan de yinghou cizhi shu (Zhou Xuan's Film Queen Resignation)," *Zhongguo yingxun* (*China Film News*) 1, no. 43 (January 10, 1941). Shen Feide, "Mao Zipei yi 'dianying huanghou' Hu Die jiamian dianli (Mao Zipei Recalls the Crowning Ceremony for the 'Film Queen')," *Dang'an yu shixue* (*Archives and History*) no. 4 (2002): p. 54.

⁶⁵ Zhao, *Xunfang lao yingxing* (*In Search of Old Film Stars*). p. 13.

⁶⁶ See Wei Kefeng, Zhang Ailing de guanggao shijie (Eileen Zhang's world of advertisement) : http://unitas.udn.edu.tw/web_old/d/bookb046c.htm Website accessed on Nov 20, 2012

Shanghai chronicles:

<http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/node2247/node4597/node79736/node79750/userobject1ai102275.html> Website accessed on Nov 20, 2012

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Zhou Xuan de yinghou cizhi shu (Zhou Xuan's Film Queen Resignation)," *Zhongguo yingxun* (*China Film News*) 1, no. 43 (January 10, 1941). Shen Feide, "Mao Zipei yi 'dianying huanghou' Hu Die jiamian dianli (Mao Zipei Recalls the Crowning Ceremony for the 'Film Queen')," *Dang'an yu shixue* (*Archives and History*) no. 4 (2002): p. 54.

world and was still a singsong girl at that time. Her reputation as ‘the standard beauty (*biaozhun meiren*)’ in the film circle later was firstly brought up in the advertisement for this event.⁶⁹ It was from the public exposure and promotion in this event that her reputation started to rise.⁷⁰

Shanghai merchants also seized this opportunity to advertise their products, thus partly transforming it into a commercial event. Shanghai’s first and top women’s fashion brand ‘Hongxiang Fashion Dress Company (*Hongxiang shizhuang gongsi*)’⁷¹ tailored the film queen gown and crown for Hu Die. Jin Hongxiang (1895-1969), the owner of the company offered the costume for free but only required a duplicate to be on display in their shop window.⁷² Many other manufactures offered their fashion products as gifts for the guests at the ceremony, such as ‘dancing stockings’ from *Huifu* stockings factory, chocolates from *Guanshengyuan* Food Company, *Huifeng* brand ‘crystal raincoat’.⁷³ Sino-west Grand Pharmacy (*Zhongxi da yaofang*) gifted every guest a ‘star perfume’, and spread the perfume all over the venue for attention. A cosmetic maker called *Meilai* especially manufactured for this event a new facial cream bottled in a crown-shaped bottle, and named it Queen Cream (*huanghou shuang*). Its crown-shaped logo and message “the queen’s crown” was printed on the packaging. The new film queen Hu Die was invited to give her autograph “the queen cream beautifies my appearance” for the product.⁷⁴

To these Shanghai merchants, the idea of promoting products and creating potential customers through popular entertainment was not entirely new. At least from the late 1920s, Shanghai’s premier silk and fur retailer *Laojiuhe* had already used the well-known Shanghai storyteller’s talent to advertise their goods through the popular programme of storytelling (*tanci*) on commercial radio.⁷⁵ But this time, merchants did not merely use the public event to introduce products, they also

⁶⁹ “Zhou Xuan De Yinghou Cizhi shu (Zhou Xuan’s Film Queen Resignation).”

⁷⁰ Shen, “Mao Zipei Yi ‘Dianying Huanghou’ Hu Die Jiamian dianli (Mao Zipei Recalls the Crowning Ceremony for the ‘Film Queen’) .”

⁷¹ Hongxiang shizhuang gongsi (Hong Xiang fashion dress company)

http://www.yplib.org.cn/structure/jdsh/bngy/mc_71060_1.htm Website accessed on Nov 20, 2012

⁷² Shen, “Mao Zipei yi ‘dianying huanghou’ Hu Die jiamian dianli(Mao Zipei Recalls the Crowning Ceremony for the ‘Film Queen’) .” p. 54.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Wen-hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949* (Berkely, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 2007). p. 68.

depended on and used Hu Die's fame to attract customers. The notice for the crowning ceremony especially emphasised that "Ms Hu Die's photos, Hu Die brand tobacco, and Star (*mingxing*) Perfume will be gifted [to all guests]."⁷⁶ Merchants used film fans' craze about stars to sell products, and at the same time they were also promoting the star culture.

The crowning ceremony was also a patriotic event. According to a *Shenbao* notice, this is because Hu Die continuously declined the invitation for this ceremony and she did it with modesty and firmness. It happened that organisers of the event Feng Mengyun, Chen Dieyi, and Mao Zipei also served the fundraising team of the League of Aviation (*Hangkong xiehui zhengqiudui*), so they decided to hold a fundraising event for aviation to celebrate the award.⁷⁷ Although in her biography, Hu Die confirmed that she had declined the title and the ceremony many times⁷⁸, it is still not sufficient to conclude that Hu Die's patriotism motivated her later acceptance of the title and the performance in the ceremony. However, it is clear that her performance in the event established her as both a film queen who had professional skills and attraction over her fans, and a patriotic celebrity.

The film queen arrived at the ball room in a car that belonged to her film studio. This was in contrast with other celebrities who came with their private cars.⁷⁹ She appeared in "national products"—her gown was made by a famous local fashion company Hongxiang. According to other observers who attended that event, Hu Die's appearance suggested that she was not living a luxury life.

After a few speeches delivered by social celebrities, Hu was awarded a 'film queen certificate'. Then she sung a new song *The Last Sound* (*Zuihou yisheng*) especially written for her by the leftist composer An E (1905-1976).⁸⁰ The lyrics addressed the star's concern for the difficult situation at the northern front and encouraged her male fans to fight with Japanese enemies:

⁷⁶ "Qinghe Hu Die dangxuan dianying huanghou juxing hangkong jiuguo youyi chawu dahui (Holding the Fund-rising Tea-dance Party for Aviation, to Celebrating Hu Die's Award as the Film Queen)," *Shenbao*, March 5, 1933.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu* (*Hu Die's Memoir*). p. 82.

⁷⁹ Shen, "Mao Zipei yi 'Dianying huanghou' Hu Die jiamian dianli (Mao Zipei Recalls the Coronation Ceremony for the 'Film Queen')."

⁸⁰ Zhao, *Xunfang lao yingxing* (*In Search of Old Film Stars*). p. 13.

My dear gentlemen, thanks for your kindness, but sorry for my uneasy heart and unpeaceful soul, this is my last word. When you are facing the green rice wine and red lights have you ever taken in consideration the sorrow weeping of the ghosts in the North... I cannot dance and sink with you anymore, farewell my gentlemen! We have to fight, to liberate ourselves through battle, to fight until the blood spreads over the earth, for the last hope of the nation!

In this song, she addressed the Japanese invasion of North China, as well as her anxiety and uneasiness to her audiences' enjoyment of "green rice wine and red lights (*lǜjiu hongdeng*)".⁸¹ The patriotic song shows the moral tension between the national salvation project and the entertainment culture. To sing this song at an entertainment event was also very ironic. But it was the 'patriotic theme' that legitimised this entertainment event. Hu Die through this song reassured her status as a film star/film queen who advised and encouraged fans in a mild but commanding tone, also established a patriotic image for herself.

The commercial profit from this event was considerable. All entry tickets were sold out, although the price was as high as one *yuan*, five times as much as the tickets in a high-end cinema and twenty times as much as the average price at that time.⁸² The dancing ticket was another source of profit. Anyone who wanted to dance with professional dancers of this ball room needed to buy the dance ticket. It was said all the profit and donation went to the Society of National Salvation through Aviation (*hangkong jiuguo hui*) to purchase aircrafts for the nation.⁸³

This event shows the interdependent relations among commercial forces, the entertainment industry, and mass media. The patriotic sentiments and the reputation of the star provided an opportunity for the collaboration of all these forces. It also demonstrates that stars such as Hu Die was very aware of her power over fans and the potential of such public events. She also tried to make efforts to contribute to the

⁸¹ In traditional literature, "*lǜ* (green)" is a widely used symbol for rice wine, and rice wine is usually called *lǜ jiu* (green rice wine). When the Rice wine made from glutinous rice is not entirely refined, it always has green foam on the surface.

⁸² Shen, "Mao Zipei yi 'dianying huanghou' Hu Die jiamian dianli(Mao Zipei Recalls the Coronation Ceremony for the 'Film Queen')."

⁸³ Ibid.

national salvation through her public role as a social celebrity. Through such activity, she would cultivate a positive social image.

4.2.4 For the Nation or for the Money

Lu Xun was not the only one to question film stars' patriotic performance. News and rumors about stars' fake charity events appeared in media along with positive reports of their patriotic social events. Most negative comments centered on stars and their studios' motivation behind their charity events.

For example, the Capital Theater (*Shoudu daxiyuan*) in Nanjing once wanted to take advantage of Hu Die's reputation as a film queen and invite her to perform in the theater's charity event.⁸⁴ But Hu Die and her studio had a disagreement with the theater manager over the star's payment for the performance. At the same time, Nanjing Theater (*Nanjing daxiyuan*) also wanted to have her in their charity performance and promised to offer better payment than the Capital Theater. The press mockingly remarked that "maybe which theater Hu Die will join would depend on whose 6,000 *yuan* [payment] arrives in Shanghai early".⁸⁵

When Hu Die finally came to Nanjing for a charity performance for flood relief, she and Mingxing Film Studio's manager Zhou Jianyun were attacked for cheating the public and grabbing money from the event in the name of charity.⁸⁶ The journalist reported that "in fact profits from tickets all go to the private purses of Mingxing's staff".⁸⁷ After paying the star, the performance only raised 27 *yuan* for the flood victims. The journalist mocked the star: "does this (little money that was raised from stars' performance) mean that Hu Die and others are no longer welcomed by audiences?"⁸⁸ The conflict between the commercial operation and the charitable purpose of the event was revealed in *Linglong* magazine - also an active star image-maker. The doubts towards stars' motivation for their so-called patriotic social

⁸⁴ "Hu Die rujing biao xian zhizheng (Competing for Hu Die's Performance in the Capital)," *Linglong* no. 207 (1935). pp. 3452-3453.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3453.

⁸⁶ "Hudie deng zai jing yanxi zhenzai jin ershiqi yuan, shouduan jiaohua jijin qipian (Hu Die and Others Raised Only Twenty-seven Yuan in the Fundraising Performance in Beijing, [Their] Artifice Is Almost Like Cheat)," *Linglong*, no. 216 (1935): pp. 4171-4172.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

entertainment for the media further revealed the public's hesitant acceptance of their self-promotion.

4.3 Film Stars in the National Products Movement

Film stars not only used their reputations to deliver nationalistic ideas in entertainment events, but also got actively involved in various social and political movements originating outside of the entertainment industry. Such movements include the National Products Movement, the New Life Movement, and the Anti-Japanese Movements. They participated in these social movements sometimes through their performing profession such as to appear in propaganda films (e.g. the film *National Style* was made for promoting the New Life Movement) or to perform in national products fashion shows. Sometimes they supported these movements through embodying the dominant social values in their daily life such as shopping national products in the National Products Movement.

Stars' social visibility enabled by media exposure made their personal behaviour become a public demonstration. Through public demonstration, film stars shaped two types of images: 1) they were the patriotic Chinese citizen who took part in the movements by following the dominant social value (as all citizens were expected to do), and 2) prominent social celebrities whose behaviour set the ideal model for other citizens.

The National Products Movement offers a rich source for discussing the relation between film stars and social movements. As early as 1930, stars such as Hu Die, Gao Qianping, Chen Yumei and Xia Peizhen (1908-1975) had started to participate in the fashion show for clothes made by the local hand-woven cloth in Shanghai(*shougong tubu*).⁸⁹ This movement attempted to create a nationalistic consumer culture⁹⁰ by creating, introducing, and reinforcing new patterns of group behaviour and new systems of social regulation and order.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Wei Shaochang, "Dianying mingxing chuan tubu ji qita(Film Stars Wearing Handwoven Clothings and Others)," *Dianying pingjie (Movie Review)*, no. 8 (1983): p. 28.

⁹⁰ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard UP, 2003). p. 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

In this section, I will examine film stars' activities in the National Products Movement to illustrate how they used their reputation and social recognition to support this movement, which also reinforced their image as patriotic citizens. Through the response from the media to stars' activities in the movement, popular social discourse about what social responsibilities stars were expected to take will also be disclosed.

