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Anne Kerlan

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# THE MAKING OF MODERN ICONS: THREE ACTRESSES OF LIANHUA FILM COMPANY

ANNE KERLAN-STEPHENS

Could film be an undesirable document for the historian? Almost a century old but ignored, it does not even rank among leftover sources. It does not enter the historian's mental universe.<sup>1</sup>

## *I Introduction*

### *I.1 History and Cinema in the Context of Republican China*

It is now 30 years since Marc Ferro wrote these lines, and one would hope that the situation has changed.<sup>2</sup> Is cinema now part of the 'mental universe' of the historian? On the first analysis, the answer is yes. It is less and less rare to see historians engaged with filmic material in America or in Europe as can be testified by the work of prominent scholars such as Robert A. Rosenstone and Nathalie Zemon Davis, for instance.<sup>3</sup> By working with films and reshaping the relation of the historian with the past, they have raised challenging questions. However, the limits of their work are set by the fact that they consider mainly the sub-genre of historical movies. Their approach is a valid one, but when Rosenstone formulates the question in the following terms:

Enter film: the great temptation. Film: the contemporary medium still capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience. How can we not suspect that this is the medium to use to create narrative histories that will touch large numbers of people? Yet is this dream

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 23 (*Cinéma et Histoire* [1977] (Paris: Gallimard, 1993, translated by Naomi Green).

possible? The issues come down to this: is it possible to tell historical stories on film and not lose our professional or intellectual souls?<sup>4</sup>

one wonders whether he really does take the nature of cinematographic language into account.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank here the Institut d'Asie Orientale, the Heidelberg Sinological Institute, the Hong Kong Film Archives and M. Law Kar for their support in my research on Lianhua.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past, The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, 'History in images/history in words: reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (Dec. 1988), p. 1175.

It seems that when focusing on the methodological issue — the narration of history — historians once more tend to ignore the potential of cinema as a source (and an object) of research. We are back to Marc Ferro's statement. Why is this so? Why does the historian not want to work with cinema? Is it because cinema is difficult to categorise? Cinema is both an art and an industry; it belongs to the sphere of popular culture and as such cannot be considered as a serious, valuable and reliable source of information. But this might be the very thing that makes cinema a powerful source of study for the historian. Marc Ferro has underscored the corrosive relation of cinema with reality: 'Newsreel or fiction, the image of reality offered by cinema appears terribly true... it [the camera] unveils secrets and shows the underside of a society and its lapses.'<sup>5</sup> It does so because film (like photography), contrary to other arts, never totally transforms the real world; rather, it is an exploration of the real world that is never disconnected with it. Thoroughly exploring a reality with respect for its irreducibility — this is what a cameraman or photograph does; is it not also what historians ought to do? There is a striking similarity in both approaches: in both cases, there is a reality, rich and complex as life, that needs to be caught and rendered — and, in the process, revealed.

This analogy between cinema and history has been beautifully explored by Siegfried Kracauer in *History. The Last Things before the Last*.<sup>6</sup> Kracauer's analysis might allow the reconciliation of Rosenstone's and Ferro's approaches because it leaves room, I believe, for the possibility of taking cinema as a source and an object of historical study and, at the same time, rethinking the methodology of narrating history. The programme is, I confess, an ambitious one: it aims to take images both as a source for historical research and as a model for the writing of history. The following article is a first attempt to work in this direction.

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<sup>5</sup> Ferro, *Cinema and History*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History. The Last Things before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) (French translation: *L'histoire des avant-dernières choses*, Paris: Stock, 2006). See in particular chapter 2, pp. 110–19 in the French translation.

Images as a source: for the cinema of Republican China, there is a lot to do. Film studies have too often taken a textual approach to looking at Chinese cinema.<sup>7</sup> Despite their best efforts, historians of Chinese cinema are still relying more on texts than on the visual.<sup>8</sup> This was perhaps because for a long time movies could not be accessed. But now they are available, together with all sorts of visual material for this time-period: photos, magazine publications, posters, newsreels, etc. It is time to explore this visual material *per se*, without projecting upon it any strong ideological or theoretical framework. Our work hypothesis is that images can tell us more — or something different — about the history of Chinese cinema and about the world in which it was produced. As Marc Ferro puts it:

Go back to the images. Do not seek in them merely the illustration, confirmation, or contradiction of another knowledge — that of written tradition. Consider images as such at the risk of using other forms of knowledge to grasp them even better... We need to study film and see it in relation to the world that produces it. What is our hypothesis? — that film, image or not of reality, document or fiction, true story or pure invention, is History. Our postulate?—that what has not occurred (and even what *has* occurred)—beliefs, intentions, human imaginations—is as much history as History.<sup>9</sup>

How can we make images speak? First and obviously, by showing them. This leads us to the second aspect of the project, which will be as experimental as the first one, if not more so.<sup>10</sup> Not only do we intend to take images as our main source and object, but we will also integrate them into our methodological elaboration of a new writing

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<sup>7</sup> Western studies of early Chinese cinema are developing. See for instance Yingjin Zhang (ed.), *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema, The Chinese Left-Wing Movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Hu Jubin, *Projecting a Nation, Chinese National Cinema before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen, Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> A very good example is the study by Zhang Zhen of early Chinese cinema. Although she integrates a lot of visual material, and calls for a ‘sensorial history of cinema’ (p. 3), many of her analyses are still based on texts rather than on visuals. See for instance chapter 7, where she presents the theoretical debates around ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ films.

<sup>9</sup> Ferro, *Cinema and history*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> The following article was first designed for the ‘Common People and the Artist in the 1930s’ website (<http://commonpeopleandartist.net/>). What we present here is an adaptation for *EJEAS*. Readers will have to remember that some of its visual dimension cannot, unfortunately, be shown in these pages.

of history. Besides producing a film himself, a historian can use the different media available to create a visual history. The Internet is one of them. On a website, the historian can show both images and texts, and can also create tools to combine a classic, literary writing of history with a more experimental approach, where images become the body of the narrative. This is what the website ‘The Common People and the Artist in the 1930s’ – which can be considered an attempt to learn to read and speak the language of images in order to propose a new historical analysis of Republican China – is dedicated to do.

