

Edited and with an Introduction by

Yingjin Zhang

Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943



Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
© 1999 by the Board of Trustees of the
Leland Stanford Junior University
Printed in the United States of America
CIP data appear at the end of the book

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 1999

Chapter Seven

Prostitution and Urban Imagination:
Negotiating the Public and the Private
in Chinese Films of the 1930s

YINGJIN ZHANG

Prostitution and Urban Imagination

As a recurring theme in film and literature, prostitution is endowed with special significance in the urban imagination. Due to the public's conflicting perceptions of it, prostitution has become one of the most compelling metaphors with which to articulate the ambivalence and contradiction inherent in the conceptualization of the modern city: the city seen simultaneously as the symbol of heaven and hell, as the site of civilization and dehumanization, as the agent of progress and destruction. Paralleled to the negative images of the city as "presumption (Babel), corruption (Babylon), perversion (Sodom and Gomorrah), power (Rome), destruction (Troy, Carthage), death, the plague (the City of Dis)"¹ are insidious ideas of prostitution as sexual promiscuity, physical degeneration, moral degradation, and national humiliation. On the other hand, "virtues" such as faithful companionship, fashionable ornamentation, and artistic sensibility have been attributed to prostitutes (*chang*) in Chinese society throughout history, and the city has long been designated as the locus of such traditional cultural achievements.²

In *Dangerous Pleasures*, Gail Hershatter succinctly sums up such conflicting perceptions: "In Shanghai over the past century, prostitution was variously understood as a source of urbanized pleasures, a profession full of unscrupulous and greedy schemers, a site of moral danger and physical disease, and a marker of national decay."³ In other words, prostitution has come to constitute a highly

contested space in the modern era in which diverse urban discourses and ideologies confront one another and compete. In this chapter, I will discuss films about Shanghai prostitution and use them as markers of urban imagination. I will further demonstrate that elite modern intellectuals who lay claim to ethical-moral legitimacy had to confront—and at times to accommodate themselves to—the epicurean and voyeuristic penchants in mass audiences as well as within their own ranks.

To give the context of urban imagination in Republican China, I will start with conflicting public perceptions gleaned from original sources as well as recent historical and social-scientific literatures, and then shift the focus from the question of "facts" to that of representation, by identifying a number of textual modes used in representing prostitution. My reading of early Chinese films, in particular Wu Yonggang's *Shennü* (Goddess, 1934) and Shen Xiling's *Chuanjianü* (Boatman's daughter, 1935), will further reveal the textual processes whereby the otherwise "unpresentable" figure of prostitution is presented and distributed as an artistic product for public consumption. In the concluding section, I will take note of a recent trend toward glamorizing prostitution in Chinese cinema, which has made the idea of prostitution not just "presentable" but instrumental to historical representation itself.

Charles Bernheimer decodes the word "prostitution" in this way: "Etymologically, prostitution means to set or place (Latin: *statuere*) forth, in public (*pro*). When Baudelaire wrote that art is prostitution, he may have had this etymology in mind, for indeed art is the making public of private fantasies, the public exposition of one's imaginary creations."⁴ Reading through Baudelaire, Bernheimer detects a potential conflict embedded within the idea of prostitution: to make "public" something that is usually or at least originally "private"—be it one's body, desire, fantasy, or artistic creation. Following this exegesis, I would contend that prostitution involves not only private issues but also public discussion, intervention, and regulation. In some cases, as in China at the turn of the twentieth century, the house of prostitution might even be imagined as partially immersed in a "public sphere" of some sort.⁵ In this particular type of Chinese "public sphere" (definitely more erotic—although no less cultural—than the urban teahouse and wine shop), a young boy might be initiated into the sphere of male knowledge; a prostitute might be praised by her clientele through print media; and a literatus might air his political views in addition to displaying his artistic talents.

Take, for example, Bao Tianxiao (1876–1973), an eminent Shanghai writer of mandarin duck and butterfly fiction (*yuanyang hudie pai xiaoshuo*) in the Republican period. At the age of 96, Bao still vividly remembered his first experience with the erotic "flower boat" (*huachuan*) in his early childhood, when his

father took him to a festival celebration in the company of gorgeously dressed prostitutes. During the 1910s and 1920s, Bao edited a number of popular magazines that regularly carried the photographs of prostitutes famous nationwide.⁶ Take Wang Tao (1828–97), a prominent late Qing Shanghai literatus, as another example. He mingled with prostitutes, politicians, and foreigners, eagerly submitting policy suggestions to the Qing court on the one hand and, on the other, gracefully composing verses to comment on courtesans' character. Wang was so fond of passing clever remarks to Shanghai prostitutes that he once claimed himself to be the “prime minister of prostitution” (*fengyue pingzhang*).⁷ Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, the house of prostitution was delicately situated at the threshold between the public and the private, and it marked a site where a variety of urban discourses contended and converged. As demonstrated by recent historical studies, hardly any aspect of prostitution in China has escaped public scrutiny in the course of the twentieth century. Issues such as the rules and tricks of the trade, trafficking and regulating, pregnancy and abortion, contraception and sterility, venereal disease and opium addiction have all been detailed and catalogued in public discourses in one form or another.⁸ It is precisely such interactions and interplays between the private and the public that make prostitution a fascinating subject for a study of urban imagination.

Public Perceptions and Textual Modes

Gail Hershatler's six “approximations” of Shanghai prostitutes are by far the best summary of various public perceptions of prostitution in early twentieth-century China. The first approximation, “the urbane courtesan,” abounds in a popular genre of literati writing, a literature of pleasure, appreciation, or nostalgia, which recounts stories of male youthful indulgences in urban prostitution as the delightful consummation of rare female artistic achievements. The second approximation, “the scheming businesswoman,” appears primarily in city guidebooks and tabloids, which warn the male tourists/adventurers of the dangers posed by the untrustworthy prostitutes and their all-too-greedy madams. The third approximation, “the diseased and oppressed streetwalker,” touches the darker and more sinful side of urban life, articulated through imageries of filth, violence, disease, and death. From the fourth to the sixth approximations, which pertain to “rational” discourses, prostitution is alternatively regarded as a marker of backwardness (which stands for an “endangered” China waiting to be saved by Christianity or nationalism in turns), as a marker of modernity (which imagines China as taking part in a universal human history), and as object of state regulation (which involves health issues, police strategies, and public campaigns).⁹

It is evident from Hershatler's approximations that the urbane courtesan and

the oppressed streetwalker are two extreme figures of urban prostitution, one embodying distinctive cultural achievements, the other social and sexual victimization. This difference, however, does not form a contrast “between good and bad women,” but rather is a result of class distinction.¹⁰ What deserves special attention at this point is that, insofar as public discourse is concerned, the courtesan was gradually displaced by the streetwalker in the early decades of the century.¹¹ I will return to this process of displacement and to a contemporary replacement of the streetwalker by the courtesan later in this chapter.