4.3.1 The National Products Movement and Social Discourses about Stars

After the Opium War, the Qing Empire lost its Tariff Autonomy in a series of 'unequal treaties' imposed by imperialist powers.⁹² As China could not restrict the import of foreign goods by raising tariffs, a direct result was the influx of foreign products, fuelled by Chinese consumers' desire for western materials.⁹³ Chinese people worried that the mass-produced inexpensive Western goods would take over the Chinese market, and dominate Chinese commercial economy, which would further lead to the loss of sovereignty.⁹⁴

To defend the Chinese market and industry from the threat of imported goods, the National Products Movement was launched to arouse public support for domestic products. The movement was not a centrally controlled social movement, but initiated by a broad range of social groups including politicians, manufacturers, intellectuals, college students, women, etc.⁹⁵ A new nationalised consumption culture that established the idea that 'Chinese people ought to consume Chinese products', was promoted through a series of social movements. These movements included boycotts of foreign products as well as imperialist powers, laws mandating the use of Chinese-made fabrics in clothing, exhibitions and advertisements promoting national products, and a National Products Year (1933), a Women's National Products Year (1934) and a Student's National Product Year (1935) staged

⁹² Ibid., p. 5.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

by the government.⁹⁶ Although the pro-national-products sentiments were rooted in the late nineteenth century after China lost its Tariff Autonomy, historians usually marked the starting point of the movement by the anti-American boycott of 1905.⁹⁷ When film stars entered the social stage in the 1920s, the National Products Movement had already been rooted in the social culture in the everyday life.

Film stars were not as politically influential as other social activists such as college students and manufacturers in the National Products Movement. But their participation in this movement still aroused broad social discussions due to their social status as celebrities. In the discussions about film stars and this movement, stars sometimes were expected to be leaders who can guide the nationalised consumption behaviour. But sometimes they were considered as traitors of the movement (which will be discussed later in this section). Therefore, this National Products Movement became the focal point site where film stars' social influences and social discourses about them were tested and articulated.

The ambiguous social discourse about stars' relation to the National Products Movement could be illustrated in a news story on the Hollywood Star Clara Bow. In 1933, *Linglong* magazine published a piece of news titled "Is Clara Bow patriotic (*kelaike bao aiguo*)?"

Is Clara Bow patriotic (?)

It is said that Clara Bow is very patriotic. Before she went to Europe recently, she bought thirty pairs of leather shoes, fifty suits of new clothes, dozens of hats. All American products! It is also heard that she persuades others to love their country.

--News in Brief from Hollywood⁹⁸

The main body of the news tells the hearsay that the Hollywood star Clara Bow purchased new American-made cloths for her European trip. In relating to the social background that the news was published in the National Products Year in China, it is very clear that Clara Bow's consumption behaviour reminded Chinese readers about the National Products Movement. However, a question mark in a pair of brackets at

⁹⁶ Huang Qingqing, "Jindai 'Guohuo nian'yundong shi yanjiu zongshu (A Summerise of Contemporary Research on the History of 'National Products Year')," *Gaoxiao sheke dongtai (Social Sciences Perspectives in Higher Education)*, no. 4 (2011), p. 18.

⁹⁷ Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, p. 65.

⁹⁸ "Kelaike Bao aiguo (Is Clara Bow Patriotic)," *Linglong*, no. 93 (1933): p. 566.

the end of the title caught the attention of readers and suggested more (and even contradictory) meanings of this news.

The question mark could be read as the Chinese journalist's doubt of the purpose of her behaviour – could her shopping preference represent her patriotism or was it merely the luxury Hollywood star's another conspicuous consumption to display her wealth and satisfy her vanity?⁹⁹ The ambiguous attitude of the news left a space for readers to reflect and judge Bow's patriotism. The meaning of this news is open for different interpretations. But it is clear that in the public eyes, film stars' personal consumption was related to their patriotism.

4.3.2 The Promoter? The Follower? or the Betrayer?

In the mass media, film stars were portrayed as promoters, followers and betrayers of the National Products Movement, which reflected the public's different attitudes towards stars.

As discussed in chapter three, due to film stars' established image as the trendsetter and consumption leader, they were expected to lead a new fashion of consuming national products. Manufacturers and department stores invited stars to take part in their fashion shows for domestic products. It was reported that in a fashion show organized by Shanghai National Products Company (*Shanghai guohuo gongsi*), female stars from different studios attended, e.g. Hu Die (Mingxing Studio), Yan Yuexian (1911-1985, Mingxing Studio), Hu Shan (1910-1989, Tianyi Studio), which caused a sensation in Shanghai.¹⁰⁰ On the opening day of Shanghai South Market National Products Store (*Shanghai nanshi guohuo shangchang*), Hu Die's appearance in the opening ceremony attracted "tens of thousands people who learnt the news [of Hu's attendance]".¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ "Conspicuous consumption is the way by which the wealthy display the fact that they are wealthy." Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979). p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ "Zhongnuxing shizhuang biaoan (Female Stars' Fashion Show)," *Linglong*, no. 96 (1933): p. 749.

¹⁰¹ "Hu Die de haozhaoli (Hu Die's Charisma)," *Linglong*, no. 135 (1935): p. 635.



Figure 4. 4 Hu Die at the opening ceremony of National Products Store (*Guohuo shangdian*) at the South Market in Shanghai.1934¹⁰²

Stars also joined these events as performers, and were expected to perform in the public, such as dressing in China-made clothes and showing them to the public. Their star status was important in attracting many people who rushed to these events. Stars attended social gatherings for national products promotion along with other social celebrities such as wives of prominent politicians and socialites (as Figure 4.5 shows¹⁰³). This confirmed the status of stars as social celebrities, and on the other hand shows that to some extent the boundary between social classes was blurred. It also suggested that film stars could enter into the upper class circle by taking part in social movements.

¹⁰² Hu Die at the opening ceremony of national products store at the South Market in Shanghai on 21 March.1934

See: Shanghai Memory, Website accessed on Nov 20, 2012

<http://memoire.digilib.sh.cn/SHNH//tpsh.jsp?action=tag&item=112&value=%B9%FA%BB%F5>

¹⁰³ *Shenbao* (Shanghai, May 14, 1933), sec. Dianying zengkan (Film Supplement).



Figure 4.5 Hu Die in her new clothes. Text: To promote the national products fashion, the national products store of Dalu Store on Nanjing Road held a grand fashion show. The wife of Major Wu also came. Many Shanghai socialites came...also film stars Hu Die, Hu Ping...joined the fashion show...

The print media such as newspapers, film magazines, life style magazines and women's magazines usually published pictures featuring film stars wearing the latest fashion and articles that depicted star's fashionable appearance. During the National Products Movement, one of the unique elements of star fashion was the label national products (*guohuo*). Through displaying their personal charms and introducing their new fashion preference with national products, the mass media expected the stars to arouse readers' interests in these same national products. As can be seen in Figure 4.6, the picture of star Zhu Qiuhen's (1915-?) new clothes published in the section of Stars' Fashion of National Products (*mingxing guohuo shizhuang*) on *Linglong* magazine in 1934 portrayed the star in her latest fashion.¹⁰⁴ She posed confidently and attractively in front of the camera, suggesting the star was satisfied with and confident about the new national products. At the right side of the page, under the same section, another picture shows Hu Die standing in front of a national products store. This picture not only informed readers where to buy national products. The latter also established her as a fashion leader who was familiar with Shanghai's shopping map thus offering consumption suggestions to potential followers.

¹⁰⁴ "Mingxing guohuo shizhuang (Stars' National Products Fashion)," *Linglong*, no. 99 (1933): p. 906.



Figure 4.6 “*Mingxing guohuo shizhuang* (The national products fashion of stars)”

Stars were also considered as the target of the movement. They were expected to regulate their consumption behavior in accordance with the requirements of the movement. A picture portraying Hu Die shopping in a national products store (Figure 4.7) represented such an attitude towards stars.¹⁰⁵ It is highly possible that Hu Die posed for the camera, but both the title of *Star's Life* (*Mingxing de shenghuo*), and the content of the picture tried to create an everyday atmosphere. In the picture, Hu Die did not face the camera - as she usually did in promotional pictures, but only showed the side of her face and fixed her gaze at the products in her hands. A shop assistant was standing aside. He did not look at the star, but also focused on the products. This clearly shows that the national product is the focal point in the picture. In addition, the picture made it clear that it was a snapshot taken from everyday scenes. The everyday atmosphere of the picture, and the fact that the shop staff did not look at the star, all transformed Hu Die from her usual image as a glamorous super star to an ordinary woman. Without the text underneath the picture, Hu Die could be taken as any Chinese woman who responded to the call of the National Products Movement by shopping in a National Products Store. In his monograph on the National Products Movement in China, Karl Gerth argues that this movement became a primary means by which people in China began to regard

¹⁰⁵ “Mingxing de Shenghuo (Star's Life),” *Linglong*, no. 100 (1933): p. 988.

themselves as citizens of a modern nation.¹⁰⁶ Film stars, who participated in this movement as common people did, were also identified with citizens of a modern nation.



Figure 4.7 *Zai guohuo shangchang goumai guohuo zhi dianying mingxing Hu Die* (the film star Hu Die is shopping in a national products store)

However, no matter how much effort was devoted to establishing stars' image as either leaders or participants of the movement, there was always an ironic voice to assert that stars were actually the traitor or even enemy of the National Products Movement. A trivia published on *Linglong* magazine said that the *tubu qipao* (qipao made with homespun cloth) Hu Die wore on the Convention of Homespun Cloth (*tubu dahui*) was made overnight for that occasion.¹⁰⁷ It further claimed that there were no clothes made by homespun cloth in Hu Die's wardrobe despite her many

¹⁰⁶ Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*. p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ "Guopian jie huaxu (Trivias in the Domestic Filmdom)", *Linglong*, no. 116 (1933): p. 1984.

new clothes. Another report on stars' participation in a national products event also doubted whether film stars wear homespun clothes or not in everyday life.¹⁰⁸

In the popular imagination, film stars' image as the trendsetter was usually contradictory with the image as the follower of national products. When discussing female consumers in the National Products Movement, Karl Gerth points out that those fashionable female consumers were perceived as obstacle to the movement because they were considered as addicts to imported luxury goods.¹⁰⁹ The reason for this suspicion was also due to their image as fashionable female consumer.

4.4 Conclusion

At a time when the nation was facing serious economic and military crisis and patriotic appeals occupied the mainstream society, the entertainment industry and the consumption of entertainment seemed quite out of tune. Therefore, various justifications for the industry and entertainers appeared, including inserting patriotic and nationalistic themes into entertainment events and using entertainers' social visibility to promote such ideas.

Film stars actively involved in various social activities and public events, and expressed their patriotic sentiments through these events. By doing so, they established their image as social celebrities and also citizens of this nation. Although stars made efforts to gain positive social discourses from the society, their true motivation behind their various patriotic performances and behaviour often confronted doubts from the public.

The contradiction between a patriotic social image that film stars wanted to display and the public's suspicion to stars' patriotism revealed an ambiguous social image of film stars in society. Without further study on Republican-era film fandom, it is difficult to estimate to what extent the Republican society accepted film stars as important figures in the society (e.g. promoters of the idea of patriotism). Although their social image in promoting nationalistic discourses is ambiguous, at least,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 1920.

¹⁰⁹ Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*. p. 286.

through these social activities, they began to be involved in intellectual social discourses. It further confirmed their status as social celebrities, and increased their media exposure.

Chapter 5 A Case Study on Hu Die, “the Most Popular Star”

5.1 Introduction

Hu Die is the most popular star in China today. She has fans in numerous places, including Singapore. Film companies from Southeast Asia come to China to order her films.

-Ge Gongzhen¹

It is unquestionable that Ms Hu Die is the most popular star... she is not only the most admired super star in the hearts of film fans, but also an important figure in society.

-Chen Jiazhen²

Hu Die was one of the most well-known film stars in the Chinese film industry prior to the Second World War (henceforth WWII). A magazine article claimed that her name was as well-known as popular terminology, such as Anti-Japanese Resistance (*kangri*) and National Salvation (*jiuguo*).³

The heyday of her career spanned from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Except in her film debut *Battle Exploits* (*Zhangong*, 1925), she was always cast as the leading role in her films preceding WWII.⁴ She successfully survived the industry transition from the film silent era to the sound film era, which many other silent stars failed to do. Hu was the leading star in the first Chinese sound film *The Singsong Girl Red Peony* (*Genü Hongmudan*, 1930). Hu played numerous types of roles set in different time periods, including martial arts heroines and God-spirits (*shenguai*),

¹ Quoted from Liu Huiqin, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoirs)* (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 1988). p. 82.

² Chen Jiazhen, “Hu Die,” *Yi Sheng* 1, no. 1 (June 1935).

³ Meiyun Xu, “Cong Hu Die jinda zhong renshi Hu Die nüshi (Meet Ms Hu Die in an Interview with Her)” *Xiandai Dianying (Modern Screen)*, July 1933. p. 28.

⁴ According to my statistics based on film information provided by *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films*, Hu Die played the leading role in 77 films out of a total of 78 films she played in, between 1925 and 1936.

Qingyun Zhu and Zhenzhen Wang, eds., *Zhongguo yingpian dadian: gushipian, xiqupian, 1905-1930* (Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films, 1905-1930) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1996). Wang Zhenzhen, ed., *Zhongguo yingpian dadian: gushipian, ziqupian, 1931-1949.9* (Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films, 1931-1949.9) (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2005).

upper class gentlewomen, and proletarian and peasant workers in left-wing films. Her different screen images are a reflection of the filmmaking trends at the time. Her films *Two Sisters* (1933) and *Orchid in an Empty Valley* (1934) were selected by the KMT government along with six other films to send to the 1935 Moscow International Film Festival.⁵ Her successful career also led to her success in a number of film star contests.⁶ For her wins in many film star contests, Hu won a reputation of ‘*laopai yinghou*’,⁷ literally ‘old brand film queen’, which means she was a qualified and trust-worthy film queen.