There is no doubt that Republican China was an era when images circulated. And all sorts of images: photos, drawings, lithography, films, etc. These images shared a common characteristic: they were all mechanically produced and could therefore be reproduced and circulated widely. From that perspective, and regardless of the political, economical and social situation of China in the 1930s, it shared a common experience with the rest of the world in the same period, a destiny well described by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes led to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), II. This transcription is by Andy Blunden on the webpage <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

I will not discuss this famous text any further here, although I feel that many of Benjamin's analyses apply to Republican China, or at least Republican Shanghai. But I wanted to mention it because it is necessary to bear in mind that the images we will study in our project have a specific nature and belong to a certain stage in the history of humanity.

However, there is another point in Benjamin's text that demands our attention: his analysis of the movie actor. For him, there is a fundamental difference between a movie actor and a theatre actor. First, the actor (or the performer, as Benjamin says) in a movie does not play in front of a public but in front of one (in case of a silent movie) or two (in case of a talkie) machines. What the spectators see when they go to a cinema is not an actor representing somebody else on a stage, in front of them, but a performer confronted with a machine: 'For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else.' The result is that acting is not what is required from a movie performer: on the contrary, 'the greatest effects are almost always obtained by "acting" as little as possible'.<sup>12</sup> Taken to an extreme, the movie performer is just an accessory, chosen for his rightness, which will be applied at the right place.

The second phenomenon is linked to this: it is the relation of the movie performer with his public. When he performs in front of the camera, the actor may feel the same way we feel in front of a mirror: by seeing one's image reproduced mechanically, one can feel alienated. But the image reflected by a mirror does not circulate, contrary to the image produced by a camera, which separates the image from the person and takes it away from him. Moreover, in a film, images are shown in front of an audience — the public sphere, as we call it:

Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk*, IX.

beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory.<sup>13</sup>

This, according to Benjamin, creates a tension for the performer that finds its resolution in the triumph of the actor as a star.

It is certainly helpful to understand the specificities of movie culture from both sides – that of production and that of reception. Films are not just stories put into the images: they create and/or reflect social phenomena that need to be explored. An example is the exploration of the social status of movie actors and actresses, both as workers in a specific industry – the film industry – and as artists in a given society. Regardless of the angle taken, studies of Hollywood actors and the star system have provided very interesting insights not only into the micro society of the film industry but, on a bigger scale, into the larger society producing these movies. Richard Dyers, in his classical study, built a theoretical framework, based on a semiotic analysis, to study the ‘star image’.<sup>14</sup> His work is helpful because of its rigorous analysis of the images of the film performers. Since then, there have been many other approaches. Some are more historically anchored, like Richard deCordova’s,<sup>15</sup> examining the origins of the star system in America; others take into account the question of the audience and spectatorship. More recently, some have studied the star at work and the production system associated with stardom.<sup>16</sup>

Compared to this burgeoning of studies, the history of Chinese cinema, when it comes to the question of the performers, is still at its very beginning. A few studies have

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk*, X.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* [1979] (London: British Film Institute, 1998) with an excellent supplementary chapter and bibliography by Paul MacDonald, pp. 201–11.

<sup>15</sup> Richard deCordova, ‘The emergence of the star system in America’, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1985), pp. 4–13 and *Picture Personalities, The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors’ Labour* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995).

focused on actors<sup>17</sup> but little is known about the work conditions, social status and process of reception of this new type of performers.

### *I. 2 The Social Status of Film Actors: A Study of the Lianhua Film Company*

My main concern in the following is the social status of film actors. In 1930s China, cinema was an incredibly powerful and compelling new medium; it represented a symbol of modernity and a path forward for China. The movie actors participated in the aura of modernity, novelty and Westernisation proper to cinema. Thus it seems particularly appropriate to reflect on the social status of movie performers, who at that time represented a new category of artist. This social status can be explored through different ways: one can research the socio-economical work conditions of the movie actors; one can also study how film companies built and managed the career and public identity of their staff.

There are many ways to explore this last question. Obviously, one could study texts: newspapers, actors' biographies and autobiographies, etc. There is, however, another method that can be chosen: analysing all the visual material associated to the movie stars. Images were central to the creation and definition of the movie stars' identities as artists, because, as we have already said, they existed for their audience as images — movie images — and because they belonged to a society where, by and large, images were the vehicles for many social messages. What can the analysis of their images tell us about the status of the movie stars? This is what we will try to explore through 'visual narratives' that will, I hope, allow these images to speak and produce historical meaning.

The group of artists I examine are the movie actresses who worked for the Lianhua Film Company. Between 1930 and 1937, the Lianhua Film Company was one of the major studios in China and, in many ways, a symbol of modernity. In fact, the

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<sup>17</sup> See the very interesting article by Michael G. Chang, 'The good, the bad, and the beautiful: movie actresses and public discourse in Shanghai', in Yingjin Zhang (ed.), *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 128–59. I hope that my study, by focusing on a company's building of the iconic personality of film actresses, complements the Chang article, where the focus is on the 'public discourse' on movie actresses.

Company advertised itself as a modern company that would one day create a Chinese Hollywood.<sup>18</sup> To achieve this ambition, the Company had several projects from its very beginning: to build film studios in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong; to open a school and an institute dedicated to the training of technicians and actors; to put together a managerial structure based on vertical integration, similar to the structure of Hollywood Majors, that controlled the entire process from production to distribution; and, last but not least, to produce artistically and technically good-quality movies that could resist the invasion of American productions.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately the Company ran into many financial difficulties and, in spite of the efforts of its managers Luo Mingyou (1901–67) and Li Minwei (1893–1953), had to abandon many of its projects. However, in Shanghai, where Lianhua's main studios were located, the Company had a remarkable body of actors who were among the most famous Chinese movie stars of the era: Ruan Lingyu (1910–35), Jin Yan (1910–83), Chen Yanyan (1916–), Zheng Junli (1911–69), Li Lili (1915–2005) and Wang Renmei (1915–87). Some of the most talented filmmakers worked for Lianhua, among them Sun Yu (1900–90), Cai Chusheng (1906–68), Wu Yonggang (1907–82) and Fei Mu (1906–51).

Lianhua's modernist ambitions were not just aesthetic or economic. They were driven by ideological and social goals. For Lianhua's founders, influenced by May Fourth ideals, movies could truly educate the people, and therefore movies and the world of cinema should exemplify the construction of a modern nation. Lianhua needed to find artists who could incarnate this ambition: young, modern but also morally exemplary artists. Here, the challenge for the Company was to transform the profession of movie actor into an honourable one and to find actors who could incarnate its ideals. The policy of the Company towards its staff, specifically its actors, was quite new and contributed to the creation of a new social status for this group. Point four of Lianhua's mission statement was quite clear:

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<sup>18</sup> See *Yingxi Zazhi* (The Film Magazine), Vol. 2, No. 2 (October 1931), pp. 22–3.