In spite of the marked difference between the courtesan and the streetwalker, some scholars have recently gathered evidence for a more or less identical, if not uniform, lifestyle and behavioral pattern in all classes of Chinese prostitutes. Virgil Kit-yiu Ho, for one, takes pains to prove that, in spite of common stories of prostitutes' “ruthless exploitation” by their madams, which frequently surfaced in contemporary “moralists' writings,” the Cantonese prostitutes of the early Republican period in fact lived a fairly “decent” life, showing off their lavish clothing, enjoying their newly acquired wealth and power, organizing entertainment parties of their own, and conducting their trade either “with some pleasure” or with “thorough” enjoyment.¹² Ho's extensive use of archival materials to illustrate “the generally favorable view, and the widespread patronage, of prostitution in Canton” may look impressive on first reading,¹³ but his uncritical, if not indiscriminate, stance toward these materials beg the questions of mediation and representation.

The bulk of public perceptions as recorded by Ho is not so much unmediated *facts* about “the job and life of those in that profession” as their textual *representations* by the historian, the writer, or the government agency, each of them with different and specific purposes in mind.¹⁴ One must not, therefore, equate to “truth” the fictionalized voice of a prostitute in some popular songs. When Ho interprets the song “Repaying the Flower-Debt” (Huan huazhai) in this way—“a prostitute is described as willing to sell her body while still young and attractive, for at this golden age of life she will be admired, appeased, and wooed by a large number of ‘followers’ who will bring her both companionship and money,” he runs the risk of erasing a crucial difference between the voice of the prostitute—speaking as she may be in the first person—and that of the songwriter, who might derive fame, money, and pleasure from a particular type of representation.¹⁵

Christian Henriot devotes more attention to the problem of representation than Virgil Ho. After drawing our attention to the “undoubtedly strongly idealized” image of prostitution that dominated textual representations in the late Qing and early Republican periods, Henriot writes: “Nevertheless, that the reality was different from the representations the literati gave of it is not so important per se. What matters here is the discourse that was elaborated about this

community.”¹⁶ Henriot seems to have clarified his position regarding this “positive discourse” when he later contends that “what these [secondary] sources provide are forms of discourse, not evidence of historical practices.”¹⁷ As is indicated in Henriot’s case, the historian confronts the dilemma of how one goes about knowing and claiming to know the historical reality without any textual mediation. Clearly aware of this dilemma, Gail Hershtatter acknowledges the function of textual representations in historical research and recommends that “we need to subject them to multiple readings: as clues (never straightforward) to long-disappeared social conditions, and as signposts for use in mapping the preoccupations of the writers.”¹⁸

Adopting a strategy similar to Hershtatter’s, but with more emphasis on the preoccupations of the filmmakers and the audience, I will undertake a critical reading of the process of public exposition of prostitution in Chinese films of the 1930s. As I will demonstrate below, what is revealed in the representational process of filmmaking is more often male fantasy or patriarchal self-righteousness than female enjoyment or suffering per se. To facilitate my critical reading, I will distinguish three major textual modes in the public discourse on prostitution in modern China.

The first is the *informative, journalistic mode*, scattered around in city guidebooks, popular magazines, or tabloids, and what cultural elites call “lowbrow” literature, which focus on an array of time-honored procedures (for instance, scripting invitation slips [*jiao tiaozhi*] and arranging flower-wine banquets [*hua-jiu*]) as well as practical aspects (such as “professional terms” specific to a city) of urban prostitution. In the early twentieth century, publicity work for prostitution was partially undertaken by literary magazines such as *Banyue* (The half moon journal) and *Xiaoshuo daguan* (The grand magazine). Both magazines included in their front illustration pages a number of photographs of famous or not-so-famous prostitutes from major cities nationwide and used this “erotic” feature as an effective means to attract readers and to boost sales.¹⁹ The increased attention to cataloging relevant information is also striking. A 1906 guidebook contained scattered entries such as poems praising famed courtesans, advice given to prostitutes against footbinding, and fundraising efforts to build a public temple. A 1919 guidebook offered three and a half pages of neatly organized information on Chinese and foreign prostitutes of various classes and prices. And a 1932 guidebook, edited by a man of certain literary reputation, was able to give a 51-page description of nearly all conceivable aspects of prostitution in Shanghai, male prostitutes included, and to present informed choices for its readers.²⁰ Indeed, by 1932, Shanghai had boasted of at least 38 books on prostitution.²¹ Typically, in this first mode of representation, prostitution is presented as a “natural” way of life, an everyday practice in the city, a business beyond good and evil.

The second is the *appreciative, hedonistic mode*, practiced mostly in literati writing, butterfly fiction, or what some scholars choose to describe as “middle-brow” literature, which dwelled extensively on the sexualized female body and the literati’s excessive sentiments (*qing*).²² Female companionship and the cultured tastes of famed and gifted courtesans are described with a connoisseur’s appreciation and a stylist’s delight, sometimes elaborated in a hedonistic manner, complete with textual displays of music, poetry, wine, tears, and sex. For a literatus such as Han Bangqing (Han Ziyun, 1856–94), the house of prostitution was not only a source of literary inspiration but also the actual place of literary production.²³ It is interesting to read this sarcastic but nonetheless perceptive comment by Lu Xun (1881–1936): at the turn of the century, “talented scholars” went whoring in Shanghai and “could surround themselves with ten or twenty girls, . . . till they fancied themselves the young hero” admired by beautiful prostitutes.²⁴ The appreciative attitude was not altered substantially in the so-called social novels of the 1920s, such as *Renjian diyu* (Human hell, 1923–24) co-authored by Suopo Sheng (pen name of Bi Yihong) and Bao Tianxiao, or *Shanghai chunqiu* (Shanghai chronicles, 1924–26) by Bao Tianxiao.²⁵ In these novels, the glamorous lifestyle of the prostitutes and their wealthy clientele is delineated in minute detail and overshadows occasional social commentary articulated in the intrusive authorial voice. In this second mode of representation, prostitution is imagined as a fantastic cultural realm, an exquisite artistic form, and a fountain of nostalgia.