Hu Die also established her fame in other areas, thus becoming a social celebrity. She was a leading figure in the fashion circle. This status was established in a number of ways: from magazine covers and advertisings, fashion shows, and magazines praising her beauty and fashion style. Her private life (and rumours about her private life) often became sensational social news. Her broken wedding engagement with film star Lin Xuehuai (?-?) in 1931 became a scandal and thus received constant attention from the public⁸, and the notorious rumour about a fictitious affair with Warlord Zhang Xueliang (1901-2001) elevated her fame status to a nationwide level.⁹ Her trip to Europe in 1935 established her image as an international celebrity. Furthermore, she was active in various public events, such as fundraising performances,¹⁰ the National Products Exhibition, and even Buddhist ritual.¹¹ As stated at the beginning of this thesis, Hu Die was regarded as a ‘model woman (*Biaozhun nüxing*)’, and was thusly elected in 1934 by *The Young Companion* magazine, for both her success in the film industry and her reputation as a social celebrity.¹²

⁵ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoirs)*. pp. 83-84.

⁶ Zhao Shihui, “Zaoqi yingtian de dianying huanghou xuanju (The Film Queen Election in Early Filmdom)” *Popular Cinema*, no. 4 (1999). p. 27.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The news of Hu Die and Lin Xuehuai's disengagement was reported in *Shenbao* from December 1930 to March 1931.

⁹ “Hu Die shou chujiantuan jinggao? (Hu Die Was Warned by the Eliminating Traitors Group?)” *Linglong*, no. 129 (1934): p. 253.

¹⁰ “Hu Die ru jing biao xian zhi zheng (Debates on Hu Die's Behavior in Beijing)” *Linglong*, no. 207 (1935): p. 3452.

¹¹ “Hu Die, Xu Lai jiang canjia shilun jingang fahui (Hu Die and Xu Lawi Are Going to Attend the Diamond Cutter Buddhist Religious Assembly)” *Linglong*, no. 139 (1934): p. 890.

¹² “*Biaozhun nüxing (the Model Women)*” *The Young Companion* (December 1934): p. 22.

As a popular star and well known social celebrity, Hu Die's star image can be an illustrative example helping us to better understand the Republican-era film star culture in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the academic research on her is rare. Michael G. Chang conducted a limited scope of research on her in "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s".¹³ He briefly introduces Hu Die's career in the 1930s, and argues that her popularity was due to the proliferation of movie publications and new promotional methods, which all contributed to creating her star-like image. Chang also points out that Hu Die's ability to speak Mandarin helped her survive the sound film era, while many other silent film stars failed to do so. Chang's discussion on her career is limited, and some important aspects, such as her personal image and her status as a social celebrity are not addressed in his article.

This chapter will examine Hu Die's screen image, personal image and public image. It does not aim at retelling the story of a super star, but to use Hu Die as an illustrative example to present how agendas of popular social ideologies and the entertainment culture collaborated to shape star images, and how such star images spread out ideologies and aided the entertainment industry.

5.2 Entertainment Culture, Nationalist Discourses and Hu Die's Screen Images

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films (Zhongguo Yingpian Dadian)*, Hu Die appeared in over seventy films before WWII.¹⁴ However, only very few survive today. The most known extant films today include a film fragment from the serial martial arts film *Burning the Red Lotus Temple (Huoshao hongliansi, 1928-31)*¹⁵ and contemporary themed films *Cosmetics Market (Zhifen shichang, 1933)*, *Two Sisters*,

¹³ Michael G. Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). pp. 143-145.

¹⁴ Wang Zhenzhen, ed., *Zhongguo yingpian dadian: gushipian, xiquipian, (Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 2005).

¹⁵ I haven't had access to this film, but according to Zhang Zhen's research there is only one fragment of this film series that has survived until today. See: Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005). p. 203.

and *A Classic for Women* (*Nü'erjing*, 1934). These few extant films of course cannot represent all of Hu's screen images at that time. A lack of original films restricts this particular research to rely mostly on written materials, such as film plots, film advertisements, memoirs, and contemporary film reviews.

Hu Die was trained as a professional actress at the China Film School (*Zhonghua dianying xuexiao*) before entering the film industry.¹⁶ Her film debut was a supporting role in *Battle Exploits* for Dazhonghua Film Studio in 1925.¹⁷ After this film, she briefly joined Youlian Studio in 1926 and played a leading role in a contemporary themed film adapted from a stage drama of the same title - *Resentments* (*Qiushanyuan*, 1926).¹⁸ Her contract with Youlian ended after this film. Later on she joined Tianyi Studio in 1926, where she began her journey towards stardom.¹⁹ In 1928, Hu left Tianyi and joined Mingxing Studio instead, where she remained until the breakout of WWII.²⁰

Hu Die incarnated various roles during her career prior to the Second World War, such as martial arts heroines (e.g. Hong Gu in *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*, 1928-31), peasant girls (e.g. Dabao in *Two Sisters*, 1933), and revolutionaries (e.g. Zhang Shuhua in *Iron Blood Youth* (*Tiexue qingnian*), 1931). These different characters were chosen for Hu by her studio. In both Tianyi and Mingxing studios, Hu Die was employed as a contracted actress (*jiben yanyuan*), which means she neither had the right to choose scripts nor her co-actors, but only to play the role assigned to her by her studio.²¹ Film studios always cultivated their contracted actors by putting them in big budget products hoping to turn them into "bestselling" stars. At the same time, establishing stars in big budget films could also secure a high turnover at the box-office.

Film studios always tailored films to satisfy contemporary audiences' demands to ensure the highest profits. As a result, the creation of stars' different screen images was influenced by audiences' appeals, which shifted along with the ever-changing

¹⁶ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu* (*Hu Die's Memoirs*). pp. 12-15.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu* (*Hu Die's Memoirs*). p. 25.

²⁰ Ibid., pp.30,182.

²¹ "Zong dafu (Answers)" *Yisheng* 1, no. 4 (September 1935).

social tendencies. Hu Die's varying screen images was an illustrative example to demonstrate the relationship between film studios' production focus and the social context.

5.2.1 1926-1931: A Screen Incarnation of Chinese Legends

As discussed in chapter 2, in the first half of the 1920s, the mainstream film production was constituted by adaptations from foreign literature, the New Drama and Butterfly Literature.²² These films were mostly contemporary themed, and were influenced by foreign films in terms of techniques and ideologies in films.²³ After the anti-imperialist May 30th Movement in 1925, traditional costume films appeared.²⁴ Through adapting classical Chinese legends, portraying historical heroes, and adopting Chinese aesthetic preferences (e.g. Chinese costumes and settings), these new genres promoted national culture and a sense of national pride,²⁵ which satisfied nationalistic sentiments of the contemporary people.²⁶

The tendency to produce films showing Chinese features was firstly established by Tianyi Film Studio when it released the studio's first film in 1925, *Repentance* (*Lidi chengfo*). It proclaimed a distinctive production strategy of "emphasising traditional morality and ethics, promoting Chinese civilisation and rejecting Europeanisation".²⁷ Since then, Tianyi made a range of films with obvious Chinese characteristics, including adaptations of Chinese folktales, classical novels, and operas.²⁸ These films expanded Chinese films' audiences from the elite - who preferred film adaptations of Western literature and those portraying urban lifestyle

²² Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)*. p. 24.

Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005). p. 210.

²³ Hu Jubin, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2003). p. 55, 88.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 65-68.

²⁷ "*Lidi chengfo*" tekan (*Special Issue of "Repentance"*) (October 1925), from Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe (China Film Publishing), 1996). p. 88.

²⁸ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. p. 210.

and culture, to petty urbanites and Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia - who were fond of folklore, traditional operas, and popular history (*yeshi*).²⁹

Due to Tianyi's production strategy, Hu Die established herself in the roles of heroines in classical vernacular literature, operas and folktales. Her early film roles included god-spirits (*shen'guai*) e.g. the White Snake Bai Suzhen in *Legend of the White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan*, 1926) – adapted from the folktale of the same title; heroines in classical love tragedies e.g. Meng Jiangnü (in *Meng Jiangnü*, 1926) and Zhu Yingtai (in *The Tragic Story of Liang and Zhu* (*Liangzhu tongshi*), 1926); Empress He in the popular history *Liu, Guan and Zhang Conquer the Yellow Turban* (*Liuguanzhang dapo Huangjin*, 1927).³⁰ None of these films exist today, but based on the film plots one could presume Hu's early screen image was tied to fanciful traditional costume characters in adaptations of popular literature and legendary stories.

In her memoirs, Hu Die claimed that due to the low “artistic quality” of Tianyi's films, she had long wanted to leave. It was the reform of Tianyi's production system in 1927 that gave her the opportunity to end her contract.³¹ However, the better remuneration offered by Mingxing might be one of the reasons that caused her leaving Tianyi. Mingxing paid her 2,000 *yuan* a month and provided a car for her private use.³² According to Chen Mingyuan's study on extant film actors' contracts with studios, Hu Die was the highest paid star in the 1930s.³³

Hu Die's high salary could be the result of its commercial competition with Tianyi. The popularity of Tianyi's traditional costume films threatened other film companies including the leading studio Mingxing.³⁴ Although being one of the leading domestic film studios in the mid-late 1920s,³⁵ Mingxing was also suffering a

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wang, *Zhongguo yingpian dadian: gushipian, xiqupian, 1931-1949.9* (*Encyclopaedia of Chinese Films: Feature Films, Opera Films, 1931-1949.9*).

³¹ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu* (*Hu Die's Memoirs*). p. 36.

³² Ibid., pp. 36-37.

³³ Chen Mingyuan, *Wenhua ren de jingjishenghuo* (*the Economic Life of Intellectuals and Artists*), Quanxin zengxiuban (the New Complemented Edition). (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing, 2009). p. 133.

³⁴ Li Duoyu, *Zhongguo dianying bainian 1905-1976, shangbian* (*100 Years of Chinese films, Book 1*) (Beijing: China Radio and Television Publishing House, 2005). p. 52.

³⁵ Zhu Ying and Seio Nakajima, “The Evolution of Chinese Film as an Industry,” in *Arts, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2012). p. 20.

serious economic crisis in 1926.³⁶ At that time the studio tried to restore its market share through different approaches. In July 1926, Mingxing allied with other studios³⁷ to establish the Liuhe Film Company (Liuhe yingpian gongsi) to resist Tianyi's impact on the market.³⁸ Although this alliance did not last long (until July 1929),³⁹ the commercial war between Tianyi and Liuhe clasped Tianyi's market and forced it to explore a new market in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰

Besides leading Liuhe to supplant Tianyi, Mingxing also decided to change its production interests. The most popular genres during 1927-1928 were all subgenres of costume films, including films of popular history (*baishi pian*), god-spirit films (*shenguai pian*) and martial arts films (*wuxia pian*). As discussed in chapter 2, the Northern Expedition aiming at eliminating warlords all over China in 1926 and 1927 especially motivated a sense of 'chivalry' in Chinese society.⁴¹ The social context partially inspired the making of martial arts films in which chivalrous heroes and heroines eliminated villains and brought peace to the mass. Besides big studios like Tianyi, many opportunistic small studios also seized the popularity of traditional costume films to make many low budget and low quality products.⁴²

At first, Mingxing Studio did not follow this trend. This is due to its manager, Zheng Zhengqiu, who was a former dramatist and believed in films' function in social education.⁴³ However, whilst facing a serious economic crisis, Mingxing also decided to make costume films. In a production manifesto, Mingxing's managers Zhou Jianyun (1893-1967) and Zheng Zhengqiu criticised those low quality costume

³⁶ Liu Siping, *Zhang Shichuan Congying Shi (The History of Zhang Shichuan's Filmmaking Experience)* (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 2000). p. 78.

³⁷ Including Shenzhou Studio, Minxin Studio, Shanghai Yingxi Studio, Dazhonghua-Baihe Studio, and Youlian Studio

³⁸ *Liuhe* tried to monopolise film market through signing contracts with film distributors and cinema houses to agree that only Liuhe's films be shown in these cinema houses. Duoyu Li, *Zhongguo Dianyng Bainian 1905-1976, Shangbian (100 Years of Chinese films, Book 1)* (Beijing: China Radio and Television Publishing House, 2005). pp. 68-70.

³⁹ Yang Liu, "1937nianqian Zhongguo Dianyng Zhipianye De Shuli Yu Yanjiu (a Study on Chinese Film Production Before 1937)" *Beijing Dianyng Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Beijing Film Academy), no. 03 (2009). p81.

⁴⁰ Li, *Zhongguo dianyng bainian 1905-1976, shangbian (100 Years of Chinese films, Book 1)*. p. 70.

⁴¹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 69.

⁴² Li and Hu, *Zhongguo Wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 221.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

films made by small studios, and brought up their plan to make high quality costume films to resist low quality products.⁴⁴

Mingxing did not simply imitate the established costume genre, but developed a new genre of ‘martial arts and god spirit film (*wuxia shenguai pian*)’,⁴⁵ which mixed two popular genres: god-spirit films and martial arts films.⁴⁶ Mingxing Studio’s first martial arts and god spirit epic was *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*, which cast Hu Die in one of the leading roles. One could argue Mingxing used Hu Die as an established costume film star in order to secure a profitable box office, also because the role in this film was similar to that of previous fanciful screen images. Although Mingxing had top stars, such as Yang Naimei and Xuan Jinglin, the studio did not cast them in martial arts films. The screen images of Yang and Xuan were tied to Mingxing’s previous successful genre of family drama, whereas Hu had been often seen in fanciful stories. Therefore, Hu would have been considered more qualified than Yang and Xuan in martial arts films.