<sup>19</sup> On the Lianhua Film Company see Anne Kerlan-Stephens and Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, 'La compagnie cinématographique *Lianhua* et le cinéma progressiste chinois, 1930–1937', *Arts Asiatiques*, No. 61 (2006); Poshek Fu, 'Rewriting Lo Ming-yau: between China and Hong Kong' and Zhou Chengren, 'United Photoplay Service; structure and organisation', both in Wong Ain-ling (ed.) *The Hong Kong–Guangdong Film Connection* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archives, 2005).

We will respect the personalities of our actors. Today in the world of Chinese cinema there is a very unfortunate attitude: most people in Chinese society are suspicious of movie actors. Theatre [*xiju*] is an art appreciated by cultured as well as common people; therefore acting is a lofty and beautiful art. The value of cinema is also particularly outstanding. Some compare the cinema to beautiful courtesans of past times; ignorant people say that the make-up actors wear on stage is like the seductive smiles of prostitutes. Even if today these kinds of prejudices have been beaten, the old ideas about actors are still alive. Moreover, some movie actors use this argument to reform themselves; they become serious as saints but they also develop contempt for their art. Is there anything worse than that? Is this not cause to lament?... This is why our company will focus both on the individual talents of the actors and on their moral virtues; it will preserve the sanctity of the art but it will also increase the importance of the actor's personality.<sup>20</sup>

The challenge was significant. One purpose of my work is to study how the Company achieved this goal (if indeed it did): What kind of artists did it hire and train? How did it choose to present its actors and actresses in its promotion campaigns? One excellent entry point is the *Lianhua Huabao* (UPS Illustrated), published between 1933 and 1937, first as a weekly magazine and after 1935 as a bi-monthly.<sup>21</sup> The images of the actors and actresses published in *Lianhua Huabao*, together with the related articles, speak of the Company's policy towards its artists. In this paper, I will present a very preliminary attempt to answer these questions through the analysis of the visual presentation of three major Lianhua actresses: Wang Renmei, Chen Yanyan and Li Lili.

I chose these three actresses because they represent a new generation of artists who began their movie careers at the Lianhua Company. They were all born at more or

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<sup>20</sup> *Lianhua nianjian* (UPS Yearbook) (1933–4), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Between 1931 and 1932 *Yingxi Zazhi* (The Film Magazine) was the magazine of the Company. Unfortunately, this publication is difficult to study because few issues have been preserved in libraries and I have so far been able to see only five issues, meaning I have almost no information and few photos for the years 1931 and 1932.

less the same time, between 1914 and 1916, and were young girls when they entered the Company. They developed their careers at Lianhua while themselves growing up to become young women. They were the modern actresses that a modern company like Lianhua needed. But what did it mean exactly, to be a ‘modern actress’, and how did the Company construct these three personalities? We will answer these questions by studying the images of our three actresses produced by the Company: photos taken from *Lianhua Huabao* and clips from the movies in which our actresses performed. It is important to remember that the images produced and/or published by the Company belonged to three different spheres: private life, public life and fictional lives played on screen. The entanglement of these three spheres, and the relative importance of one over the others, reveals the strategy of the Company in constructing the identities of these three actresses. On a broader perspective, it also reveals company ideology regarding its female staff. I will present three analyses that rely on visual narratives and movie clips that can be seen on the website and that each point towards certain aspects of this strategy. This will provide some reflections on the differences and contradictions between the images of our three actresses produced by the Company and, more generally, the policies of Lianhua towards its female actors.

## II *The Itinerary of a Married Actress: Wang Renmei (December 1914–12 April 1987)*

Wang Renmei had the shortest career at Lianhua of the three actresses, but she was the only one who achieved international recognition. Wang Renmei was born Wang Shuxi (Wang Renmei) in Changsha, Hunan province, to a well-educated family (her father was a mathematics teacher at Changsha First Normal School). Wang Renmei was orphaned at a young age, losing her mother when she was seven and her father when she was 12. This changed her destiny: the educated girl who wanted to become a mathematics teacher had to rely on herself for a living. In 1928, Wang Renmei followed her brother to Shanghai and entered Li Jinhui's Chinese Music and Dance Troupe (Zhonghua gewu tuan, which became later Clear Moon Music and Dance Troupe, Mingyue gewutuan). This was not just any entertainment troupe. Animated by the modernist ideas of the May Fourth movement, its founder, Li Jinhui (1891-1967), had designed it with the idea of promoting Chinese music for Chinese people. He hired and trained young children and wrote songs intended to awaken the Chinese consciousness.

Wang Renmei was one of the stars of the troupe until April 1931, when it was bought by the Lianhua Film Company and became the Lianhua Dance and Song Troupe. Wang Renmei performed as a dancer in one feature film, *Two Stars of the Milky Way* (*Yinhan shuangxing*, sc. Zhu Shilin, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1931)<sup>22</sup> and a few short musicals. But she was also quickly seen as a potential actress.<sup>23</sup> In fact, in 1932 she took the leading role in Sun Yu's *The Wild Rose* (*Ye Meigui*).<sup>24</sup> The movie was a big success, and when the dance troupe was dissolved because of financial problems Renmei was taken under contract by the Lianhua Company. She performed in *Early Morning in the Metropolis* (*Duhui de zaochen*, sc./dir. Cai Chusheng, 1933) and *Song of the Fishermen* (*Yuguang qu*, sc./dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934)<sup>25</sup>, a film which won the first international prize for a Chinese movie at the 1935 Moscow Film Festival. *Song of the Fishermen* was also the biggest hit among 1930s Chinese movies<sup>26</sup> and its theme song, performed by the actress, was very popular during that period.

Wang Renmei's acting, natural and spontaneous, was very different from the then current style of acting. This in part explains her popularity. She was nicknamed Yemao (Wild Cat), for her wild and unsophisticated nature. But another reason for her popularity came from her private life. In December 1933, she married one of the most popular stars of the 1930s, the 'Chinese Valentino' Jin Yan,<sup>27</sup> in 1932 elected 'King of the Screen'.<sup>28</sup> As Renmei recalls, Chinese students welcomed this romantic union, but the Lianhua Company managers had a different opinion: to them, it meant the end of her career. Wang Renmei's contract with Lianhua was not renewed,<sup>29</sup> and Renmei left Lianhua in 1935. She subsequently made a few movies for left-wing

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<sup>22</sup> Still available on VCD.