The third is the *castigatory, moralistic mode*, found mostly in political intervention, moral discussions, and May Fourth “highbrow” literature, which usually depict the miserable life of streetwalkers and advocate self-righteously for social reform. This literature links prostitution to issues of national concern, such as public health, reproduction, education, and urban security. As my film analysis in the following sections will demonstrate, the ground for representation in the third mode shifts from the cultural to the social and political, while the ethico-moral tone replaces the literary, artistic tone in the second mode, or the factual, descriptive tone in the first. In this last mode, prostitution is transfigured or refigured as a symbol of infectious social disease, of ruthless class exploitation, and of intolerable national humiliation. Many films in the 1920s and 1930s adopted this critical mode of representation.

Urban Prostitution and Film Narrative of the 1920s and 1930s

Ever since its early features, Chinese film has devoted unfading attention to the fates of women. For instance, one of China’s first short features, *Nanfu*

nanqi (The difficult couple, 1913), an early product of Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu's teamwork, was a satire of the ridiculous procedures of the age-long Chinese tradition of arranged marriage, which were carried out regardless of the young couple's mutual feelings. More significantly, the first Chinese long feature, Ren Pengnian's (1894–1968) *Yan Ruisheng* (Yan Ruisheng, 1921), was based on a sensational real-life murder case in which a debt-ridden Shanghai businessman took a well-known prostitute for a pleasure ride in a borrowed automobile, then strangled her to death, ripped off her jewelry, and dumped her body in a wheat field in the suburbs. Featuring a friend of the real-life murderer and a former prostitute for authenticity, the film attracted a large crowd when it premiered at the Olympic Theater, one of Shanghai's best cinemas.²⁶ In the context of Chinese film history, this early box-office hit proved that domestic productions could be profitable. The film also demonstrates the close link between urban prostitution and film narrative in modern China.

In the 1920s, Zheng Zhengqiu contributed many screenplays that dramatized the fates of Chinese women in their various traditional roles: the chaste widow, the abused child bride, the kindhearted prostitute, the unemployed factory worker, the contract domestic maid, the suffering wife with a child from her previous marriage, and so on and so forth.²⁷ After Mingxing Company successfully recruited Xuan Jinglin (1907–92), a prostitute who made her screen debut as an extravagant, unfilial daughter in Zhang Shichuan's *Zuihou zhi liangxin* (The last trace of conscience, 1925), Zheng Zhengqiu wrote *Shanghai yi furen* (A woman in Shanghai, 1925), a script specifically designed for Xuan in the lead role as a kindhearted prostitute. In this film, Xuan's character, Aibao, is sold into prostitution in Shanghai, crowned as the "president of the flowery nation" (*huaguo da zongtong*), and purchased by a millionaire as his seventh concubine. In spite of the glamor of her courtesan life, Aibao has all along preserved a heart of gold. In addition to sending ten thousand yuan to her father, she purchases land for her ex-husband, who was crippled in a car accident in Shanghai, and reestablishes him as a small landlord in the countryside. Near the end of the film, when she revisits her former brothel and encounters a young country girl whose family background resembles hers, Aibao decides to use her own money to buy the girl out of prostitution and to pay for her education expenses. Xuan Jinglin herself gained stardom from *A Woman in Shanghai*, and earned enough money to buy herself out of prostitution.²⁸

As evident in *A Woman in Shanghai*, Zheng Zhengqiu's films of the 1920s were moralist in tone and critical in their depiction of social realities. His representation of suffering women—in particular prostitutes—as victims of social injustice influenced the next generation of Chinese filmmakers. Sun Yu's *Tianming* (Daybreak, 1932), for instance, largely followed Zheng's narrative pattern by focusing on an innocent country girl, Lingling (played by Li Lili). Lingling

moves to Shanghai in search of a better life but is first raped by her factory boss and then sold into prostitution. In a rather radical move, Sun Yu transforms Lingling from a high-class prostitute into a revolutionary martyr. After helping her former lover, an underground revolutionary, to escape the police, Lingling is caught and sentenced to death. At her execution, she makes the request that the squad open fire the moment she smiles her best. Her death cuts to the intertitle "Long Live the Revolution!" and the images of the revolutionary soldiers marching forward.

Historically speaking, the revolution in question here is the Nationalist-led Northern Expedition in 1927 that placed Chiang Kai-shek in control of China, and the film's explicit political message might not necessarily come as a surprise to the contemporary film audience. However, Sun Yu's efforts to transform the kindhearted prostitute into a revolutionary "new woman" endowed with her own subjectivity remains a rare case in Chinese film history,²⁹ because prostitutes are more often than not treated as mere objects of sympathy.

Before proceeding to other films, we may pause here for a moment to consider the repeated shots of Lingling's smiles in *Daybreak*, which foreground her as the *ideal* image of a kindhearted and self-sacrificing prostitute in Shanghai. When Lingling is first introduced by her cousin to attractions in the city (such as the Bund and Nanjing Road), she is under the impression that "Shanghai is such a fun place that everyone smiles." When she is sold into prostitution, she has to put on a forced smile that is the trademark of the profession. When she is elevated into high-class status, she wears her contemptuous smiles all the time while dealing with her morally corrupt clients. But it is her sincere smiles that comfort her sick factory friends and their children the most, for she regularly brings money and food to those in need.³⁰ As we will see in the next section, Ruan Lingyu acts out with brilliance these various kinds of trademark smiles in *Goddess*.³¹

Female Virtues and Patriarchal Order in 'Goddess'