Hong Gu, the female Knight-errant in the eighteen episode series of *Burning the Red Lotus Temple* became Hu Die’s most well-known character during her early years with Mingxing. This series achieved extreme commercial success and was said to have earned Mingxing over 200,000 yuan.⁴⁷ Hu Die’s early film roles with Mingxing were almost all female knight-warrant type characters, including in *The Revenge of a Knight-errant* (*Daxia fuchouji*, 1928), *Female Detective* (*Nüzhentan*, 1928), and *A Female Knight-errant Rescues the Madam* (*Xianü jiu furen*, 1928).

5.2.2 1931-1936: an oppressed woman

The KMT government was concerned that these martial arts and god-spirit genres might spread a sense of rebellion among the young and lower working classes, which could potentially increase social instability.⁴⁸ Thus, it started to limit the production

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

⁴⁵ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (*Chinese Silent Film History*). p. 222.

⁴⁶ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 69-74.

⁴⁷ “Hu Die shi Mingxing zhi gongchen (Hu Die is Mingxing’s Hero)” *Linglong*, no. 107 (1933): p. 1457.

⁴⁸ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. p. 41.

Jin, “Shenguaipian chajin hou - jinhou de dianyingjie xiang nali zou? (After the Ban on Ghost-spirit Films: Where Should Filmdom Go in the Future?)”.

and release of martial arts films from the early 1930s.⁴⁹ Consequently, Mingxing resumed producing family ethical dramas and adaptations from popular vernacular fiction - genres that they used to make in the mid 1920s. However, these films were not successful, including *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (*Tixiao yinyuan*, 1932), *Lucky Silver Stars* (*Yinxing xingyun*, 1932), *Loving Mother* (*Cimu*, 1932), and *Fall out of Love* (*Shilian*, 1933).⁵⁰ It is believed that military circumstances at the time changed audiences' aesthetic preferences.⁵¹ The breakout of the Mukden Incident in 1931, which signalled the beginning of the Japanese invasion in Northern China, and a brief struggle between Japanese and Chinese in January 28, 1932 in Shanghai, evoked a strong sense of patriotism among Chinese audiences.⁵² As a result, the call for a strong modern nation became the main theme of popular social ideology.⁵³

In order to make new types of films that could meet the requirements of the times, in 1932 Mingxing Studio sought cooperation with left-wing writers, such as Huang Zibu (aka. Xia Yan), Zheng Junping (aka. Zheng Boqi), and Qian Qianwu (aka. A Ying).⁵⁴ They started to make films revealing social struggles and promoting anti-imperialism, such as *Raging Torrents* (*Kuangliu*, 1933), *Spring Silkworms* (*Chuncan*, 1933), and *Cries of Women* (*Nüxing de nahan*, 1933).⁵⁵ However, the KMT government watched leftist writers' films closely. They not only heavily censored some left-wing films, they also threatened Mingxing with cutting-off the studio's loan.⁵⁶ Under political and financial pressure, Mingxing dismissed leftist writers in late 1934.⁵⁷ Although unofficially Mingxing still sought their advice (e.g. discussing scripts over dinner),⁵⁸ and its family ethical dramas post 1933 were

Kristine Harris, "The Romance of the Western Chamber and the Classical Subject Film in 1920s Shanghai", in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1999). p. 56.

⁴⁹ Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. pp. 42-43.

⁵⁰ Liu, *Zhang Shichuan congying shi (the History of Zhang Shichuan's Filmmaking Experience)*. pp. 103-107.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 103.

⁵² Ibid., p. 103.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 103-104.

⁵⁴ Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, eds., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1997). p. 201.

⁵⁵ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 90.

⁵⁶ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo Wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 290.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 291.

⁵⁸ Liu, *Zhang Shichuan congying shi (the History of Zhang Shichuan's Filmmaking Experience)*. pp. 139-140.

sometimes considered left-leaning,⁵⁹ their products could no longer be labelled as left-wing films.

As Mingxing's leading star, Hu Die appeared in both left-wing and non-left-wing films in the 1930s. PRC film historians tend to attribute the rise of Hu Die in the 1930s to her cooperation with Mingxing's left-wing filmmakers and other filmmakers who were sympathetic to the left-wing film movement.⁶⁰ I do not agree with this argument for two reasons: Firstly, Hu Die had already gained her reputation as a top ranking film star in the early 1930s before making left-wing films. At that time Hu Die's appearance ensured a profitable box-office due to her previous success in costume and martial arts films. When the studio set out to experiment with new genres, Hu was often cast in these films to secure commercial profits. For example, Hu was cast as the leading actress in the first Chinese talkie *Singsong Girl Red Peony*, and the big-budgeted six episodes of *Fate in Tears and Laughter*. When Mingxing cooperated with left-wing writers for the first time in 1933, Hu Die was also chosen as the leading star in those new style films, including the first left-wing film produced in Mingxing Studio - *Raging Torrent*. Her name and image were often emphasised in film posters and advertisements to attract audiences. For example, in a film advertisement (Figure 5.1) for the film *The Flower of Freedom*, Hu's name was put at an obvious location of the advertisement and specially highlighted with a big font, while other stars' names were printed in a smaller font under her name. Her image occupied almost a quarter of the advertisement. In another simplified version of this film's advertisement (Figure 5.2), Hu's image occupied half of the picture, which implies that Hu Die, as the leading star, was the most attractive and recognisable element in this film. In short, Hu's status as a leading star did not rely on her characters in left-wing films.

⁵⁹ Li and Hu, *Zhongguo Wusheng dianyingshi (Chinese Silent Film History)*. p. 291.

⁶⁰ Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s." p. 144.



Figure 5.1, *Shenbao*, December 20, 1932



Figure 5.2, *Shenbao*, January 23, 1933

Secondly, as discussed in chapter 2, the line that defined left-wing from non-left-wing films was very thin. Thus, it made it very hard to prove whether Hu Die became famous as a result of 1930s left-wing films, especially since by then she had already played various characters from different social backgrounds. Her screen roles during that period included proletarian peasant girls (e.g. *Salt Tide*, *Yanchao*, 1934); a late Qing courtesan (e.g. *The Flower of Freedom*, 1932); a girl student (e.g. *Brothers*, (*Xiongdixing*, 1936)); a revolutionary (e.g. *Iron Blood Youth*, 1931) and upper class wives (e.g. *A Classic for Women*; *Two Sisters*). These films were not all written by left-wing writers.

Instead of a political-oriented categorisation of Hu Die's film characters, I argue that Hu Die's success in the 1930s was due to her screen image as an oppressed and self-sacrificing woman in both left-wing and non-left-wing films. As I have discussed in chapter 2, Chinese filmmakers used the oppression of women to represent the suffering and backwardness of China. This strategy was also applied to many films made in 1930s. The KMT government prohibited any films made with clear anti-Japanese tendencies.⁶¹ Therefore, filmmakers expressed their social concerns through tragic women's stories criticising the backwardness and injustice of Chinese society. In addition, the Left-wing Film Movement led by the CCP focused on the theme of class-struggle,⁶² which again, was usually addressed through portraying the image of oppressed women. Thus, a large amount of films made in the 1930s before WWII portrayed tragic women figures and discussed women's issues.

⁶¹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. p. 95.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

According to Pang Laikwan, from 1932 to 1934 the theme of women's liberation dominated about half of the left-wing films.⁶³ Many other films that were not clearly labelled as left-wing, also addressed women's issues and portrayed the image of oppressed women, such as *Two Sisters, Struggle* (Zhengzha, 1933), and *Women's Rights* (Nüquan, 1936).

Hu Die played many sympathetic characters of oppressed women in the 1930s in both left-wing and non-left-wing films. Oppression came from different places: from patriarchal families (*Singsong Girl Red Peony*, *Raging Torrent*), evil urban cities (*Street Willow and Wall Flower*), the merciless society (*Two Sisters*), and war (*Peach Blossoms after the Disaster*, *Adventure in Battleground*). Her characters, although representing different social classes, had one characteristic in common: they often sacrificed their personal welfare and their lives for their families (*Singsong Girl Red Peony*; *Three Sisters* (*San jiemei*), 1934) and lovers (*Raging Torrent*, *Beauty's Heart*). The following sections will discuss Hu Die's screen characters as oppressed women. I will point out that Hu's portrayal of oppressed women was one of the major attractions in both the left-wing and non-left-wing films.

Hu Die's most popular characters in the 1930s were probably two sisters from Zheng Zhengqiu's 1933 melodrama *Two Sisters*, Dabao and Er'bao. The film was adapted from his Civilised Play *The Noble and the Prisoner* (*Guiren yu fanren*).⁶⁴ It tells the story of two sisters, separated from birth, and their different fates. Dabao is raised in the countryside and married to a peasant, whilst Erbao grows up in the city and marries a warlord as per her father's directive, thus becoming the warlord's seventh concubine. At the beginning, Dabao has to leave her home and her baby to look for a job in the city to sustain her family due to her husband's serious illness. Coincidentally, she becomes a servant in Erbao's house. At that point the two sisters do not recognise each other. Her own sister, Erbao, treats Dabao cruelly, who is working as a servant. When Dabao's husband's health worsens Dabao asks Erbao to borrow some money for her husband's medical treatment. Dabao then steals the money following Erbao's negative. Erbao's sister-

⁶³ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*. p. 115.

⁶⁴ Cheng, Li, and Xing, *Zhongguo Dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, 1.: p. 237.

in-law sees Dabao stealing the money. Dabao, desperate and clumsy, accidentally kills Erbao's sister in law. Dabao is then mercilessly sent to jail. In the end, both sisters are reunited when their mother comes to the city and reveals their relationship. The family connection finally overcomes the law, and Erbao uses her authority as the warlord's wife to set Dabao free from prison.

The story addressed different social problems through the sisters' life stories and the contrast between them, including criticism against arranged marriage (e.g. Erbao's engagement with her true love was broken due to the marriage her father arranged for her), tension between different classes, bankruptcy in the countryside, and advocating for anti-imperialism (the sisters' father used to be a weapon dealer who bought weapons from westerners and sold them to warlords, which was criticised for "causing the death of Chinese people" in the film).

This film was extremely successful at the time. It was shown for over sixty days,⁶⁵ and it was estimated that over 100,000 people saw it in Shanghai alone.⁶⁶ Due to this film, Hu Die gained great reputation and became "the only great star worshiped by every film-lover".⁶⁷

Hu Die performed both Dabao and Erbao in this film. This double performance could be regarded by the audience as one of the attractions. According to its contemporary film reviewers, this film's commercial success was due to several attractive elements: the excess emotion that was aroused by the dramatic plot, audiences' sympathetic to Dabao's suffering, the restoration of family value, and a happy ending that was preferred by Chinese audiences.⁶⁸ Hu Die's sentimental performance especially received positive comments. She was praised for authentically representing the suffering of the poor and arousing audiences' sympathy. One audience expressed "... on my way home from Xiguang [cinema], Hu Die's crying still resonates in my ears ... and [her] sadness ... still appears in

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 239.

⁶⁶ "Zimeihua dapo maizuo jilu (Two Sisters Breaks Box-office Record)" *Linglong*, 1934. p. 574.

⁶⁷ Chen Jiazhen, "Hu Die," *Yisheng* 1, no. 1 (June 1935).

⁶⁸ Xuxu, "Guanyu 'Zimeihua' weishenme bei kuangre de huanyin? (Regarding Why the Film Two Sisters Is Enthusiastically Welcomed?)" *Dawanbao*, February 28, 1934. Luo Yunwen, "Youlun 'Zimeihua'ji jinhou dianying wenhua zhilu (Re-discussing 'Two Sisters' and the Future Direction of the Film Culture)" *Dawanbao*, March 24, 1934. Tang Na, "Muqian Zhongguo Dianying De Jige Qinxiang (several Trends of Current Chinese Films)" *Shidai Dianying* (June 1934).

front of my eyes”.⁶⁹ From these comments, it could be concluded that Hu Die’s character Dabao, who suffered from poverty and was mistreated by the upper class, touched the hearts of audiences, which was an important reason of the success of this film.

Leftist critics and filmmakers, who emphasised the importance of cinema to reveal class struggle, heavily criticised *Two Sister*’s dramatic plot, for its happy ending weakened the sharp class struggle between the poor and the powerful. The family reunion at the end of the film was criticised as “harmonising two contradictory classes” through “the reformist’s fantasy”.⁷⁰ One commentator claimed that “[*Two Sisters*] catches the interests of ordinary audiences of urban petty bourgeois, and solves some problems for them [through the happy ending], but those solutions [provided in the film] are definitely not the correct approach.”⁷¹ Therefore, to leftist critics, the suffering of Dabao in this film was seen as merely aiming at stirring up audiences’ ‘cheap’ tears, not for arousing audiences’ in-depth thoughts. One film critic claimed that most audiences saw their emotional experiences evoked by film plots as a form of entertainment, so *Two Sisters* was just what such shallow audiences needed.⁷²

However, and as I will discuss next, some of the left-wing films depicting the suffering of women to express their political standpoints, also contained a happy ending. By closely examining two of Hu Die’s left-wing films, I will argue that audiences may have not been aware of left-wing films’ political agendas, but that Hu Die’s characters of oppressed women could still be presented as an attraction to the audience.