<sup>23</sup> She is presented as such in *Yingxi Zazhi*, Vol. 2.2 (October 1931), p. 43. See [http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Images.php?Table=Image&ID=13935](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Images.php?Table=Image&ID=13935)

<sup>24</sup> Still extant. Most of the movies signalled as 'still extant' can be seen on VCD.

<sup>25</sup> Still extant.

<sup>26</sup> It was screened for 84 days at the Jincheng Theatre, which had a capacity of 1,786 seats. See Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), Appendix II, p. 245.

<sup>27</sup> See *Lianhua Huabao* (UPS Illustrated), Vol. 3.1, No. 31 (December 1933), front cover. See fig. 2.

<sup>28</sup> See Wang Renmei, *Wo de chengming yu buxin — Wang Renmei huiyi lu* (My Fame and My Sorrow — Wang Renmei's Memoirs) (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> Wang Renmei, *Huiyi lu*, p. 155.

companies such as Diantong and Xinhua. After the Japanese invasion she kept working in Shanghai but left in 1941, travelling and performing between Hong Kong, Guilin, Kunming and Chongqing. She acted in only one movie during this period. In 1943, she divorced Jin Yan.<sup>30</sup> After the war, despite her best efforts, she was never able to resume her career. She entered the Beijing Studio in 1953 and made a few final movies, in which she failed to play any leading roles. She retired in 1962 and died on 12 April 1987.

As has been pointed out, Wang Renmei's union with Jin Yan seems to have been perceived by the Company as an obstacle to building the actress's identity. One can see this by looking at the photos of Wang Renmei published in *Lianhua Huabao*. In the first images, published by Lianhua before her wedding, Wang Renmei is described as a wild beauty, a child not yet a woman (Fig. 1). Not long after their wedding (Fig. 2), Wang Renmei and Jin Yan appear twice in the magazine. But the photos are not of the couple (three people are in the pictures) and they do not speak of marriage and love (Fig. 3a, 3b). It is only after Wang Renmei left Lianhua that the Company published any images of closeness (Fig. 4).<sup>31</sup>

[Figs 1, 2, 3a, 3b and 4 about here]

From these images, one might infer that, according to Lianhua, married women could not be professional actresses. However, there were married women who had good careers at Lianhua: one was Lin Chuchu, the second spouse of one of Lianhua's managers, Li Minwei. But she performed the roles of older, married women in films. It seems that company strategy for building Wang Renmei's identity as an actress was in conflict with her real identity once she was married: they wanted a wild child, a little sister (which is the role she plays in *The Wild Rose*),<sup>32</sup> not a happily married

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<sup>30</sup> During the war, Jin Yan disagreed when Wang Renmei wanted to take a job as a secretary for the American Army. He thought that it was his role to provide for the family; the wife was supposed to stay at home. The couple divorced not long after, when Jin Yan left Wang Renmei for another woman who later became his second wife, the actress Qin Yi. See Wang Renmei, *Huiyi lu*, p. 228.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Itinerary of a Married Actress* on the 'Common People and the Artist in the 1930s' website ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual\\_Narrative.php?ID=4](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual_Narrative.php?ID=4)).

<sup>32</sup> See a movie clip at <http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Movies.php?ID=13>

young woman. The Company lacked a certain sense of opportunism: it could have taken advantage of an event that was welcomed by movie fans, making it a promotional tool. But it was only after Renmei left the Company that Lianhua started to take advantage of the glamour associated with the couple. For Lianhua, the advertising of a new actress also meant the production of a new identity, an iconic, public identity, but one that should, however, be in harmony with the real life of the woman. Lianhua tried to create continuity between the real, the fictional and the public life of the actress. When this continuity was endangered, her professional career suffered.

### *III A Pure Lianhua Product: Chen Yanyan (12 January 1916–3 May 1999)*

Wang Renmei's case led us to some preliminary conclusions about the Company's policy in building its actresses' iconic identity, in that this should to some extent be the only identity these women had. This is why Wang Renmei's wedding with Jin Yan was disturbing for Lianhua: it contradicted Lianhua's strategy. With other actresses, like Chen Yanyan, the Company had better luck.

Chen Yanyan was one of the most popular actresses of the 1930s. Born in Ningbo to a Manchu family, she grew up in Beijing where she studied in a Catholic school. She was already a movie fan when Sun Yu and his team came to Beijing to make *Memories of the Old Capital* (*Gudu chunmeng*, 1930). Chen Yanyan assisted at the filming every day and was offered the chance to join the new company. The 14-year-old girl knew she wanted to become an actress but had to convince her parents, who finally agreed under three conditions: (1) she could not use her family name; (2) she could not mention family matters; (3) she was cut off from any family inheritance. Under this agreement, she signed a contract with Lianhua and left for Shanghai, accompanied by her mother. Li Minwei chose for her the name of Chen Yanyan, the only name she would ever have from then on.

At Lianhua, Chen Yanyan was first an apprentice, performing small roles in many movies. Her first leading role was in *Southern Spring* (*Nanguo zhi chun*, dir. Cai

Chusheng, 1932)<sup>33</sup> and she was critically acclaimed for this performance. People talked about her as the 'Beautiful Bird' and 'The Swallow from the South'. After this first success, she played in 20 films, all at Lianhua, between 1932 and 1937. She often took the role of the young and innocent lovable girl and her fans nicknamed her Xiaoniao (Little Bird). Chen Yanyan's career continued after 1938, when she played for several movie companies in Orphan Island Shanghai, then under Japanese occupation. She moved to Hong Kong in 1949 and with her second husband co-founded the Haiyan Film Studio. In the 1940s and 1950s, both in Hong Kong and in Taiwan (Shaw Brothers and CMPC), she played the role of middle-aged or elderly characters. She retired from filmmaking in 1972 but appeared in a Taiwan TV show in 1988. According to the Hong Kong Film Archives website, she died on 3 May 1999.

