



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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**# 1**

### **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

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# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

## Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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## Qin Xiqing

### Pearl White and the New Female Image in Chinese Early Silent Cinema<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT: Considering the synchronism between the screening of American serials in China and the production of the first few Chinese feature-length films, this paper traces the interaction between Pearl White and Chinese actresses in the early 1920s. It demonstrates how Pearl White was absorbed into Chinese vernacular cinematic culture through the mediation of Chinese film actresses in the early years of Chinese filmmaking. Taking *The Shun Pao* [Chinese Daily News], one of the most influential newspapers in the 1920s, as its main resource and reconsidering Chinese film history in terms of modernity and gender, this paper reveals how American serial movies, especially “serial queens” such as Pearl White, created a new female image for Chinese movie-goers. It further explores how Yin Mingzhu (1904-1989), a Chinese actress known for her Pearl White-style attire in off-screen life, links Pearl White with the transformation of femininity of modern Chinese women and their search for a new self-image.

American serials enjoyed huge popularity in Shanghai throughout the 1920s, and played a very special role in Chinese early filmmaking. Less sophisticated in terms of both technique and narration style than the later films made in the first half of 1930s, the early Shanghai production bear discernable traces of an American influence—the cultural influence of the American silent serial, one of the favourite film genres at this time in China. Not only did American serials inspire Chinese filmmakers to shoot crime films, but some of the typical devices of this genre were assimilated into the melodrama genre as well, where fight scenes were often intentionally added as a hook to attract Chinese audiences. In the late 1920s, the craze for the *wuxiapian* genre [knight-errant film], also bore trace of the Chinese fascination with the foreign chapter plays.

This influence, however, has been given little domestic academic attention, partly because the Chinese intellectual discourse on cinema has been traditionally very critical of the silent serials. A moralistic judgement about such silent American productions persists even today in one of the most authoritative textbooks of Chinese film history, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [history of the development of Chinese cinema] (Cheng, Li, and Xing).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Zhang Zhen's and then Weihong Bao's publications have reoriented the historical and theoretical research in this field. Together, these scholars have initiated a rewriting of Chinese early film history in terms of modernity. Their work is anchored in Miriam Hansen's concept of “vernacular modernism,” which understands American classical cinema as a “sensory reflexive horizon” of the modern experience and relocates Chinese early cinema in a larger cultural context of heterogeneous media and urban cultural forms. According to Hansen, by the late 1920s and the early 1930s,

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Professor Kay Armatage for all her advice and help without which this paper would have been impossible.

Chinese culture had modernized in ways that exceeded the purview of literary and intellectual modernism. It had developed responses to modernization in a wide range of media and on a mass scale, spawning a vernacular form of modernism. This modernist vernacular may not always have tallied with the ideals of national culture formulated in literary and political discourse at the time, but it clearly represented an idiom of its own kind, a locally and culturally specific aesthetics. (19)

To rethink Chinese silent cinema in terms of modernity also provides a new approach to the function of women's presence on screen, especially because the female images are considered in both studies as being so many early "embodiments" of vernacular Chinese film culture. For example, Zhang Zhen argues that the figure interpreted by Xuan Jinglin (1907-1992) in *Yin Mu Yan Shi* (an amorous history of the silver screen, 1931) embodies the vernacular experience of modernity in early twentieth-century China. Hansen points out that the female characters re-enact the contradictions of modernity, arguing that the figuration of the woman through a masquerade-like performance multiplies the films' meanings and undermines the traditional gender binary code. Following Hansen, Weihong Bao further explores the encounter between the American serial queen genre and a subgenre of the Chinese martial arts cinema, the *nü-xiapiàn* [female knight-errant film]. She traces the reception of Pearl White's films and their impact on a particular configuration of the female body in Chinese silent cinema, the *nüxia* or "female knight-errant," a character that appeared in Chinese martial arts films in the 1927-1931 period. The female vernacular bodies discussed in these studies, however, are mainly confined to examples emerging in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Keeping in mind this synchronism between the release of the American serials and the productions of the first few Chinese feature-length films, I intend to trace the interaction between Pearl White and the actresses of Chinese cinema further back to the early 1920s, to show how Pearl White's image and performing style were absorbed into the early Chinese vernacular film culture through the mediation of female film acting. Taking the *Shun Pao*—one of Shanghai's more influential newspapers in the 1920s, also known as the *Shanghai News*—as its main resource, and reconsidering Chinese film history in terms of modernity and gender, this paper will reveal the other side of the story: that is how American serials, and especially such beloved "serial queens" as Pearl White, created a new female image for Chinese filmgoers.