In *Cosmetic Market*, Hu Die’s character Li Cuifen comes from a poor family in a city. In order to support her family, including her old and ill father, a young sister and brother, Cuifen has to give up schooling, and look for a job in a department store as a low ranking shop assistant. In order to keep her job Cuifen has to tolerate

⁶⁹ Zhen Meng, “Ping ‘Zimeihua’ (Review on ‘Two Sisters’)” *Shenbao*, March 5, 1934.

⁷⁰ Cheng, Li, and Xing, eds, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, 1: p. 239.

⁷¹ Yunwen Luo, “Youlun ‘Zimeihua’ji jinhou dianying wenhua zhilu (Re-discussing ‘Two Sisters’ and the Future Direction of the Film Culture)” *Dawanbao* (March 24, 1934).

⁷² Heixing, “Cong Rendao dao Zimeihua (From ‘Humanism’ to ‘Two Sisters’),” *Dawanbao*, March 21, 1934.

the oppression and humiliation from costumers and her bosses. Her relationship with a colleague is also broken, partly due to interferences from her boss. Left-wing writer Xia Yan scripted the original story for this film. In Xia's version, at the end of the film, Cuifen quit her job and walked out of the department store, disappearing within the stream of people on the street, which symbolises Cuifen's realisation to join the masses and to struggle along with them in order to eliminate humiliations against women.⁷³ However, the original version did not pass KMT censorship, so Mingxing's manager Zhang Shichuan replaced it with a happy ending. The new version shows Cuifen working hard in a factory after leaving the department store, and finally managing to open her own shop. Since the original version was not shown to the audience, this film highlighted social injustice towards women, and therefore reaffirmed Hu Die's image as an oppressed woman.

The first left-wing film made by Mingxing Studio was *Raging Torrents*, scripted by Xia Yan.⁷⁴ This film is about a school teacher leading a group of peasants in the struggle with floods in Hubei Province in 1933. The filmmakers saw the suffering of peasants, provoked by the oppression of the rich, and suggested the proletarian class should struggle against the current social system.⁷⁵ According to Pang Laikwan, this film tried to portray an ideal left-wing cinema prototype of the intellectual/revolutionary, and reverse the tradition of 1920s films featuring female characters and developing a narrative around them.⁷⁶ But this film still included a love story between the school teacher and the landlord's daughter (played by Hu Die). The daughter suffered the patriarchal power of her father as he was against their love and arranged to marry her to an official, so she finally fell into the torrents with her lover. This love story did not dominate the whole story. Actually according to Sufeng, a contemporary film reviewer, this love story was only "*chuancha* (trivia)", and Hu Die did not even appear too often in film scenes.⁷⁷ However, in the advertisement of the film, Hu Die's name was still printed with the biggest font above other actors'

⁷³ Cheng, Li, and Xing, eds, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi (A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, 1: pp. 228-229.

⁷⁴ The original film is lost.

⁷⁵ Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. pp. 92-93.

⁷⁶ Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*. p. 114.

⁷⁷ Sufeng, "Xinde lianghaode shouhuo (Some New Good Achievements)" *Chenbao*, March 6, 1933.

names.⁷⁸ This would imply that Hu Die's reputation and her popular screen image as an oppressed woman were seen as important attractions to her audiences.

5.3 Profession, Marriage and Morality of a Modern Woman

Film stars' private lives, especially issues related to their love lives often aroused big public interest in society and engaged broad social discussions. One very well-known example was perhaps the death of Lianhua Studio's top star Ruan Lingyu. When Ruan's relationships with her first and second lovers Zhang Damin and Tang Jishan respectively were made public, mass media got involved and publicly judged her character as a woman.⁷⁹ Ruan eventually committed suicide as a result of the pressure. After her death, social discussions about this tragedy erupted. Different social groups expressed their own ideological agendas and opinions through commenting on Ruan's tragedy.⁸⁰ Thus, Ruan's tragic death became the symbol of Chinese women's sufferings from "feudal morality" and "social injustice".⁸¹ Different social groups used Ruan's demise to assert their particular concerns on social phenomena, such as the press' power to fabricate rumour and pressure from the newly emerging film industry on young stars.⁸² As a top film star, Hu Die's private life always intrigued the public, which also often became a public affair via media reports. Like Ruan, Hu Die's personal life was equally exposed, and provided a public forum for different social groups with various opinions to negotiate and compete.

The most sensational and intriguing aspects of her private life involved her love life. The legal case over her breaking engagement with Lin Xuehuai, which lasted over a year, became a public soap drama. As a result, her marriage to Pan Yousheng, again attracted the attention of the public. Her personal life was no longer private, but provided a public forum for different social groups with various opinions

⁷⁸ Chen Bo, *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong (Chinese Left-wing Film Movement)* (Beijing: China Film Publishing, 1993). p. 416.

⁷⁹ Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s." p. 156.

⁸⁰ Richard J. Meyer, *Ruan Ling-yu: The Goddess of Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005). pp. 62-65.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 62-64.

⁸² Ibid., p. 64.

to compete. This section will discuss Hu's two personal affairs in order to analyse the different private images that were shaped by different social groups. Conservatives saw actresses' profession as a threat to marriage and brought about moral corruption. Contrary to this, the film industry built actresses' image of a modern woman who pursued free marriage and her social responsibility (e.g. dedicating to the modernisation of the nation through her profession).

5.3.1 Profession and Moral Standards

Hu Die and actor Lin Xuehuai met when they made the film *Resentments*.⁸³ They fell in love and got engaged in 1927.⁸⁴ At the end of 1930, the news regarding their engagement's break-up erupted in the mass media.

Lin first sent a letter to Hu, through his attorney, E Sen. In the letter he renounced their engagement.⁸⁵ Hu responded that she would agree to cancel their engagement if Lin paid back money he owed her plus an added compensation for "wasting her youth".⁸⁶ As Lin rejected Hu's requirements, Hu took a prosecution to District Court of Shanghai (*Shanghai defang fayuan*) at the end of 1930. Later, the case was transferred to the Special District Court (*tequ defang fayuan*) and the first hearing was held in late February of 1931.⁸⁷ Lin was sentenced to return the money he owed. Consequently, the engagement was cancelled. After the sentence was announced, Lin appealed to the Superior Court of Jiangsu (*Jiangsu gaodeng fayuan*). It was not until December of 1931, that the case was finally closed with the superior court's decision, following the original verdict.⁸⁸

Many local newspapers reported the scandal extensively, including major daily newspapers like *Shenbao*, and entertainment tabloids such as *Alarm Paper (Lingbao)*,

⁸³ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoir)*. p. 21.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Hu Die hunbian suci (Hu Die's Complaint Regarding Her Broken Engagement)" *Shenbao*, December 20, 1930. "Zhongmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public)" *Shenbao*, March 1, 1931.

⁸⁶ "Hu Die hunbian suci (Hu Die's Complaint Regarding Her Broken Engagement)" *Shenbao*, December 20, 1930. "Xue Die shangsu bohui (Xue-Die's Appeal Was Turned Down)" *Shenbao*, December 3, 1931.

⁸⁷ "Wanmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public)" *Shenbao*, March 1, 1931.

⁸⁸ "Xue-Die An panjueshu (the Court Case Xue vs. Die)" *Shenbao*, December 28, 1931.

Grand Paper (Dabao), *the Diamond (Jingangzuan)*, and *the Iron (Tiebao)*.⁸⁹ Lin and Hu used the power of media to promote and defend themselves.

Although the financial dispute between Lin and Hu was the main force behind the lawsuit, Lin and the tabloids that opposed Hu's views, played on conservative opinions regarding actresses' morality. Lin claimed that Hu's "improper conduct (*xingwei bujian*)", such as attending dancing events and being pursued by others caused him to break-up their engagement.⁹⁰ Following Lin's statement, and for sensationalist and monetary gains, an entertainment tabloid *Alarm Paper* fabricated a rumour saying that Hu Die used to be a prostitute and a concubine.⁹¹ Attacks on Hu Die used familiar forms of discrimination towards women professionals, especially actresses in Republican China. At that time, women who sought for work opportunities and advancement in urban cities were often characterised as pursuers and providers of pleasure and entertainment, the likes of prostitutes and actresses.⁹² Sometimes, actresses were seen as almost prostitutes in disguise.⁹³ Both Lin and the tabloid defamed Hu by using these forms of discrimination to create an image of a femme fatale. To further intrigue readers, the paper also suggested Mingxing Studio's male star Zhu Fei (?-?) caused the break-up between Lin and Hu.⁹⁴ This rumour, along with Lin's criticism on Hu's social life, indicated that a wider social circle created by an actress' profession would increase her opportunities to engage with more men, and eventually bringing about moral corruption and pose a threat to her marriage.

Hu Die denied all the false accusations and sued the tabloid.⁹⁵ The editor of the tabloid was charged to pay three hundred *yuan*.⁹⁶ Besides looking for protection from the law, Hu Die also tried to reshape and defend her image through mass media.

⁸⁹ "Shisijia xiaobaoguan yu Zhan Jifeng Wuhui xiaoshi (Fourteen Tabloids Eliminated Misunderstandings with Zhan Jifeng)" *Shenbao*, January 1, 1931.

⁹⁰ "Hu Die hunbian suci (Hu Die's Complaint Regarding Her Broken Engagement)" *Shenbao*, December 20, 1930. "Zhongmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public)" *Shenbao*, March 1, 1931.

⁹¹ "Hu Die kong Lingbaoan shenxunji (the Hearing of Hu Die and Lingbao Case)" *Shenbao*, December 30, 1930.

⁹² Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s." p. 137.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹⁴ "Hu Die kong Lingbaoan shenxunji (the Hearing of Hu Die and Lingbao Case)".

⁹⁵ "Hu Die yu Lingbao zhengsong (Hu Die and Lingbao's Lawsuit)" *Shenbao*, December 25, 1930.

⁹⁶ "Hu Die kong Lingbaoan shenxunji (the Hearing of Hu Die and Lingbao Case)".

She published her statements and open letters in the influential paper *Shenbao*. Confronting the accusations regarding her “improper conduct” and disloyalty to Lin, Hu Die defended the nature of film acting as a modern profession, like other jobs. In her own words, she came from a respectable family, and the reason for her pursuing acting was due to “seeking female independence”.⁹⁷

In order to explain the reasons for ending her engagement with Lin, and to win over the public’s support, Hu promoted a modern woman’s opinion on the pursuit of free marriage and true love, and insisted that the good personality of a person would guarantee a good marriage.⁹⁸ She saw true love between couples as an important element in a marriage, and accused Lin for treasuring her money rather than herself.⁹⁹ She further claimed that, after the marriage engagement, if a woman found the man had personality shortcomings, she of course needed to reconsider their relationship.¹⁰⁰ Hu Die concluded that once the love and affection was lost in a relationship, the marriage could not last.¹⁰¹

In Hu Die’s accounts, she identified herself with the type of modern woman within the intellectual discourse, who pursued a freely-chosen marriage and financial independence. The readership of *Shenbao* where Hu published her personal statement was largely constituted by the middle class, students, and other young urbanites,¹⁰² who might have supported Hu’s ideas on marriage and profession in the life of a modern woman.

As one of the most influential major newspapers in Shanghai, *Shenbao* followed in great detail the events from its beginning to end, through journalistic reports on Hu Die and Lin Xuehuai’s court hearings. Unlike tabloids, which had a strong preference for Lin Xuehuai and a clear stance on this issue (even used fake news to support their standpoint like *Lingbao*), *Shenbao*, as a commercial newspaper,

⁹⁷ “Hu Die hunbian suci (Hu Die’s Complaint Regarding Her Broken Engagement)”.

⁹⁸ Die Hu, “Die-Xue jieyue an: Hu Die zhi fuhan (The Legal Case of the Break-up between Die and Xue’s Engagement: Hu Die’s Letter)” *Shenbao*, March 18, 1931.

⁹⁹ “Wanmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public).” *Shenbao*, March 1, 1931.

¹⁰⁰ Hu, “Die-Xue jieyue an: Hu Die zhi fuhan (The Legal Case of the Break-up between Die and Xue’s Engagement: Hu Die’s Letter).”

¹⁰¹ “Wanmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public).”