Chen Yanyan was, after Ruan Lingyu, Lianhua's biggest female movie star. As a result, it is not surprising that the Company invested a lot in her image. Chen Yanyan appears eight times on the front page of *Lianhua Huabao* magazine between 1935 and 1937, which accounts for 17.02 per cent of the front covers. In many ways she can be considered a pure Lianhua product: she started her career at Lianhua, where she was trained and grew to stardom. Even her name was chosen for her by the Company. In Chen Yanyan's case, there was a complete fusion of her real and professional life, and the Company seemed to be her only family and world. Yanyan's sad love story shows the extent to which Lianhua controlled her personal life:<sup>34</sup> not long after she entered Lianhua, she met Huang Shaofen, who worked there as a cameraman. The two loved each other but were not allowed to formalise their union prior to the beginning of the war. Chen Yanyan was quite young to be married; but it might also be that the Company did not encourage a union that could endanger the career of one of its biggest stars.

With this young girl, Lianhua had the opportunity of forging a picture personality from scratch. This personality was based on a reassuring continuity between tradition

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<sup>33</sup> Still extant.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, how the Company protected Chen Yanyan's private life. In response to a fan's letter, the editors of *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 7, No. 12 (16 June 1936) say that the actress is living in the company compound and that all letters should be addressed to the Company, which will pass them on.

and modernity, Chineseness and Westernisation. For instance, one striking element in Chen Yanyan's images is the recurrence of the Chinese type of clothing.<sup>35</sup> There is almost an element of nationalism in the Company's insistence on presenting this young woman dressed in such a way. However, the Chinese outfit allowed certain variations: either the actress was presented as a modern girl, wearing a modern, fashionable *qibao* (Fig. 5), or she was a traditional Chinese woman, when the *qibao* is replaced by an old Chinese costume or simple peasant clothing (Figs 6a, 6b).

[Figs 5, 6a, 6b about here]

This contributed to sending a very clear message: a modern professional actress was not the enemy of tradition. A form of continuity between traditional China and modern China was possible. Further, another message was sent by the Company, especially through its films: this young professional was not a lost woman; in her real life she belonged to a family — the Company and, more importantly, the Chinese nation. In films, Chen Yanyan is often presented as a member of a family, with a mother and/or father: she is not a woman on the loose, she is integrated into the Chinese social system. This made Chen Yanyan an honourable actress and a skilled professional. She became China's 'little fiancée' (similar to what was said about Mary Pickford)<sup>36</sup> and gained such respect that she became a national icon, as in *The Heroine in the Besieged City* (*Gucheng lienü*, dir. Wang Cilong, 1936)<sup>37</sup> in which she sacrifices herself for the nation.

#### *IV Masquerade and Disguise: Li Lili (2 June 1915–7 August 2005)*

Chen Yanyan can be considered the best example of what Lianhua wanted to produce for its actors. She had a stable appearance that helped to define the personality of the actress and the type of character she performed. Such is not the case with Li Lili. The complexity of her professional image and the discrepancies between this image and

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<sup>35</sup> See the narrative *Chen Yanyan, a New Woman Dressed in Chinese Clothes* at [http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual\\_Narrative.php?ID=6](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual_Narrative.php?ID=6)

<sup>36</sup> In many movies she is presented as a potential fiancée, or we see her getting married.

<sup>37</sup> Still extant.

Lili's personality show the limits of Lianhua's modern vision: here, the real woman may have been more modern than the movie personality.

Li Lili (her real name was Qian Zhenzhen) was born in Wuxing (act. Huzhou), Zhejiang province, but spent her youth in Beijing.<sup>38</sup> Both her parents were typical of a generation of Chinese intellectuals influenced by the ideas of the May Fourth movement. They studied medicine at the National Beijing Hospital but were also active in the revolutionary movement and in 1925 joined the Communist Party. Li Lili/Qian Zhenzhen was often left to be raised by others and had an imperfect, often interrupted education. In 1927, the Qian family had to flee to the relative safety of Shanghai. Once there, Qian Zhenzhen's father, probably to protect his daughter from the threat of the White Terror, took her to Li Jinhui. She entered his dance troupe and later became his adopted daughter, taking the stage name of Li Lili. Her career followed the same path as Wang Renmei's: she entered Lianhua as a member of the dance troupe and performed as such in *Two Stars of the Milky Way*. But she stayed under contract until the Japanese invasion in 1937 and appeared in a total of 13 movies. She started with a relatively low salary (50 yuan/month) and kept climbing the ladder of success (she was earning up to 1,000 yuan a month by 1937).<sup>39</sup>

Her first appearance as an actress was in *Revenge by the Volcano* (*Huoshan qingxue*, 1932)<sup>40</sup> by Sun Yu. But the revelation was in *Daybreak* (*Tianming*, 1933, sc./dir. Sun Yu).<sup>41</sup> Li Lili made several other movies with Sun Yu: she is the daughter of Ruan Lingyu in *Little Toys* (*Xiao Wanyi*, 1933), the Queen of Sport in the movie with the same name (*Tiyu huanghou*, Sun Yu, 1934) and she shares the female leading role

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<sup>38</sup> See Li Lili, *Xingyun liushui: Huiyi, zhuinian, yingcun* (The Clouds Go, the River Flows: Li Lili's Memories) (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2001), pp. 2–18. See a longer version of this biography with images on the website ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Articles.php?ID=19&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Articles.php?ID=19&CF=3)).

<sup>39</sup> See Li Lili, *Huiyi*, pp. 18, 25, 86, 168 for these figures. One must remember that Lianhua was not a rich company, and the actors' salaries were not among the highest in China at that time. Because of its financial difficulties, the Company was often late in paying its employees. Li Lili mentions this problem in *Huiyi*. See also Zhou Chengren, *United Photoplay Service*, p. 125. According to Yinjing Zhang, in 1938 Hu Die earned \$1,000 for one movie. See Yinjing Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), table 3.1.

<sup>40</sup> Still extant.

<sup>41</sup> Still extant.

with Chen Yanyan in *The Road (Da Lu, 1934)*.<sup>42</sup> In these three movies, Li Lili appears as a young, optimistic and patriotic person, active and ready to give her physical energy to the nation. She is the incarnation of the modern youth Sun Yu dreamed about for China. After 1935, Li Lili's career took a new turn; she performed in several movies with a very different tone: moralistic stories or comedies. But she also took a beautiful role in Fei Mu's *Bloodbath on Wolf Mountain (Langshan dixue ji, 1936)*.<sup>43</sup> Throughout this period, Li Lili was not just an actress. She also went back to school (with her friend Wang Renmei) where she studied English,<sup>44</sup> and she participated in sports events; in particular, she was a good swimmer and basketball player. Finally, she was introduced to many caricaturists who became her close friends, such as Ye Qianyu and the Zhang brothers, Zhang Guangyu and Zhang Zhengyu. Acting was one of the many activities of this young woman, who seems to have embraced a very modern, Westernised lifestyle.