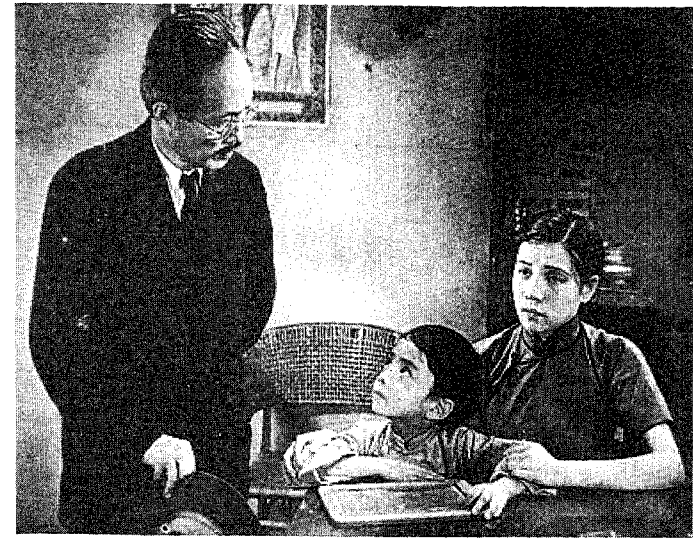
In 1934, Wu Yonggang chose to tackle the issue of prostitution in his first feature, *Goddess*, a silent film that earned him immediate critical acclaim and was later judged to be a masterpiece in early Chinese cinema.³² Wu studied fine art at the Commercial Press and worked as art designer for Da Zhonghua-Baihe (Great China-Lily) Film Company before moving to Tianyi Company in 1928.³³ One of his off-duty experiences during the period was his daily encounter with streetwalkers who forced smiles on dark street corners. As he watched them from the trolley, Wu was so disturbed by the fate of these women that he envisioned an oil painting: under a dim street light stands a sorrowful woman with

thick powder and lipstick. “The painting was never completed,” Wu reminisces, “but the image of this miserable woman had been deeply imprinted in my memory.”³⁴

Instead of a painting, Wu submitted a screenplay to Lianhua Company, and the result was the silent film *Goddess*. Following the narrative pattern established by Zheng Zhengqiu in *A Woman in Shanghai* and refashioned by Sun Yu in *Daybreak*, Wu presented a memorable screen image of a kind and self-sacrificing prostitute. Using a more sophisticated film language than its predecessors, *Goddess* portrays a Shanghai streetwalker, despised by the local community, who has a heart of gold. By concentrating largely on moral issues (such as the child’s education, the mother’s virtue, and the principal’s integrity) and by presenting urban prostitution as “a problem of our entire society, a disease of our social and economic system,”³⁵ the film succeeds in making publicly visible an otherwise invisible mother figure, who struggles in the lowest social stratum to fulfill her expected role in cultural reproduction. As the camera lingers lovingly and “excessively” on the female star Ruan Lingyu, the viewer is compelled to “experience an innocent pleasure” and to feel the virtue of the suffering mother, “an ideal mother” in the filmic imagination.³⁶

The newly established visibility of the “virtuous prostitute,” however, is framed in a patriarchal discourse about the self-sacrificing mother: “*Goddess* affirms a woman’s self-denial,” a woman whose “mission in life is to provide her son with an education.”³⁷ In gender terms, it is evident that the objective being pursued in the film is not the articulation of a female voice, nor the attainment of “woman’s self,”³⁸ but rather the realization of a particular type of male fantasy. This male fantasy is played out by the old school principal, a morally upright paternal figure who intervenes on behalf of the mother and eventually takes over her role. In a touching scene near the end of the film, the principal visits the mother in jail (after she killed the gambler who had stolen all her savings for her son’s education) and promises to raise her son as his own (instead of letting the child stay in an orphanage). By assuming his new role of surrogate father, the principal secures patrilineal continuity on a symbolic level, relegating the despised mother once and for all to the realm of oblivion, and thereby marking the film as conservative (see fig. 18).³⁹

A film full of the pathos of unrewarded virtue, *Goddess* participates in a male discourse on prostitution typical in Republican China, which dictates that sexual dangers be contained, public disorder be reduced, and male offspring be legitimately adopted. In conformity with this discourse, *Goddess* sees to it that the woman of ill repute is safely locked behind bars, though she is still seen pacing uneasily like a “caged animal,” and that she willingly erases herself—and her motherhood—from the male narrative. Hence her tearful plea to the principal:



18. A virtuous prostitute in *Goddess* (1934), courtesy of the China Film Archive.

“When [my son] grows up, please tell him that his mother died long ago, so that he will never know he had a mother like me.” In a sharp contrast to an earlier chaotic scene where the police are busy chasing the unlicensed streetwalkers at night, the final prison scene, with the camera focusing on the securely locked iron gates, reassures the audience that male control of the city has been firmly restored. With this twist in male fantasy, *Goddess* turns out to be one more example of the “masculine quest to stabilize the mobility of a sexually imaged reality,”⁴⁰ which is the modern city of Shanghai. In a montage, Shanghai is fantasized as an alluring prostitute smiling directly at the audience against a background of skyscrapers and flashing neon lights.

In spite of its focus on prostitution, *Goddess* is marked by its lack of an explicit display of female sexuality. A few sequences show the prostitute soliciting her clients on the street at night. One scene is especially striking in terms of its artistic quality and its possible influence by a German film: we first see a medium shot of the woman’s feet, which uneasily tap on the pavement until they are joined by a man’s feet, and then follow a tracking shot of the man’s and the woman’s feet walking together along the street and disappearing in a doorway.⁴¹ As a rule, these solicitation sequences in *Goddess* quickly cut to the morning scenes where the mother takes good care of her lonely child in a shabby room. The only evidence betraying the mother’s unrepresentable trade (and her con-

cealed sexuality) in the room are two pretty dresses she hangs on the wall, but the association of these dresses is beyond the comprehension of her innocent child.

One exception to the concealment of sexuality in the film is found in what William Rothman sees as “an erotic bond” between the prostitute and the principal. In his two brief encounters with the prostitute, the principal manifests an almost irresistible desire to *touch* her physically: he fails the first time in her room (instead he pats the boy on the head—a gesture of misplaced or displaced desire) but succeeds the second time in the prison (when the mother is beside herself with grief over her dilemma).⁴² In these two “touching” scenes, I would suggest, the principal’s desire to touch the woman is more than a physical desire, for it also powerfully articulates the desire of the male intellectual to penetrate the unknown world of urban prostitution (unmistakably gendered as female) and to narrate it in a rational (that is, male) discourse. The otherwise concealed *narrative desire* is fully articulated when the principal, after his first meeting with the mother, makes an eloquent speech at the school’s faculty meeting in an attempt to retain the boy as a legitimate student. Unfortunately, the principal’s attempt fails, and he chooses to resign, thus distinguishing himself as a benevolent figure standing alone in an unsympathetic society.