¹⁰² Tsai Weipin, *Reading Shenbao: Nationalism, Consumerism, and Individuality in China 1919-37* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). pp. 184-188.

kept a neutral attitude to present the truth. However, its reports on this issue still suggested a certain preference towards Hu Die. Hu was depicted as an independent and assertive modern woman who defended her own rights and insisted on her moral values. The paper gave detailed descriptions on fashionable dresses she wore during the court hearings,¹⁰³ which reaffirmed her “modern” image. It also used a heading, *Hu Die Insisted in Breaking the Engagement with a Harsh Voice [in the Court] (Hu Die lisheng jianchi jieyue)* to emphasis Hu’s decisive attitude.¹⁰⁴ Thanks to the publication of Lin and Hu’s financial details, Hu’s image as a fully financially independent and capable woman was founded.¹⁰⁵ Although tabloids had traditionally been patronages of the entertainment industry,¹⁰⁶ their financially-driven journalistic interests sometimes led them to exploit scandals and oppose actors’ position. A major commercial newspaper like *Shenbao* also sought for the commercial value of scandals, but had different approaches. Even though *Shenbao* did not obviously evidence its preference towards either Lin or Hu, its “neutral” report without conventional discriminations towards actresses and an attitude of “down to the facts” showed their support tilted towards actresses.

5.3.2 Professional Career vs. Marriage

Hu Die’s marriage to Pan Yousheng in November 1935 was another popular topic in the media. Although many journalist reports focused on the sensational aspects of this news, such as her lavish wedding and new house,¹⁰⁷ Hu Die and her studio used this opportunity to establish the star’s image as a professional modern woman who devoted herself to the modernisation of the national film industry.

After her marriage to Pan Yousheng, Hu made the film *Women’s Rights* (1936) as the leading star, telling the story of a young woman’s personal struggle in

¹⁰³ “Zhongmukuikui zhixia, Xue Die duibugongting (Xue and Die Confronted in the Court in Front of the Public)” *Shenbao*, March 1, 1931.

“Xue-die jieyue an xushen: Hu Die fei jieyue buke (the Continuous Hearing of the Legal Case on Xue and Die’s Break-up Engagement: Hu Die Insists on Breaking the Engagement)” *Shenbao*, March 21, 1931.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “Xue-Die An panjueshu (the Trial of Xue vs. Die).”

¹⁰⁶ Catherine Vance Yeh, “a Public Love Affair or a Nasty Game? the Chinese Tabloid Newspaper and the Rise of the Opera Singer as Stars” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2003). pp. 14-51.

¹⁰⁷ “Hu Die jiehun xixun (the Good News on Hu Die’s Marriage)” *Linglong*, no. 210 (1935). p. 3771.

marriage and in her professional career. Hu Die, married not long before the release of this film, made a public statement on *Shenbao* to assert her opinions on marriage and professional career.¹⁰⁸ In the statement, she claimed that the film culture was important to the nation and society, and thus she had always taken her career seriously and tried to improve it. She also stated that she had already decided to devote her lifetime to the film industry. In her mind, marriage would not encumber the progress of one's career, and she especially respected and admired the "intellectual class heroine" in her new film *Women's Rights*, who "struggles alone in society".¹⁰⁹ The above statement helped to promote the new film, by depicting herself as a devoted professional actress, much like other educated professional women, including the character in *Women's Rights*. At the same time, Hu promised to continue making films and making progress in her acting career, which could be regarded as an attempt to retain the interest of the audience.

However, parts in Hu Die's biography revealed an attitude that contradicted her career aspirations. According to Hu, her contract with Mingxing ended after filming *Women's Rights* since she wanted to be a housewife.¹¹⁰ She only agreed to make one film per year for Mingxing Studio after the manager Zhou Jianyun insisted.¹¹¹

If Hu Die's later accounts in her biography are true, the contradiction between the personal statement in *Shenbao* and the biography proves that her image as a devoted working woman was deliberately constructed for the promotion of her star image. As discussed in chapter 3, right from the start the Chinese film industry had made efforts to portray itself as a modern national industry. This was partially achieved by turning stars from amateurs into professionals, and Hu Die's star image as a devoted professional woman was an illustrative example of the type of star image the film industry sought to create.

¹⁰⁸ "Hu Die qishi (Hu Die's Statement)" *Shenbao*, September 19, 1936.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoirs)*. p. 177.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 180.

5.4 *An Actress and Her Nation*

As mentioned in chapter 4, traditional culture stood against female entertainers, who often took the blame for the decline of a nation. They were blamed for not caring about the future of their nation by tempting their monarchs to indulge in trivial entertainment. This would cause the monarchs to overlook important duties, which would consequently result in the fall of the nation. Such archetypes include the “songstresses” in Du Mu’s poem *Mooring on Qinhuan* (*Yebo Qinhuai*) and Emperor Xuanzong of Tang’s (685-762) consort Yang Yuhuan (719-756). The later was said a great musician and should be held responsible for the national crisis of An Lushan’s rebellion (755-763). In Republican China, such traditional views were still imbedded in the public’s mind, and thus occasionally used to attack female stars.

The film industry made efforts to protect actresses from being objects of such discrimination and tried to attach to them a patriotic image. It reshaped actresses’ social image, partially by portraying them as professional workers who contributed to the nation’s development through their service to the national film industry.

These two conflicting views were part of Hu Die’s social image. The nationwide scandal on the romance between Hu Die and Warlord Zhang Xueliang represented the cultural and social influence of traditional discrimination against actresses, while Hu Die’s own accounts and the film industry’s reports on her European trip presented Hu as a patriotic modern worker.

5.4.1 *A Femme Fatale Who Caused the Fall of Three Northeastern Provinces*

The notorious rumour about Hu Die’s romance with Warlord Zhang Xueliang appearing on the fatal night of the Mukden Incident (September 18, 1931) reflected the traditional bias towards female entertainers.

In 1931, not long before the Mukden Incident, Hu Die left Shanghai for Beiping and Tianjin with her colleagues in Mingxing Studio to film *Flower of Freedom* (*Ziyou zhihua*, 1932), *Falling Sunset Clouds and Lonely Wild Birds* (*Luo xia guwu*, 1932), and *Fate in Tears and Laughter*. The Mukden Incident broke out whilst they were still on the train. Two months after the Incident, and when Hu had

already returned to Shanghai, a scholar named Ma Junwu (1881-1940) published a satirical poem in *Current Affairs* (*Shishi xinbao*), titled *Crying for Shenyang* (*Ai Shenyang*). In his poem, Ma lampooned Zhang Xueliang's failure to defend Northern China from the Japanese army.¹¹² In his poems, Ma declared that on the night when the Mukden Incident took place, Zhang indulged in dancing with beautiful women, including the seductive film star Hu Die at the "six-nation hotel (*Liuguo fandian*)" in Beiping.¹¹³ He suggested that their romance was responsible for letting pass the best opportunity of resisting Japanese invaders, which led to the fall of three Northern provinces.¹¹⁴ Ma claimed that his poem patterned on another poem, *Northern Qi* (*Beiqi*) written by the Song Dynasty poet Li Yishan (Li Shangyin, 813-858). In Li's poem, the fall of the Northern Qi Empire was due to its Emperor Gao Wei's (557-577) infatuation with a beauty. Ma Junwu's poem used this historical anecdote to highlight Zhang's image as an incompetent leader who favoured beauty over nation.

According to scholar Yu Jizeng, it was a Japanese spy who first invented the story and published it on a Japanese controlled newspaper in Tianjin named *Yongbao*.¹¹⁵ It was said that because the Warlord Zhang Xueliang's military forces in Northern China could be a potential threaten to Japanese invasion, Japanese invaders tried to defame Zhang in order to dent his reputation and public support.¹¹⁶ Yu also pointed out that one of the films Hu Die was making in Beiping and Tianjin, *Flower of Freedom*, aroused Japanese dissatisfaction. It told a love story between a late Qing courtesan named Xiaofengxian and the Warlord Cai E (1882-1916), who was against Yuan Shikai's collaboration with the Japanese government. Hu Die, played the leading role in this film and became the target of Japanese attack.¹¹⁷ Yu considers that Japanese spies were familiar with Chinese culture, including the archetype of female entertainers and monarchs. This allowed them to deliberately fabricate a

¹¹² Ma Junwu, "Ai Shenyang. Er shou (Crying for Shenyang, Two Poems)" *Shishi xinbao* (*Current Affairs*), November 20, 1931; Liu, Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoirs). pp. 65-66.

¹¹³ Other two women cited in Ma's poem were two social butterflies: Zhao Yidi (1912-2000) and Zhu Meiyun (1905-?).

¹¹⁴ Ma Junwu, "Ai Shenyang. Er shou (Crying for Shenyang, Two Poems)", November 20, 1931.

¹¹⁵ Jizeng Yu, "Hu Die de '9.18' zhi yuan (Rumour about Hu Die on 9/18)" *Dang'an Chunqiu* (*Memories and Archives*, no. 6 (2007). p. 43.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Ibid .

romance between Hu and Zhang.¹¹⁸ Later, this fake romance increased in popularity through various tabloids, where further ‘details’ were revealed to the public, in particular, Hu receiving a large sum of money from Zhang.¹¹⁹ Finally, Ma Junwu, who had personal enmity towards Zhang Xueliang picked up this rumour and made it into a nation-wide scandal.¹²⁰

Although it is not known whether the Japanese did plot the whole story,¹²¹ or whether Ma’s poem resulted from his personal hatred towards Zhang, it is clear that all parties with a negative view on Hu Die and Zhang Xueliang made use of cultural archetypes. Tabloids, which sought for the commercial value of this scandal, became one of the promoters and published it to look like ‘true’ news. The sensation of this scandal also came from the public’s familiarity with such archetypes from traditional operas and fictions. Hu Die was a modern time victim of the traditional bias against actresses.

After Ma Junwu’s poem appeared in *Current Affairs* - one of Shanghai’s most influential newspapers, the film industry responded immediately to the rumour. Hu Die and *Mingxing* studio published statements on *Shenbao* to affirm her innocence. In her personal statement, Hu emphasised the strict disciplines surrounding her film studio, which forbade actors and actresses to accept private banquets of any kind during the shooting in Beiping and therefore never met Zhang Xueliang.¹²² Furthermore, she expressed her strong sense of patriotism in this statement. She saw herself as a member of the nation and naturally hated the Japanese enemy, thus she would not act in any way to disrupt a defence strategy.¹²³ This declaration clarified Hu Die’s innocence and defended her reputation not only through providing the truth, but also by portraying herself as a disciplined actress and a patriotic citizen.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ In Hu Die’s memoir, she also blamed this rumour on Japanese news agencies. But so far there is no evidence to prove it. See: Liu, *Hu Die Huiyilu (Hu Die’s Memoirs)*. p. 66.

¹²² “Hu Die piyao (Hu Die’s Refutation)” *Shenbao*, November 22, 1931.

¹²³ Ibid.

5.4.2 ***An Actress who Contributed to Her Nation via Her Profession***

More than passively defending her reputation, Hu Die and the film industry created in her a patriotic image that cared about the nation's future and was actively involved in nation-building projects via her contributions to the film industry. The film industry's depiction of such an image was well illustrated in Hu Die's travel notes and journalistic writings during her trip to Europe in 1935.

In 1935, Hu Die was invited by the Moscow International Film Festival Committee as a member of the Chinese delegation.¹²⁴ After the delegation's visit to the Soviet Union, they visited other European countries, including France, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany.¹²⁵ In this trip, the delegation took part in international film events (1935 Moscow Film Festival and the Nazi's International Film Conference in Berlin¹²⁶), screened two of her films, *Lily in the Empty Valley* and *Two Sisters* in foreign countries she visited, took part in diplomatic events, and visited foreign film studios. When Hu returned to China, she wrote a booklet on her trip - *The travel notes on Ms Hu Die's European Trip* (*Hu Die nüshi ou'you zaji*, 1935), published by Shanghai Liangyou publishing house.¹²⁷ Many journalistic writings on this trip also appeared in various newspapers and film magazines.¹²⁸

Hu Die's booklet highlighted her importance as a professional actress in the Chinese film industry in three different ways. Firstly, the visit informed European audiences of the existence of a Chinese film industry and talented stars. Before the delegation's visit to Europe, many Westerners did not realise that China also had its own film industry and films stars.¹²⁹ Also, the two films the delegation took to Europe received positive reviews from western audiences, who saw these films representing "an achievement of China's film industry and film acting".¹³⁰ The

¹²⁴ Die Hu and Yiyun Chen, *Hu Die nüshi Ou'you Zaji (Notes on Ms Hu Die's European Trip)* (Shanghai: Young Companion Publishing House, 1935). p. 2.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 74-111.

¹²⁶ Die Hu and Yiyun Chen, *Hu Die nüshi Ou'you Zaji (Notes on Ms Hu Die's European Trip)* (Shanghai: Young Companion Publishing House, 1935)., p.53. David S. Hull, *Film in the Third Reich: A Study of the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 1st ed. (California: California UP, 1969). p. 70.

¹²⁷ Hu and Chen, *Hu Die nüshi Ou'you Zaji (Notes on Ms Hu Die's European Trip)*.

¹²⁸ "Yipian huanying sheng (all Say Welcome)" *Dianying xinwen (Movie News)* 1, no. 2 (July 1935).

¹²⁹ Hu and Chen, *Hu Die Nushi Ou'you Zaji (Notes on Ms Hu Die's European Trip)*. pp. 70, 80.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

western press introduced Hu as “China’s greatest film actress”,¹³¹ and the “Greta Gabo of China”.¹³² In a film magazine article, the author claimed that Hu Die’s acting skills showed in *Two Sisters* amazed western audiences and gained their admiration for the “Chinese film industry having made such considerable progress”.¹³³ All this suggests western audiences had gained, thanks to the development of the Chinese film industry, admiration and respect towards China.