During the war, she participated in the making of several movies before leaving in 1944 for the United States, where she spent a couple of years studying film acting in Washington and at Columbia University. After the establishment of the PRC, her career as an actress came to an end. She became a professor at the Beijing Film Academy, in the film-acting department, and she stayed there — except during the Cultural Revolution — until her retirement. She died in August 2005 at the age of 91.

A sports queen, studying English and living an exciting professional and unmarried life, Li Lili appears to be a truly representative modern woman in 1930s China. But was she exactly the type of artist Lianhua wanted to advertise? It appears, when one studies her cinematographic career and her images as published in *Lianhua Huabao*, that the Company was not completely at ease with Li Lili's real personality and in particular with her physical capacities. Li Lili liked sports, and as a former dancer she knew how to move her body and used this knowledge often when acting (Fig. 7). She was not shy when it came to displaying her physical beauty. Today, this seems the most striking aspect of this actress; however, it was underused by the Company. Only

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<sup>42</sup> These three movies are still extant.

<sup>43</sup> Still extant.

<sup>44</sup> See Li Lili, *Huiyi*, p. 19.

Sun Yu exploited Li Lili's physical gifts and created characters that would allow the display of her particular talent. But in its magazine, instead of building a picture personality around her physical elegance, the Company chose to advertise a more traditional aspect of her image. Li Lili's 'sweet smile' became her main trademark, as we can see from several pictures (Figs 8a and 8b) and the visual narrative *Variation with a Smile* ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual\\_Narrative.php?ID=5](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual_Narrative.php?ID=5)). When the magazine shows Li Lili's body, the photos are always taken from a film: it is not the actress's body that is emphasised, but rather her cinematographic performance. Why was Lianhua reluctant to advertise Li Lili's body? This, I believe, reveals the limits of the Company's managers' openness to modernity.

[Figures 7, 8a and 8b about here]

Cinema was a young and modern industry and Lianhua managers had a vision of the role this industry should play for the New China. However, this vision was not free from a certain ambiguity that had clear consequences when it came to the status of the female actors. This is well expressed in the 1931 movie *Two Stars of the Milky Way*, the story of a young girl living quietly in the countryside with her father, a musician. Because of her talents in singing and dancing, she is hired by the Yinhan Film Company and becomes a movie star (just like Li Lili, one should note). But moviedom is also the source of her sorrow. When she discovers that the actor she is in love with is unfaithful to her, she is heartbroken. She resigns her job and goes back to living a simple life in the countryside with her father. This movie raises an important question: is the film industry the right place for a young, talented girl? This question may have haunted Lianhua's managers' minds; however, the answer suggested by *Two Stars of the Milky Way* is quite surprising in its ambivalence: the movie world, with its brilliance and glamour, can be a dangerous world for young women. At best, they can be deceived; at worst, their honour is threatened. This moralistic condemnation of the entertainment world was in some ways in conflict with some of the goals of the movie industry.

However, *Two Stars of the Milky Way* suggests a resolution to this contradiction. It is given by the film director of the Yinhua Film Company, who says: 'We of the film industry have our mission to fulfil, that of propagation of the virtues of our people and of imparting knowledge to the public through the screen.' This speech could be that of the Lianhua manager Luo Mingyou, who in several journals of the time explained his ambition to build a national cinema.<sup>45</sup> Cinema is not just glamour and entertainment. Moral education of the masses and patriotism are its true goals. For Lianhua managers, this was where the modernity of the movie industry really was.

When it came to its actresses, Lianhua also tried to combine these two visions of modernity. Its movie stars were not just glamorous, attractive, educated women. They were the soldiers serving the nation, as is clearly depicted in a full-page photo of six Lianhua actresses published in Vol. 2, No. 2 of *Yingxi Zazhi (The Film Magazine)*.<sup>46</sup> The title of this photo is 'The Lianhua marching troupe' (Fig. 9). Further, Lianhua repeatedly presented its actresses with a vocabulary more closely associated with patriotism than with entertainment. For instance, Lin Chuchu was presented as 'an exemplary woman who sacrificed herself completely and gained some great success in the history of the edification of the national cinema'.<sup>47</sup> Chen Yanyan is 'a young woman of her time, simple and natural with a perfect ideal and unlimited enthusiasm. Her energy and her aspiration are to build the future and to fulfil herself'.<sup>48</sup> As for Li Lili, she is 'a beautiful modern woman. She is beautiful, she is young; yet her enthusiasm is never overplayed and her courage is amongst the strongest'.<sup>49</sup>

Enthusiasm, courage and the spirit of sacrifice are the main qualities of Lianhua actresses. However, Lianhua actresses did not all play the same role in this

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<sup>45</sup> See Anne Kerlan-Stephens and Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, *La compagnie cinématographique*.

<sup>46</sup> *Yingxi Zazhi*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (October 1931), between pp. 24 and 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (8 January 1933), front cover.

<sup>48</sup> *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (15 January 1933), front cover ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Images.php?ID=14165&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Images.php?ID=14165&CF=3)).

<sup>49</sup> *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (12 February 1933), front cover ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Images.php?ID=5335&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Images.php?ID=5335&CF=3)).

'Cinematographic Army'. The comparison between Chen Yanyan and Li Lili's images and roles shows that the two personalities were seen differently by the Company. Although Li Lili appears more often in Western outfits and/or associated with modern machines than Chen Yanyan, the latter appears to be the true 'Future of the Nation' in Lianhua's ideology. For instance, in *The Road*, Chen Yanyan and Li Lili are two good friends about to be separated by destiny. Lili is a refugee with no family; Yanyan has a father and is almost engaged to one of the young workers. Moreover, Yanyan will stay pure and alive, while Lili will not. When the two girls go to rescue their friends, who are prisoners of the villains, Li Lili stays with the traitor and distracts him in his bed while Chen Yanyan releases the workers. In this scene Li Lili wears an elegant dark *qibao*; she suddenly *looks* different from the innocent and pure girl she was earlier in the movie and contrasts sharply with Chen Yanyan. It is no surprise that, at the end of the movie, Lili dies while Yanyan stays alive. If Li Lili and Chen Yanyan represent two versions of what a Chinese actress could be,<sup>50</sup> one more glamorous, the other more pure, it seems that Chen Yanyan was better suited to be the symbol of Lianhua's ideal.