In his reading of *Goddess*, Rothman is puzzled by the film’s evasion of female sexuality: “Then why does he [the principal] not marry her? How can it be that this possibility is not even considered, as it could not fail to be if this were an American film?”⁴³ My response to Rothman’s question is that, in *Goddess*, the Chinese concern with patrilineal continuity precludes any effort to explore the issue of happiness in an individual’s case. Individual pursuit of happiness was still perceived as a Western concept in 1930s China, although such a concept had shaped the happy endings in Western prostitution films such as Frank Borzage’s *Seventh Heaven* (1927) and Josef von Sternberg’s *Shanghai Express* (1932).⁴⁴

The evasion or concealment of female sexuality in *Goddess* does bring out further questions. If one agrees that the image of a “loving prostitute exemplifies the renunciation of a predatory female sexuality in submission to paternal Law,”⁴⁵ then *Goddess* may have reaffirmed this paternal law, even if unconsciously, by resolutely denying a narrative space to female sexuality. To guarantee the working of this paternal law, the idealized mother in *Goddess* is “saved” from contracting contagious disease, which was a common danger to Chinese streetwalkers at the time and which made them a species of urban predator in the eyes of the public.⁴⁶ The predatory female sexuality of the streetwalker was discussed in print media with great concern in the 1930s. Among other things, it was deemed particularly detrimental to the health of the nation, because the venereal disease husbands contracted from prostitutes would unavoidably be passed on to wives, who would then pass it on to the next generation through

pregnancy.⁴⁷ In the fictional world of *Goddess*, however, the audience is ensured that the potentially predatory prostitute is now safe behind bars, and that her existence will be erased from the public memory, perhaps even from that of her son. Read against the serious public concerns with the moral and medical implications of urban prostitution in the 1930s, the ending of *Goddess* is doubly significant: at the symbolic level, it restores paternal law and reaffirms the sense of urban security; at the narrative level, it gives a seamless closure to a tragic tale of the kind and self-sacrificing prostitute.

Female Body and Male Fantasy in ‘Boatman’s Daughter’

The final shot in *Goddess* consists of a split screen: in the lower left corner, the prostitute looks up at her son, who appears in the upper right corner, whispers to her, smiles, and then fades out; she turns around with a deep sigh and a faint smile, and her image fades out, too. As mentioned earlier in the case of *Daybreak*, the screen image of the prostitute’s smiles seems to have attracted particular attention from Chinese filmmakers. In his 1936 critical profile of Shen Xiling, Ling He points to the “troubled smile” Shen’s films usually bring out in the viewer—a kind of bitter smile that appears the moment one is about to burst into tears. According to Ling He, the troubled smile has become a stylistic feature of Shen’s films, such as *Nüxing de nahan* (The protest of women, 1933), *Shanghai ershisi xiaoshi* (Twenty-four hours in Shanghai, 1934), *Xiangchou* (Homesick, 1934), and *Boatman’s Daughter*.⁴⁸ Like Zheng Zhengqiu, Sun Yu, and Wu Yonggang, Shen wanted to expose social injustice and to show his sympathy for suffering women. In his *Boatman’s Daughter*, a sound film about an innocent and lovable girl who is forced into prostitution, Shen includes a brothel scene in which a prostitute, after drinking a cup of wine, sings of her tragic fate: “Today, only today / Can I tolerate such suffering. / Tomorrow, yet tomorrow, / My voice lost, / My skin decayed, / I’ll be abandoned in a deserted lot, / like useless coal cinders. . . .”⁴⁹

The performance of this sad song occurs near the end of *Boatman’s Daughter* and is intercut with a chaotic scene in which a factory worker, Gao Tie, breaks into the brothel to rescue his former sweetheart, A Ling, but is overpowered by the police. By highlighting such a dramatic—albeit futile—attempt at justice, Shen continued Chinese filmmakers’ narrative effort to construct the meaning of urban prostitution. Unlike the dominance of dull urban scenes in *Goddess*, however, Shen’s film provides many scenes where the audience can smile happily, at least for the time being. In the opening scene of *Boatman’s Daughter*, the natural beauty of Hangzhou’s scenic West Lake is displayed to the viewer as if in a traditional scroll painting: tourists boating in the lake, the ripples shimmer-

ing in the sunshine, and the distant hills half-hidden by the morning mist. For a contemporary critic like Ling He, Shen's opening scene is as fine as the waterfall scene in Frank Borzage's *Little Man, What Now?* (1934). Indeed, the opening scene of West Lake reveals Shen's penchant for "sentimentality" (*shengdi mente*), "emotionalism" (*chunqing zhuyi*), and a kind of "realist romance."⁵⁰

Another good example of Shen's sentimentality is his narration of the romance between A Ling and Gao Tie according to the convention of the Chinese fairy tale. In this traditional genre, a flower spirit or a fairy maiden would do all the housework for the unmarried male protagonist (usually a poor scholar or a hardworking cowherd) while he is not home, and the two usually fall in love when they finally meet. In *Boatman's Daughter*, Gao has been helping A Ling and her old father row a boat full of people across the lake in the daytime. One evening, A Ling notices Gao is clumsy with needlework. She sneaks into his room, steals his worn clothes, and secretly returns them after she has mended them. Naturally, Gao is all too happy when he catches his "fairy/spirit" in his room and finds out that she is none other than his beloved A Ling. The two are later seen in a romantic tryst on the lake, rowing a small boat under the full moon. Shen's romantic fairy tale, besides being simply pleasing to his audience, also reveals the persistence of fantasy in Chinese narrative across time.