Secondly, Hu suggested the image she portrayed on screen represented that of China to international audiences. In her booklet, Hu quoted director Alexander Dovzhenko’s (1894–1955) speech after the screening of *Two Sisters* in Moscow. Dovzhenko firstly expressed his regret for the negative portrayal of China and its people in most Western films. But he was reassured by the film *Two Sisters*, which convinced him that Chinese filmmakers are able to make films to present the authentic image of China and its people to foreigners.¹³⁴ Hu Die expressed her support to Dovzhenko’s opinion: “because of his speech, I feel even stronger about the important duty of our filmmakers. Isn’t it our responsibility to carry forward the glory of our nation?”¹³⁵ Except Hu Die’s accounts, there was no other historical evidence to prove the Soviet director’s speech. Dovzhenko’s point of view was shared by many in Chinese audiences, who wished to build a national film industry in order to present an ideal image of China (as discussed in chapter 2). Through re-emphasising this popular view via a Western director’s speech, Hu Die not only reminded readers of the importance of a national film industry, but also strengthened her status as an actress.

Thirdly, Hu depicted herself as a professional woman concerned with women’s role in society. During her trip, she often paid special attention to women’s work and the living conditions in European countries; she also addressed women’s issues during a speech in a film screening held by Moscow Film Festival,¹³⁶ and gave

¹³¹ *Meet Miss Butterfly Wu*, a press clipping published on *Notes on Ms Hu Die’s European Trip* as an illustration. Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., p. 52.

¹³³ Chen, “Hu Die.”

¹³⁴ Hu and Chen, *Hu Die nüshi Ou’you Zaji* (*Notes on Ms Hu Die’s European Trip*).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

suggestions on women's issues to her domestic readers.¹³⁷ For example, she praised women's equal status in the Soviet Union because women in that country could do all the jobs that were traditionally occupied by men, such as government officials, directors, cinematographers, and soldiers.¹³⁸ She said "everyone should serve society and do different jobs according to their different talents".¹³⁹ Through this, Hu attempted to instil upon her readers the idea of a professional woman who wished to serve her nation.

5.5 Conclusion

The reason Hu Die was the most popular star is because her star image always reflected and represented popular social ideologies at the time.

In terms of her screen image, Hu always played popular types of characters in popular genres. Her acting career could be seen as a representation of the development of the Chinese film industry between the mid-1920s and pre-WWII. In the mid-1920s, when the domestic film industry expanded quickly and sought for a broader audience group, costume films and martial arts films were made to attract petite urbanites and Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia. It was also at a time when the anti-imperialist sentiment was increasing in China, partly due to the May 30th Movement. Similarly, the Northern Expedition encouraged a sense of chivalry among Chinese people. Therefore, costume films and martial arts film often based on stories of legendary Chinese heroes and historical figures were able to satisfy audiences' national pride and meet their aesthetic preference for films with obvious Chinese features. Hu Die's screen images in the 1920s as incarnations of heroines in classic fictions and female knight-warrants were thus welcomed by the audience. In the 1930s, when the national crisis deepened due to Japanese invasion, Hu Die's most successful screen image became that of an oppressed woman whose sufferings symbolised social injustice. Such a woman figure whose stories often gained audiences' sympathy was very popular. No matter whether filmmakers belonged to

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

left-wing groups or not, many of them tended to use such an image to portray their social concerns and attract audiences.

As a successful female star, Hu Die's private life also attracted the attention of the public. Due to mass media exposure, her personal issues often met with broad social discussions. Most of these discussions focused on the relation between her profession and her love life. Different social groups expressed their own opinions on female stars' morality through commenting on this issue. Those who wanted to capitalise Hu Die's personal scandal (such as entertainment tabloids and her former lover Lin Xuehuai) used the conservative approach of comparing actresses to prostitutes in order to attack her. On the contrary, the film industry as well as supporters of the industry defended her as a modern woman who pursued her independence whilst contributing to nation building through career development and free marriage, which should be based on true love.

In the traditional form of discrimination against actresses, the decline of a nation was always blamed upon them. The same discourse was again applied to Hu Die after Japanese invaders occupied three provinces in Northern China in 1931. Hu Die and her studio responded to this discrimination through portraying her social image as a patriotic citizen. In addition, Hu's European trip provided her another opportunity to portray her as an international star, and a patriotic modern worker who supported women's emancipation and promoted the development of the nation's film industry.

Because of her fame in society, Hu Die's name was unprecedentedly added to her clan's genealogy book (*zupu*), which was traditionally strictly exclusive of women,¹⁴⁰ which symbolises the change in social values and a social mobility of actresses.

¹⁴⁰ Liu, *Hu Die huiyilu (Hu Die's Memoirs)*. p. 9.

Conclusion

This research examines the genesis and development of Chinese film star culture and discusses the social status of film stars in Chinese society (mainly in the Shanghai area) from 1905 to 1936. While certain topics in Republican-era Chinese cinema have been researched extensively by scholars, such as the Left Wing Film Movement and Chinese national cinema, the film star culture has been rarely touched upon in any depth. This phenomenon is due to the fact that traditionally the film star was not seen as a legitimate research subject. Most Chinese research on Chinese cinema tended to use an ideological framework to define its importance and meaning. Film stars were considered less important than other ideology-related topics, such as subject matters, political film movements, and directors and screenwriters who conveyed political messages through films. In addition, the Chinese film industry was not a star-centred industry, although it produced its own superstars. Therefore, less attention was given to Chinese film star culture.

Due to the substantial development of studies on stardom in Western scholarship in the last two decades, Chinese film stardom has also become a subject of scholarly research in recent years. A few studies on some specific aspects of Chinese film stars and stardom have been carried out and published, such as the production of film stars, social discourses on female stars, and images of certain individual stars. However, there are many other important aspects of Republican-era film stars and stardom, which have not been adequately addressed or critically discussed in existing research, including the relationship between the Republican-era film star culture and its social and cultural context. To examine the film star culture by locating it in its historical context could allow for an in-depth insight into the formation and development of this social phenomenon, and widen our vision on the social impact of it.

Therefore, this study investigated the film star culture through analysing its dynamic interactions with the historical context of Shanghai's entertainment culture and changing popular social ideologies. I focused on three aspects of this subject: 1) how the film star culture emerged and developed in its socio-political and cultural contexts; 2) how various social discourses on stars influenced the production of stars;

3) the social influences of film stars. To answer these questions, this study adopted the star-image approach, a film studies' common research method used in studies of film stars, to investigate stars' different images that were constructed in different media texts (e.g. films and the print media). Since stars' images often represent ideological meanings, and star images are products of the entertainment industry, the star-image approach allows for an efficient analysis of the entertainment and ideological framework in which the film star culture was born and developed.

Before analysing different images of the film stars, this study firstly discussed the production of film stars. I have proved that the emergence of film stars was not merely a natural feature of the film industry, but also partly a result of two facts: 1) the prosperity of the entertainment industry that had been developing from the late Qing onwards; and 2) the global expansion of Hollywood. Inspired by Richard deCordova's analytical framework which was used to explore the origins of the American film star system, this research divided the history of the establishment of the Chinese film star culture into three stages: 1) the emergence of discourse on film acting and professional film actors; 2) the appearance of the 'picture personality'; and 3) the rise of the star.

When Chinese filmmaking started in the early twentieth century, famous Peking opera stars appeared in films of stage performances to draw audiences' attention. Thanks to Shanghai's drama culture, Civilised Play actors became the first film actors who played in the first Chinese feature films made during the late 1910s to early 1920s. But neither Peking opera stars nor Civilised Play actors could be considered as professional film actors. It was not until a discourse on film acting and actors emerged that professional film actors started to appear subsequently. With the development of filmmaking techniques and the expansion of the film industry, professional film actors whose performance style could meet the requirements of the film medium were demanded by the industry. Such a demand led to a discourse on film acting and actors, and the establishment of training schools for professional film actors, which marked the first stage of the film star culture.

Due to the arrival of the advanced Hollywood star culture in Shanghai from the early 1920s, the second stage of the development of Chinese stardom was very brief

and overlapped with the third stage. Hollywood star culture inspired the Chinese film industry and Shanghai's flourishing mass media (e.g. the print media, advertisings, wireless broadcasting, and gramophone discs) to expose and circulate film stars' names, images, voices and personalities. Meanwhile, stars' personal lives were also publicised. Audiences' fantasies and collective imaginations towards stars, which were evoked by the mass media's exposés on stars, also projected onto the image of stars constructed in media texts e.g. fan letters, social critics and commentaries to stars, and popular fictions and films on the theme of (an imagined) life of stars. Therefore, the film industry, the mass media as well as the film audience were all responsible for the making of film stars and film star culture.

In terms of making stars, we actually deal with the establishment of stars' different images portrayed in different media texts. This study focused on three types of stars' image: 1) the persona that were established through their on-screen performances, i.e. screen images; 2) the portrayal of their personal lives in the mass media, i.e. off-screen images; and 3) images that were established through their participation in public events and social celebrities, i.e. social images.

Since film stars usually firstly established their fame through the films they act in, stars' screen images were first analysed in this research. I found that stars' screen images were often seen as a representation of the image of Chinese people in the Republican era. The Republican-era audiences and filmmakers considered that presenting positive screen images of Chinese people could 1) gain this nation and its people certain respect from the international community; and 2) comfort and encourage Chinese audiences who were discouraged by the national crisis caused by the internal turmoil and the external pressure from the rising Western imperialist powers. Therefore, they not only boycotted Western films that distorted the image of Chinese people, but also demanded and encouraged the film industry to establish the desired screen images of Chinese stars.

Through analysing screen images in relation to the political circumstances in which these images were created, this research proved that the nationalistic sentiments influenced the shaping of star screen images. In the early 1920s, the nationalistic sentiment was represented in the requirement of establishing a national

film industry in order to defend the Chinese film market from the influx of Western films. Therefore, Chinese filmmakers created a range of Chinese equivalent of screen images from popular Western films, especially Hollywood films. In addition, many films made during this period were adaptations from popular vernacular literature and stage plays, which were often set in the urban city and addressed modern themes like women's liberation and anti-arranged-marriage. So actors' screen images during this period were often 'Westernised', expressing through their modern and westernised costume and lifestyle. To endorse the "Westernised" screen characters, film studios tended to promote their stars as modern-thinking men and women. From the mid-1920s, the nationalistic sentiment was deepened by the May Thirtieth Movement with a theme of the anti-imperialism, and a chivalry spirit that was waged by the North Expedition. Subsequently, traditional costume and martial arts films had become popular since then. These genres created images of physically strong Chinese heroes and heroines with high moral standards. The Republican audiences and filmmakers considered that a heroic image of Chinese people on the silver screen could be helpful to restore a sense of national pride. From the early 1930s to 1937, because of the deepening national crisis that was caused by the Japanese invasion and the consequent anticipation of war, anti-imperialism and national-salvation became the main connotations of nationalism in China. Such nationalistic themes were also embedded in film stars' screen images. Contemporary themed films that reflected social reality and called for the improvement/modernisation of the nation replaced traditional costume films and martial arts film. New types of star images appeared in these new films, including robust male stars and "healthy and beautiful" female stars who represented the ideal image of modern Chinese men and women, idealistic intellectuals whose personal failure signalled the unfairness of the society, and oppressed women who often symbolised the oppressed Chinese people and their nation. All these screen images revealed the society's concerns with political circumstances, and showed the nationalist discourses' influence on the creation of stars' screen images.

When audiences become familiar with stars via the big screen, usually their interests and curiosities regarding their favourite stars also increase. To meet such demands of audiences, the film industry and the print media continually exposed and

published their personal lives, through which stars' off-screen image is made. This research analysed three most discussed aspects of Republican-era Chinese film stars' off-screen images: 1) their consumption, 2) profession, and 3) private issues. It was found that stars were expected to be public models in all these three aspects.

Stars' consumption was mostly promoted by the print media, film industry and the commercial advertisings. All these three parties established stars' images as the icon of modernity through depicting them as expert consumers, and interpreting stars' consumption for fashion by agendas of popular social ideologies. The film industry and the print media build such an image of stars in order to gain audiences' favour to stars. The advertisement used star endorsement to sell consumption goods. Stars' image as models in profession was established by the film industry (and pro-film-industry magazines and newspapers). Since the traditional culture discriminated against the acting profession and actors as unrespectable, the film industry made efforts to improve the reputation of both actors and the industry through building stars' image as model workers in a modern national industry. To achieve this goal, the industry advocated a modern and "scientific" working environment of film studios in which actors were working, promoted stars as educated acting artists, and set up professional ethics for actors. In terms of stars' personal issues, this research analysed three most discussed aspects in stars' private lives: their consumption in daily life, leisure activities, and marriage. I found that the film industry, as well as the pro-star and pro-modernisation print media promoted film stars as models in all these aspects: they consumed for the modernisation of the nation; trained body and improved education as well as professional skills in private time in order to support the nation-building project; and declared that their marriage was for the sake of supporting their profession better.