Lianhua did not develop the glamorous image of an athletic Li Lili, because this was inappropriate for a company that wanted to publicise its idealistic goals. However, the Company could not completely erase Li Lili's real personality and talents, nor could it ignore the nature of the movie industry, which indeed was to produce entertainment. Before being a movie actress, Li Lili was a very successful dancer and singer: she was already a professional entertainer. Therefore, the Company tried to create a picture personality for Li Lili that would shed an honourable, almost heroic, light on this profession.

Another striking pattern in Li Lili's images published in *Lianhua Huabao* is the lack of a stable appearance. Everything changes in the photos: the hairstyle, the pose, the

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<sup>50</sup> To further the comparison, read the two texts written by the actresses: Chen Yanyan, 'Five years on the silver sea', *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1 January 1935), ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Articles.php?ID=15&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Articles.php?ID=15&CF=3)); and Li Lili, 'My truth', *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1 February 1935), ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Articles.php?ID=16&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Articles.php?ID=16&CF=3)).

background, the clothes (Figs 10a–d).<sup>51</sup> This is true also for Li Lili's many roles: she appears as a pure peasant who becomes a heroic prostitute (*Daybreak*), a rich and sportive modern girl (*Queen of Sport*), a spoiled and selfish person who redeems herself (*The Spirit of the Nation*)<sup>52</sup> etc. Of course, it is more or less to be expected that an actress will go through changes in the roles she plays and in her screen appearances. However, in economic terms, it is also important to construct a stable identity for a star through the repetition of certain patterns, including her appearance on and off screen.<sup>53</sup> Such was the case for Chen Yanyan, for instance, who was associated with a traditional type (as in Chinese theatre) of woman, the young fiancée. On the contrary, Li Lili's roles and images do not fit in any traditional type: they change with each new story.

[Figs 9, 10a, 10b, 10c and 10d about here]

The instability of Li Lili's screen identity stands out as her only stable characteristic. She became a queen of masquerade. In fact, in many of her performances her character goes through a series of transformations reflected in the clothes she wears. In this regard, there is continuity between her earliest movies and the last ones she made (in *Extravaganza*, *Ruci fanhua* sc./dir. Ouyang Yuqian,<sup>54</sup> she renounced an elegant way of life to join a group of young patriots). *Daybreak*, one of Lili's first movies, is the matrix for this pattern.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the movie, Li Lili's character encounters several transformations that are highlighted by her costume, hairstyle and make-up. It is the story of a pure and innocent country girl who becomes a factory worker. She is abused by her boss and becomes a street prostitute, but later manages to transform herself into an elegant courtesan. She learns to use make-up and fashion to survive, and dies a heroine. Because she has protected her revolutionary cousin,

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<sup>51</sup> See the narrative *Variation with a Smile* ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual\\_Narrative.php?ID=5](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Visual_Narrative.php?ID=5)) with this in mind.

<sup>52</sup> Still extant.

<sup>53</sup> See C. Klapat, 'The star as market strategy, Bette Davis in another light', in T. Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 1985), pp. 351–76.

<sup>54</sup> Still extant.

<sup>55</sup> See the movie clip *Make-up, Masquerade and Disguise: Li Lili's Performance in Daybreak* ([http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Movies.php?Table=Movies&ID=14](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Movies.php?Table=Movies&ID=14)).

she is sentenced to death. She faces the firing squad with a beautiful smile, shouting: 'Revolution will never die.'

But why the insistence on masquerade in Li Lili's movie characters? Appearance, masquerade and performance in Li Lili's case are ambivalent: they are the (morally) negative sides of femininity that can, paradoxically, become tools for redemption. At this point I would like to quote an article that has inspired me: in 'Falling woman, rising stars',<sup>56</sup> Miriam Hansen analyses the trope of the made-up female, seen in many Chinese movies of the 1930s: 'In Shanghai's cinema's negotiation of the clash between traditional Chinese values and contemporary fashionable femininity, the figure of the "painted lady" ... emerges as a key trope.'<sup>57</sup> She adds that 'in films starring Li Lili, the trope is used both conventionally, for purpose of characterization and plot ... and ... as a performative device.'<sup>58</sup> Specifically, in *Daybreak*, for Li Lili's character, 'dissimulation, masquerade and performance become her strategies of survival/honour'.<sup>59</sup>

One can point to the way Lianhua talked about make-up in relation to movies. It was a necessity that was also a source of problems: because of make-up, movies are linked by traditional mentality to prostitution. To counter-attack this point of view, Lianhua chose to insist on the performative aspect of Li Lili's profession: a movie actress is a performance professional, whose identity is to sacrifice her body and real self to make movies. To paraphrase Miriam Hansen, one could say that 'dissimulation, masquerade and performance become the strategies whereby a movie actress can become honourable': it is worth taking a second look at the history of *Daybreak* with this in mind. It can also be seen as a description of the itinerary of a movie actress, with its dangers and possible redemption.<sup>60</sup> A young, pure country girl arrives in the city. She is hired (to play in a movie). But acting can be as violent as prostitution. Her

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<sup>56</sup> Miriam Hansen, 'Fallen women, rising stars, new horizons: Shanghai silent film as vernacular modernism', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 10–22.

<sup>57</sup> Hansen, *Fallen women*, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Hansen, *Fallen women*, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Hansen, *Fallen women*, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> See the movie clip *Make-up, Masquerade and Disguise: The Making of a Movie Actress* at [http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists\\_Movies.php?ID=15&CF=3](http://commonpeopleandartist.net/Artists_Movies.php?ID=15&CF=3)

bodily integrity is destroyed, as well as her spirit. She learns to 'act', which means to simulate: to smile when she feels crying, for instance. In this entire process, she is dominated; she has become an object for spectators who do not even see her (is this not the essence of movie performance according to Benjamin?). But there is a path to glory. The young girl learns to use make-up, masquerade and disguise. She becomes a professional performer, manipulating her appearance and manipulating her public. She climbs the ladder of success. More, she uses her talents and sacrifices herself for a better cause. The movie actress in front of the camera is like Lingling in front of the firing squad. She has become a heroine, ready to sacrifice herself for the good of the nation. She has become a movie star.