A different—and certainly more modern—type of male fantasy is elaborated in *Boatman's Daughter*. As is clear from the start of the film, A Ling's youthful body is delivered to the gaze of not only male characters in the film but also of the contemporary film audience. Voyeurism is fully at work in the film, especially in the modeling scene in which A Ling is hired to model for three urban playboy-artists. In a spacious modern setting, she appears completely changed, dressed fashionably and made up. Under an intense voyeuristic gaze, she first lies down on a couch, then sits up biting a flower between her lips, and finally stands still with her hands stretching upward in a gesture that reminds one artist of certain French paintings. The playboys take turns photographing and painting, and they enhance their "aesthetic" pleasure by playing Western music on the gramophone. Obviously, the playboys' epicurean taste is relished by the audience in this scene, in which the sexualized female body is objectified as an concrete embodiment of male artistic talents.

In moral terms, the discrepancy between this modeling scene and the fairy-tale romance mentioned above may be quite striking, but Shen Xiling's formal training in Western art accounts for their connection. A native of Hangzhou, Shen studied engineering at a local school before pursuing industrial design, oil painting, literature, and experimental theater in Japan. He returned to China in 1929 and participated in the drama movement. In 1931 he became an art director for Tianyi but soon moved on to Mingxing where he started directing. Shen's familiarity with Western art is manifest in his *mise-en-scène* for the

modeling scene. In an ambience that smacks of aestheticism and decadence (both with strong French "high-culture" flavors), the modeling scene constitutes the first stage in which the "corrupt" moneyed society forces poor girls into prostitution: A Ling's debt-ridden father is sick, and modeling is the only way she can make quick money to pay for his medical treatment. By dwelling on A Ling's agony in a close-up shot (she is so worried about her father that tears start trickling down her cheeks), *Boatman's Daughter* condemns the Westernized artists from a Chinese ethico-moral point of view: the decadent lifestyle is thus contrasted with the traditional virtue of filial piety.

One may suspect, however, at the level of textual representation, "moral condemnation serves the purpose of libertine titillation,"⁵¹ for this scene offers plenty of space for male fantasy to run wild. When one of the playboys suggests that A Ling pose nude for them, as in French painting, it is evident that the same type of male fantasy experienced by the characters is being tactfully projected or relayed to the contemporary film audience as well. Indeed, what the character suggests in the film (and, by extension, what the audience would presumably have in mind) might be something like the scene of nude modeling in Chen Tiansuo's *Zaisheng* (Resurrection, 1933), where an artist is painting a female model in a spacious room with elaborate, Western-style decorations, and his underage son is sitting beside him and painting the houses of his imagination (see fig. 19).⁵²

At this juncture, let us look at another—perhaps subconscious—level of signification in the modeling scene. In the process of objectifying the female body as an artistic product, the playboys are engaged in a different type of display as well: that is, to display themselves as model artists—who fully appreciate feminine beauty—to the film audience. To a certain extent, the scene stages a narcissistic quest for the concealed male body, which seems to be revealed only through the fetishized object of male desire—the sensuous, erotic body of a female model. It is in this sense that Baudelaire's idea of art as prostitution becomes relevant here, for modeling provides the male artists with a perfect occasion to make public their otherwise private (concealed or repressed) fantasy.

The connection between modeling and prostitution is established in the film narrative as a turning point of A Ling's life, but her posture, lying on the sofa, carries rich connotations in the culture of prostitution in both China and the West. In the June 1916 issue of *The Grand Magazine*, for instance, a Shanghai prostitute is displayed in a photograph in the same posture, and the posture is designated as "spring sleep" (*chunshui*) in the caption.⁵³ As the magazine editor Bao Tianxiao recalls, the prostitutes were the first group of modern Chinese women who were willing to make their photographs available to the reading public, and some Shanghai publishers, like Di Pingzi (pen name of Di Baoxian, style Chuqing, 1872–1940), were quick to take advantage of the prostitutes' will-



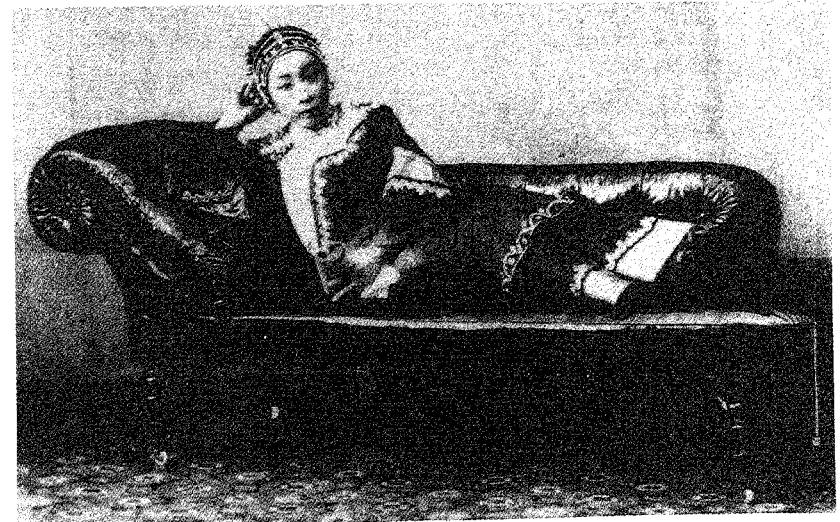
19. A still of the nude modeling in *Resurrection* (1933) (*Liangyou*, no. 78 [July 1933]: 31).

ingness to display themselves by setting up photography studios of their own and offering free services to the city's *demimondaines*.⁵⁴ In this sense, the posture of "spring sleep" as a public image in modern China was an outcome of the introduction of Western portrait photography and printing technology.