While pro-star discourses used agendas of modernisation-related issues (e.g. nation-building project) to establish positive stars' off-screen images, stars were also often confronted with criticism. Due to various social groups' different interests and political agendas, they criticised different aspects of stars' lives. The conservatives saw female stars' profession as a threat to their traditional gender role as a good mother and wife, the profit-seeking mass media exploited stars' scandals, and

progress critics attacked stars, for they did not meet the expectations to be social role models. Different ideas held by different social groups were represented in their ways to depict stars' personal lives, which reflected their own aims and interests. Therefore, actors' off-screen image was actually the representation of all sorts of issues related to modernising society as public role models.

Stars also actively engaged in intellectual discourses through taking part in various public events and social activities, by which they established their social images. To analyse their social images could help us to have a better understanding about stars' position in society. This research focused on stars' public behaviour and statements in one type of entertainment events - star elections and one political event - the National Products Movement. I found that the film industry used stars' pre-established on-and-off screens images to deliver nationalistic messages in public activities, which created their social images as patriotic celebrities. However, the public often rejected such as an image of stars, and doubted their motivations behind their patriotic behaviour. Therefore, film stars' position in promoting nationalistic ideas was ambiguous. Although the film industry's efforts to build stars as patriotic celebrities were sometimes rejected, stars' social recognition was still increased to some extent through their involvement in public events and promotion of patriotic ideas.

After showing the complexities of Republican-era film star culture in general, in order to explain and illustrate my observations and arguments stated above, I gave a detailed case study on Hu Die's screen image, off-screen image and social image. Hu was one of the most popular stars during the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, but she has been overlooked as the object of dedicated academic study. This research found that Hu Die's popularity was partly due to that her screen images were always changing in tandem with the change of social ideologies in her time. Thus, her screen images were always the reflection and representation of the public's nationalistic sentiments. In the mid to late 1920s, she was the incarnations of Chinese legends in costume films; during the late 1920s and early 1930s, she was female knight-warrant in martial arts films; in the 1930s, her most successful screen images were oppressed

woman in realistic themed films, whose sufferings symbolised social injustices in reality.

An analysis on the depiction of Hu Die's private life showed that different social groups expressed their own opinions on modernisation-related issues through commenting on Hu Die's marriage scandals. Those who wanted to make profits out of Hu Die's personal scandal used the conservative opinion of equalling actresses as prostitutes to attack her and her acting profession. On the contrary, the film industry as well as supporters of modernisation defended her as a modern woman who pursued for independent, free marriage, and contributing to the nation-building project through her profession.

Hu Die's social image was also associated with nationalistic sentiments. The traditional discrimination against actresses, which blamed the decline of a nation on actresses, was again used to attack Hu Die. Based on such discrimination, a rumour that accusing Hu Die indirectly caused the fall of the Northern China into the hands of Japanese invaders appeared and was disseminated quickly in the nation. In this rumour, Hu was identified with the prototype of *femme fatale* in the traditional discrimination, who tempted the ruler of a nation in entertainment she provided and led the ruler neglected his responsibility to the nation. Hu and her studio responded to this rumour by portraying her as a patriotic citizen. Further, Hu's European trip provided her another opportunity to establish an image as an international celebrity and a patriotic modern worker who actively supported the advancement of the national film industry and the nation's modernisation.

Through articulating the process of the formation and development of film star culture and analysing stars' screen images, off-screen images, and social images, this research showed that both the entertainment culture and agendas of various popular social ideologies influenced and shaped the Republican-era film star culture.

Several limitations to current study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, film stars' performance style, which is also an important element to construct a star's screen image, was not addressed in this research. It was partly due to lack of original films. For instance, as mentioned in chapter 5, there are only about three of Hu Die's films available, and all of them were made in the 1930s. So it is unlikely to give an

adequate discussion on her various performance styles. It was also because I considered stars' performance style deserves another research from the discipline of performance studies, which was not the focus of this study. Secondly, audiences' reception on stars was neither adequately mentioned nor discussed in this research due to lack of first hand materials. Published fan letters were not entirely reliable as they might have been crafted by magazine editors. Thirdly, many first hand materials such as film actors' contracts, film publications and original films were lost in the history. Many precious sources do not exist today. There are also many sources like original film prints and film publications that are too fragile to be watched or read now. Future research on the formation and development of Republican-era film star culture therefore could investigate audiences' influences on the star culture, and discuss different stars' performance styles.

The present study, however, makes several noteworthy contributions to our understanding towards the pre-WWII Republican-era Chinese film star culture. Firstly, it showed that the film star culture was profoundly influenced and shaped by both its contemporary entertainment culture context and socio-political circumstances. The flow of changing political appeals and the development of entertainment culture was represented in the star image of popular stars, such as the case of Hu Die. Secondly, this research found that film stars were always expected to be representations of all different and sometimes even conflicting agendas and opinions related to the theme of modernisation. Those who promoted film stars all claimed to be modernisers and saw stars as icons of modernity. Two social groups were often against film stars. One group saw stars as threats to modernisation. Another group who held the negative view of the concept of modernity and had anxieties associated with modernisation also rejected film stars. These findings suggest that both popular social ideology and Shanghai's commercial entertainment culture shaped film star culture. In such a film culture, film star images were representations of different ideas on the most focused social and cultural issues in society. Therefore, their social recognition consequently increased and their social status raised in Republican China.

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A String of Pearls (Yichuan zhenzhu), dir. by Li Zeyuan (Shanghai Great Wall Film Company, 1925)

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Adventure in Battleground (Zhendi lixian ji), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Amorous History of the Silver Screen (Yinmu yanshi), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1931)

Baishui Beach (Baishuitan), dir. by Ren Qingtai (Beijing Fengtai Photographic Studio, 1907)

Battle Exploits (Zhangong), dir. by Xu Xinfu (Tianyi Studio, 1925)

Beauty's Heart (Meiren xin), dir. by Xu Xinfu, (Mingxing Studio, 1931)

Bicycle Causes Trouble (Jiaotache chuanguo), dir. by Zhang Shichuan & Lu Ziqing (Asian Film Company, 1913)

Blood on Wolf Mountain (Langshan diexue ji), dir. by Fei Mu (Lianhua Studio, 1936)

Boatman's Daughter (Chuan jia nü), dir. by Shen Xiling, (Lianhua Studio, 1935)

Broken Blossoms, dir. by D.W. Griffith (D.W. Griffith Productions, 1919)

Brothers, (Xiongdì xing), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1936)

Burning the Red Lotus Temple (Huo shao Hongliansi), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1928-31)

Capture Guan Sheng (Shou Guan Sheng), dir. by Ren Qingtai (Beijing Fengtai Photographic Studio, 1907)

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Cosmetic Market (Zhifen shichang), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1933)

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Difficult Couple (Nanfu nanqi), dir. by Zhang Shichuan & Zheng Zhengqiu (Xinmin Studio, 1913)

Eros' Doll (Aishen de wan'ou), dir. by Hou Yao & Hou Xuechou (Shanghai Great Wall Film Company, 1925)

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Falling Sunset Clouds and Lonely Wild Birds (Luo xia gu wu), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Fate in Tears and Laughter (Ti xiao yinyuan), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Female Detective (Nüzhentan), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1928)

Fisherman's Song (Yuguangqu), dir. by Cai Chusheng (Lianhua Studio, 1934)

Flower of Freedom (Ziyou zhihua), dir. by Zheng Zhengqiu (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Great Knight-Errant of Aviation (Hangkong daxia), dir. by Chen Tian (Huaju Studio, 1928)

Hollywood, dir. by James Cruze (Paramount Pictures, 1923)

Humanity (Rendao), dir. by Bu Wancang (Lianhua Studio, 1932)

Iron Blood Youth (Tie xue qingnian), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1931)

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Labourer's Love (Laogong zhi aiqing), dir. by Zhang Shichuan, (Mingxing Studio, 1922)

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Little Friends (Xiaopengyou), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1925)

Liu, Guan and Zhang Conquer the Yellow Turban (Liu Guan Zhang da po Huangjin), dir. by Shao Zuiweng (Tianyi Studio, 1927)

Loving Mother (Ci mu), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Lucky Silver Stars (Yinxing xingyun), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Meng Jiangnü, dir. by Shao Zuiweng & Qiu Qixiang (Tianyi Studio, 1926)

Mulan Joins the Army (Mulan congjun), dir. by Hou Yao (Minxin Studio, 1928)

My Stars, dir. by Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle (Goodwill Productions, 1926)

National Style (Guo feng), dir. by Luo Mingyou & Zhu Shilin (Lianhua Studio, 1935)

New Camellia (Xin chahua), dir. unknown (Asian Film Company, 1913)

Old San Francisco, dir. by Alan Crosland (Warner Bros and Vitaphone Corporation, 1927)

Orchid in the Valley (Konggu lan), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1925)

Orphan Rescues Grandfather (Gu'er jiuzuji), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1923)

Peach Blossoms after the Disaster (Jie hou taohua), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1935)

Peter Pan, dir. by Herbert Brenon (Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1924)

Plunder of Peach and Plum (Tao li jie), dir. by Ying Yunwei (Lianhua Studio, 1934)

President of the Flower Kingdom (Huaguo dazongtong), dir. by Zhang Weitao, (Zhonghua Film Studio, 1928)

Raging Torrents (Kuangliu), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1933)

Repentance (Lidi chengfo), dir. by Shao Zuiweng (Tianyi Studio, 1925)

Resentments (Qiushan yuan), dir. by Chen Kengran (Youlian Studio, 1926)

Resurrection of the Soul (Liangxin de fuhuo), dir. by Bu Wancang (Mingxing Studio, 1926)

Salt Tide, (Yanchao), dir. by Xu Xinfu (Mingxing Studio, 1934)

Sea Vows (Haishi), dir. by Dan Duyu (Shanghai Yingxi Company, 1922),

Shanghai Express, dir. by Josef von Sternberg (Paramount Pictures, 1932)

Song of the Fisherman (Yu guang qu) dir. by Cai Chusheng (Lianhua Studio, 1934)

Spring of the South (Nanguo zhichun), dir. by Cai Chusheng, (Lianhua Studio, 1932)

Spring Silkworms (Chuncan), dir. by Cheng Bugao (Mingxing Studio, 1933)

Street Willow and Wall Flower (Lu liu qiang hua), dir. by Xu Xinfu (Mingxing Studio, 1934)

Struggle (Zhengzha), dir. by Qiu Qixiang (Tianyi Studio, 1933)

The Alaskan, dir. by Herbert Brenon (Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1924)

The Cave of Silken Coil (Pansidong), dir. by Dan Duyu (Shanghai Yingxi Company, 1927)

The Classic for Women (Nü'er jing), dir. by Zhang Shichuan, Li Pingqian, Cheng Bugao, Shen Xiling, Yao Sufeng, Zheng Zhengqiu, Xu Xinfu, Chen Kengran, and Wu Cun (Mingxing Studio, 1934)

The Flower of Freedom (Ziyou zhi hua), dir. by Zheng Zhengqiu (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

The Goddess (Shennü), dir. by Wu Yonggang (Lianhua Studio, 1934)

The House without a Key, dir. by Spencer Gordon Bennet (Pathé Exchange, 1926)

The Last Conscience (Zuihou zhi liangxin), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1925)

The Leopard (Jinqianbao), dir. by Tan Xinpei (Beijing Fengtai Photographic Studio, 1906)

The Movies dir. by Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle (Lloyd Hamilton Corporation, 1926)

The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu, dir. by A.E.Coleby (Stoll Picture Productions, 1923)

The Prison of Zenda, dir. by Rex Ingram (Metro Pictures Corporation, 1922)

The Queen of Sports (Tiyu huanghou), dir. by Sun Yu (Lianhua Studio, 1934)

The Revenge of a Knight-errant (Daxia fuchouji), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1928)

The Singsong Girl Red Peony (Genü Hongmudan), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1930)

The Swordswoman from Huangjiang (Huangjiang nüxia), dir. by Chen Kengran, Zheng Yisheng & Shang Guanwu (Youlian Studio, 1930)

The Thief of Bagdad, dir. by Raoul Walsh (Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1924)

The Three Musketeers, dir. by Fred Niblo (Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1921)

The Tragic Story of Liang and Zhu (Liang Zhu tongshi), dir. by Shao Zuiweng (Tianyi Studio, 1926)

Three Sisters (San jiemei), dir. by Li Pingqian (Mingxing Studio, 1934)

Two Sisters (Zimeihua), dir. by Zheng Zhengqiu (Mingxing Studio, 1932)

Two Stars in the Milky Way (Yinhan shuangxing), dir. by Shi Dongshan (Lianhua Studio, 1931)

Victims of Opium (Heiji yuanhun), dir. by Zhang Shichuan & Guan Haifeng (Huanxian Studio, 1917)

Welcome Danger, dir. by Clyde Bruckman (Paramount Pictures, 1929)

Wild Rose (Ye meigui), dir. by Sun Yu (Lianhua Studio, 1932)

Women's Rights (Nüquan), dir. by Zhang Shichuan (Mingxing Studio, 1936)

Xin Nüxing, dir. by Cai Chusheng (Mingxing Studio, 1934)

Yan Ruisheng (Yan Ruisheng), dir. by Ren Pengnian (China Shadow-play Study Society, 1921)

Yanyang Mansion (Yanyanglou), dir. by Ren Qingtai (Beijing Fengtai Photographic Studio, 1905)