### *Conclusion*

The narratives presented in this article offer a very preliminary attempt at studying the policy of Lianhua towards its actresses. In order to give its actresses honourable status, the Company chose to present them as true professionals dedicated to the cause of National Cinema. Their public and iconic identity was shaped by this vision of the patriotic mission they were serving. Acting was described as a skill sometimes difficult to master.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a question regarding the coherence and efficiency of Lianhua policies. The Company tried to reconcile two opposite realities: the movie actresses were by and large associated with the idea of modernity yet, for the Company, only a linkage with the Chinese tradition would contribute to the raising of their social status. Therefore, Lianhua had to select, among the many symbols of modernity — sport, modern machines, glamour and Westernisation, women's emancipation — those that could cohabit with the Chinese tradition. With Chen Yanyan, the Company was able to build a stable public identity that seemed in harmony both with its vision and with the real persona; in the case of Li Lili, the negotiation between the real personality of the young woman, her life and career was more hectic. The idea Lianhua had of the 'modern woman' was in some ways quite different from what was advertised in other media of the time.

In the three cases studied, one can see how the Company tried to forge a picture personality for each actress independent of her private life. To some extent, it did

create screen persona: Wang Renmei was the ‘little sister’, Chen Yanyan the ‘sweet fiancée’, Li Lili the ‘young optimistic companion’. The Company also tried to intervene in the private lives of both Chen Yanyan and Wang Renmei in order to adjust them to this public image. But it did not go as far as Hollywood Majors in the making of parallel, mythical personal lives for its stars.<sup>61</sup> Does it mean that, contrary to Hollywood, the Chinese film market was not built around the star system, which was also an economic system where ‘stars, by virtue of their unique appeal and drawing power, stabilized the rental prices and guaranteed that the company operated at profit’?<sup>62</sup> In 1930s Hollywood, stars were created, not discovered. First, the companies ‘experiment[ed] the correct narrative match’ for the actors; then the personal life of the star was transformed through advertisement and promotion in order to fuse real life and life on screen. This process does not seem to have been followed through in the case of our three actresses, despite Lianhua’s efforts at its beginning to model itself on Hollywood Majors. But this study brings only few elements that will need to be complemented in order to produce a more definite answer to this question. For instance, one would have to study the importance of the leading roles in the promotion of the movies, and the elaboration of the script has also to be taken into account. Finally, one would have to carefully study the case of the most prominent of Lianhua movie stars, Ruan Lingyu.

These questions are central to the history of Chinese cinema. The fact that we were able to raise them through a visual analysis proves that our initial hypothesis — that history will benefit from a visual approach — is valid. Visual analysis could tell us much more: we could look more carefully at how the actresses were filmed and photographed (the lighting, the type of shots, etc.); we could compare photos taken with reference to movies with the ones taken with reference to private life. We could also extend our study to pictures published outside Lianhua in other movie and fan magazines. The use of this very rich visual material allows us to develop a new approach to our subject, an approach that can cross some methodological boundaries. The answers that images provide are of a different nature: historical,

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<sup>61</sup> See Klaprat, *The star as market strategy*.

<sup>62</sup> Klaprat, *The star as market strategy*, p. 351.

sociological, aesthetic and philosophical.<sup>63</sup> It is our task to try, as much as is possible, to develop a discourse that can integrate these different yet complementary angles. They should collectively provide us with a new understanding of the status of movie actresses in 1930s Shanghai; more, they will eventually reflect how Chinese society in 1930s Shanghai saw this new profession and the women who pursued it. Or, to quote a movie specialist: 'The stars are a reflection in which the public studies and adjusts its own images of itself ... The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars.'<sup>64</sup>

CNRS

ak\_stephens@yahoo.fr

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<sup>63</sup> I think here specifically of the work that Stanley Cavell did on the American movie. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and *Pursuit of Happiness, The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>64</sup> Raymon Durgnat, quoted by Richard Dyer, *Stars*, p.6.

Captions:

Fig. 1: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (5 February 1933), front cover. Caption:

‘She is a fairy among humans because she is so natural; she is a star in the darkness, because she is so lively; impish like a child, pure like jade; she is like a bird, like a butterfly, she is spicy, she is wild, she is sweet. But she has flavour. That’s my opinion.’

Fig. 2: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (31 December 1933), front cover. Caption:

‘Two people in love.

The rumour was already spreading. Now it is reality. It is a great event for the Lianhua Company, it is also a great event for the Chinese movie world. It is a memorable event. Old Yan, Wild Cat, you are so lucky! Tomorrow is the first day of 1934. It is a new year. And you are getting married the very night before this New Year. We wish you a happy New Year. Your talent will also be united.

Next year you will produce a ‘small snack’; it should be easy for you. Working together to create a beautiful work of art should not be difficult for you either. Take heart!’

Fig. 3a: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (11 March 1934), front cover.

Fig. 3b: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 3, No. 11 (18 March 1934).

Fig. 4: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 7, No. 8 (16 April 1936). Caption: ‘Spouses and friends. Jin Yan and Renmei, husband and wife’.

Fig. 5: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (16 November 1935). Photo by Wang Zhuo. Caption: ‘Chen Yanyan in *Song of China*’.

Fig. 6a: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (16 January 1935). Caption: ‘Chen Yanyan, starring in *The Road*, *Song of China* and *Wild Goose on a Iced River*’.

Fig. 6b: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 6, No. 6, back cover. Caption: ‘The mother and daughter in *Song of China*: Chen Yanyan and Lin Chuchu’.

Fig. 7: Li Lili at the swimming pool, around 1933. From Li Lili, *Huiyi*, p. 55.

Fig. 8a: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (16 October 1935). Caption: ‘With a sweet smile, she says: “I am tired, I am going to sleep right here, don’t disturb me.”’

Fig. 8b: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1 January 1935). Caption: 'In *The Road* she sings *Song of Fengyang*: what a lovely voice! In *The Spirit of the Nation* she is the modern girl: how gracious she is. In *Beacon for the Autumn Fan* she has changed her acting style: how serious she becomes!'

Fig. 9: *Yingxi Zhazhi*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (October 1931): Caption: 'The Lianhua marching troupe'.

Fig. 10a: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (1 March 1935).

Fig. 10b: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (20 November 1936), front cover.

Fig. 10c: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (16 November 1935), front cover.

Fig. 10d: *Lianhua Huabao*, Vol. 7, No. 12 (16 June 1936), front cover.