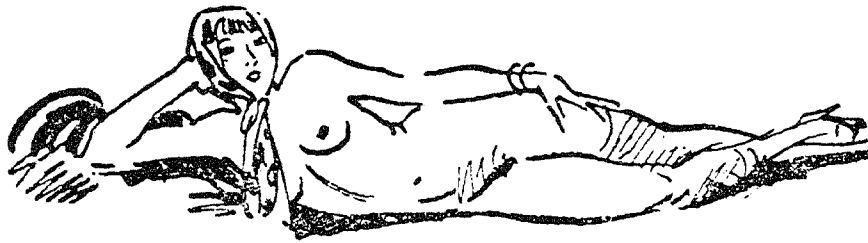
But the "spring sleep" posture can be traced to earlier precedents in the tradition of Western painting. Edouard Manet's controversial *Olympia* (1865) deliberately transformed the previously "innocent" posture in classical painting—as in Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (ca. 1538)—to highlight the morally troubling connection between art and prostitution.⁵⁵ Interestingly, such a highly provocative Western posture traveled to modern China via photography, painting, and print media. A Chinese photograph of a famous late Qing courtesan, for instance, features her in a posture similar to the one in *Olympia*: both figures stare directly at the viewer, though the Chinese prostitute is fully clothed in a traditional costume while lying on a Western-style sofa (see fig. 20).⁵⁶ A similar posture is found in *Beiyang huapao* (The pei-yang pictorial news), which regularly carried full-bodied nudes in Western painting in its attempt to promote art and common knowledge in the 1920s and 1930s. On December 10, 1927, the pictorial published a sketch carrying its own English caption—"A study of pose for

model . . . By a famous artist in Paris"—in which the female model displays herself in a posture almost identical with that of the late Qing courtesan mentioned above, except that the foreign model poses completely nude. A question printed in the Chinese caption—"Is this pose OK?"—returns us, intertextually, to the modeling scene in *Boatman's Daughter*, where the playboy artists take pains to get A Ling's poses right: right, that is, according to the tradition of French painting (see fig. 21).⁵⁷

It should be evident by now that the modeling scene in *Boatman's Daughter* illustrates the way a particular type of male fantasy comes to be a driving force behind urban imagination. What is worthy of special attention here is that, in the Republican period, it is often the prostitute who is chosen to constitute the central object of male desire. Two other film examples here will suffice to foreground the erotic nature of urban imagination. In Cai Chusheng's *Xin nüxing* (New woman, 1934), a woman writer (played by Ruan Lingyu) is fantasized by a playboy banker as cheerfully volunteering sexual services to him and his friend in a private mansion. When they walk into the living room, the writer welcomes them with her charming smile and, without further ado, sits right on his friend's lap. In an early scene of *Goddess*, the streetwalker is made to act as if she willingly accepted her fate as a sex partner in a gambler's room, which she enters by accident while escaping the police. Realizing her difficult situation, she gracefully walks past the gambler, sits on his desk, waits for him to deliver a cigarette and light it, and then puffs rings of smoke in his face.⁵⁸ In both cases, the em-



20. A late-Qing courtesan lying on a sofa (Tang Zhenchang, p. 232).



21. A study of a pose for a model (*Beiyang huabao* [Dec. 10, 1927]).

phasis on the prostitute's sexuality works to arouse not only male sexual desire (at the level of film narrative) but also male narrative desire (at the level of film-making)—a desire to probe into and write about the enigmatic city woman.

If, in *Goddess*, the male narrative desire is sustained by a single character (the school principal), in *Boatman's Daughter*, it is articulated in a more complicated way, relying on three levels that frame the narrative. The first level is the newspaper accounts of how innocent girls from good families were forced into prostitution; the second level the two old gentlemen who read the newspaper under the trees by West Lake and deplore the deterioration of public morality; and the third the political activists who speak eloquently at a meeting on the "abolition of prostitution" (*feichang*). Historically, the Nationalist government launched "intermittent campaigns to ban unlicensed prostitution" in the Republican era,⁵⁹ but the framing device in *Boatman's Daughter* has specific aims to achieve. By comparing the three levels of framing in the film with the three major modes of public discourse on prostitution discussed earlier, we come to realize what kind of value judgments the film has implicitly made: (1) the informative mode (exemplified by news reports) becomes utterly meaningless, since no one cares to listen to warnings about evil practices; (2) the hedonist mode is still being practiced (as in the scene of a flower-wine banquet near the end of the film), but the modern clients are morally corrupt and culturally impoverished, no longer capable of comparison with the talented scholars in the previous generations; and (3) the castigatory mode is represented as a mere show of rhetoric, a publicly staged fanfare without any practical effect. An ironic contrast is formed in the film between the framing sequences (beginning and ending), where neatly dressed male figures speak to an audience applauding in excitement, and the bulk of the narrative, where the reality of urban prostitution is basically unchanged as a new supply of young girls keeps arriving from impoverished rural areas and bankrupt factories.

Apart from revealing the epicurean taste in the popular discourse on prosti-

tution, both *Goddess* and *Boatman's Daughter* did not break away from the entrenched ethical-moral representation first established by Zheng Zhengqiu in the 1920s. What remained as a consistent narrative pattern in both films is that the ill-reputed must always be represented as ill-fated: the kindhearted mother loses her son and her freedom in *Goddess*, and the innocent A Ling loses her body and her love in *Boatman's Daughter*. The same narrative pattern is also found in other films of the 1930s, though often with more tragic ends. In *Day-break*, the self-sacrificing prostitute is executed; in *New Woman*, the woman writer, who is almost forced to sell her body once in order to afford her daughter's hospitalization, finally commits suicide in total despair; in Yuan Muzhi's *Malu tianshi* (Street angel, 1937), an ill-fated streetwalker, who always moves in darkness and seldom speaks in the film, is stabbed to death in the end.⁶⁰ Traceable to *Yan Ruisheng* in the early 1920s, this discursive strategy of representing the ill-reputed as the ill-fated fortuitously predestined the star Ruan Lingyu, who played the female protagonist in both *Goddess* and *New Woman*, and who functioned as a public embodiment of male fantasy in early 1930s Shanghai, a city that indulged in the endless tabloid reports of her lurid private life (an actress torn between two unfaithful husbands). Ruan's tragic suicide in 1935 inscribed a conspicuous mark on the urban imagination in Republican China. What is more significant is that, half a century later, her story returned to the screen to haunt urban audiences in both mainland China and Hong Kong.⁶¹

From the Perspective of the 1990s

The idealization of ethico-moral virtues in *Goddess* and the glorification of potent proletarian power in *Boatman's Daughter* (embodied in the male factory worker who breaks into a brothel to try to rescue his beloved A Ling) may appear a far cry from the perspective of the 1990s. After decades of clandestine existence in the 1950s through the 1970s, prostitution in China has become widespread again since the mid-1980s and public tolerance seems to have increased accordingly.⁶² It is, therefore, not merely a historical irony that prostitution has returned in its more glamorous form in the recent cinematic rewriting of modern Chinese history. *Yanzhi kou* (Rouge, 1987) by Stanley Kwan (Guan Jinpeng, b. 1957) attempts to reconstruct a local history of Hong Kong by comparing drastically different forms of sexuality in the 1930s and the 1980s, and *Bawang bieji* (Farewell my concubine, 1993) by Chen Kaige (b. 1952) reflects on the political history of mainland China by following the fate of Peking opera as a repeatedly violated cultural form.⁶³ Rather than the previously fragile, gentle,

and self-sacrificial figures, recent Chinese films prefer to feature strong-willed and aggressive woman characters, who want to control not only their own fate but in varying degrees that of their husbands and lovers as well. In *Rouge*, for instance, Fleur decides that she and her lover are to commit love suicide by swallowing an overdose of opium (and on top of that she secretly adds poison to the wine they later drink together). In *Farewell My Concubine*, Juxian throws a bundle of jewelry to her madam and buys herself out of prostitution in order to marry the actor she loves (and she does it without obtaining his consent in advance). In both films, the prostitutes are morally stronger than their male counterparts and are more dedicated to their chosen goals. They are no longer merely objects of sympathy for the audience or the filmmaker.

With a notable exception of *Kongbu fenzi* (Terrorizer, 1986) by Edward Yang (Yang Dechang, b. 1947), which traces a dangerous, mysterious Eurasian girl in the underworld of Taipei, recent Chinese films—by male and female directors alike—prefer the glamorous courtesan to the miserable streetwalker.⁶⁴ In aesthetic rather than moral terms, the glory and glamor of prostitution are represented in greater detail to invoke *nostalgia* in the viewer.⁶⁵ As far as textual representation is concerned, it seems as if the discourse on prostitution in modern China had traveled full circle: starting with an idealization of the highly cultured courtesan at the turn of the century, through an exposure of the ruthlessly exploited streetwalker in the 1930s, to a reglamorization of the courtesan culture from the 1980s on. Perhaps what Sue Gronewold observes of prostitution in modern China in general applies to contemporary Chinese cinema as well: “Condemned in law and reviled in rhetoric, prostitution was condoned in practice and merely regulated in reality.”⁶⁶ In recent cinematic representations, condemnation of prostitution on moral grounds does not merit much attention, not even at a rhetorical level. Instead, on the pretext of retelling Chinese history, condoning prostitution projects a fantastic dream world, where the lifestyle of the bygone *demimondaines* is preserved as a Chinese cultural tradition and stored forever in public memory.⁶⁷

In a striking way, recent Chinese films have much in common with the Hollywood representation of East Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. Beneath the historical script in *Rouge*, for example, is a rendition of prostitution as an essential experience of urban phantasmagoria. The same can be found in Josef von Sternberg’s film *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), in which a Eurasian girl flaunts her sexuality amid the smoke of opium, the smell of wine, and the sound of gold, albeit to a rather tragic end. Sternberg’s earlier film, *Shanghai Express* (1932), again prominently features prostitution in the narrative, but with a happy ending. In juxtaposing von Sternberg’s films to contemporary Western literary representation, I discovered that the dream quality of urban life had already been noted by Hen-

drik De Leeuw, who prefaced his 1933 investigative report of prostitution in Asia with “Dream of Lost Women,” composed in a highly poetic style:

The dream is confused and broken. The unearthly melody becomes a strange loud discordance, the cries and wailing of women rise over the sound of flutes, and, suddenly, the cities fade, the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama, of Shanghai and Hongkong, of Port Said and Singapore and Macao. The texture of the dream roughens; the shifting designs are new and fearful, until, at last, the faces gleam clearly in the mist, the features of thousands and thousands of girls and women, streaming in nakedness over the face of the earth, tossing their arms in despair, laughing in wild abandon, walking languidly in the grip of opium. White and brown and yellow and black, they engulf the landscape, drifting in a pandemonium of joy and grief and anger into that yawning cavern, over whose black, insatiable mouth, in all the languages and characters of Asia, is written the one word: Lust.⁶⁸

De Leeuw’s case is symptomatic of public discourse on prostitution in general. The bulk of his book is written in the informative mode, detailed with plenty of interviews and firsthand observations; yet, in spite of his moralist purpose (hence his title *Cities of Sin*, which conveys a castigating tone), he ended his poetic “Dream of Lost Women” with a cluster of blurred images of cities and women in Asia. To a considerable extent, his final private vision of a stream of naked, languishing, and hysterical women careening toward the cavern of lust is projected to the public in a fairly hedonistic manner, visually resembling the typical Hollywood representation of prostitution (as in von Sternberg’s films mentioned above). A conflict between the moralist intent (the public) and the hedonistic force of visual images (the private) is embedded in the discourse on prostitution, just as the idea of prostitution itself contains a conflict between the public and the private.

From the perspective of the 1990s, what can we make of De Leeuw’s connection of urban imagination and Asian prostitution? To be sure, “dreams of lost women” continue to be produced by film technology, but the ideas of sin and guilt De Leeuw attributed to prostitution rarely surface in contemporary Chinese films. Morality is hardly an issue now, and visual images seem to be the only thing that prevails in the space of urban imagination: images of flower-wine banquets, of gorgeous fashions, of shining jewelry, and, most important, of the alluring smile of the enigmatic city woman. In retrospect, the lack of moral concern in the 1990s foregrounds the 1930s Chinese films: films like *Goddess* and *Boatman’s Daughter* appear almost unique—although somewhat naive—in their puritanical ideological stand. What emerges as particularly ironic in my juxtaposition of cinematic configurations of prostitution between the 1930s and the 1980s and 1990s is the triumph of visual images over any moralist intent. Insofar as visual imagination is concerned, I would conclude by suggesting that contemporary Chinese filmmakers have rediscovered the fin-de-siècle ambience of

hedonism in the late Qing and early Republican periods, reworked a few ideologically ambiguous but visually provocative scenes of male fantasy in the 1930s Chinese films (such as scenes of modeling and street solicitation), and redelivered them as a full-scale spectacle of repressed—indeed, reinvented—Chinese sexuality, perfected in the latest Hollywood fashion of glamorization but packaged as essential to an inscrutable oriental culture.⁶⁹