The first section outlines which serials were shown and how they were received by Chinese audiences, touching on their presumed negative effects on Chinese early crime genre films. The second part of the paper focuses on Pearl White, undoubtedly the most popular serial queen in Shanghai at that time. The third section takes Yin Mingzhu (1904-1989), a Chinese actress known for the Pearl White-style attire she displayed even in her off-screen life, as a

case study to show what Pearl White meant for Chinese women in their search for a new self-image, and how her films opened up new possibilities for a transformation of the female image on Chinese screens.

### *American Serials and Chinese Crime Genre Films in the Early 1920s*

Due to the inaccessibility of most historical documentation on the subject, studies on the American silent serial have not drawn much attention from Chinese film scholars, despite the fact that these films came to China in great numbers and dominated the Shanghai screening market from the late 1910s, when the supply of French and other European productions was cut off because of WWI. Serials made up a dominant part of all of imported American film production. According to the *Shun Pao*, films featuring stars as Pearl White, Ruth Roland, Marie Walcamp, Grace Cunard, Jack Dempsey, Elmo Lincoln, Eileen Sedgwick, Eddie Polo, Warner Oland, William Duncan and Edith Johnson were all widely screened and very popular (Qin 16-17). The dramatic action, the story twists and the spectacular visual effects created by speeding trains, motorcars and other modern inventions were great attractions to Chinese audiences. Moreover, films such as *Plunder* (George B. Seitz, 1923), *The Red Glove* (J.P. McGowan, 1919), *The Black Secret* (George B. Seitz, 1919), and *Elmo the Mighty* (Henry MacRae, J.P. McGowan, 1919) were released in conjunction with original novelisations by Chinese writers (Qin 16-17).

At the same time, moralistic commentaries about the *waiguo zhenqianpian* [foreign detective movies], the Chinese expression to indicate the serials, were frequent among critics. For example, one critic wrote,

When wondering why there are such things as the hijack gangsters in *Lincheng jian*, and kidnapping and robberies in the streets, any person of insight would say they are the results of the screening of foreign detective movies. People know how bad this kind of film actually is and the wise person would certainly object to it. (Chen n. pag.)<sup>23</sup>

Provoked by the repeated occurrence of urban crime, critics began to blame serials as the cause for this. This morally-oriented attitude was upheld and developed by a later generation of Chinese film historians in the 1960s. In *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* [history of the development of Chinese cinema], the most authoritative book in this field, the serials and their influence are commented upon according to similar moral standards:

Charles Chaplin's and Buster Keaton's comedies were quite interesting and entertaining, but most of the imported American movies are tomfoolery and even harmful productions,

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<sup>2</sup> *Xiyi Shaonian* (a young gallant man, 1924) was an early martial arts film with many action and fighting scenes. It shows the great influence of American serials. All the quoted Chinese texts in this paper are translated by the author.

especially the serials that were very popular at the time and exerted an extremely bad influence on society. In the notorious Yan Ruisheng murder case in 1920, a killer of a prostitute confessed he had committed the crime under the influence of the American serials. Daytime robberies, shooting against arrest, kidnapping in Shanghai concessions were as many imitations of the behaviors and situations shown in films like *The Iron Clan*, *The Exploits of Elaine* and *Red Circle*. These hideous movies and their influences aroused huge antipathy among the Chinese audience. (Cheng, Li, and Xing 12)

It is important to point out, however, that the Chinese audience was not the monolithic figure indicated in this quotation. Chinese audiences were dichotomized by their divergent educational backgrounds and tastes. The well-educated English-speaking Chinese audience did not have any sympathy for the serials. They found them morally unjust and artistically primitive, because they closely resembled each other and the characters were mere stereotypes. Moreover, holes in the plots' development were often remarked upon. Despite the huge success of the American serials, the high-brow criticism seldom lowered its voice.

On the other hand, however, serials were extremely popular among the less educated spectators who found them easier to follow than most foreign feature films, which required an audience to be able to understand intertitles in order to follow and appreciate a story. After 1924, American serials were mostly shown in cheap and poorly-furnished theatres patronized by ordinary Chinese filmgoers. The massive production of Chinese martial arts films in the latter part of 1920s responded, to a large extent, to a taste that had been nurtured by the American serials. And similarly, the production of films of this particular genre was met with harsh criticisms too.

Chinese feature-length film production got underway in the early 1920s, when the exhibition of American serials was at its peak. As Chinese filmmakers, especially the locally-educated ones, had no learning resources other than the films themselves, the narrative and performing style of the American serial affected both their taste and their genre choice. In recollecting the early days of Chinese film production, Guan Haifeng—a Chinese filmmaker who made his first feature-length fiction film in 1916—said,

The first issue was to decide what kind of a film to shoot. The type of story was very important because the screenplay would influence directly the investment and profit. Studying the mentality and the taste of the audience in Shanghai, we could see that the most popular films were the best-selling detective fictions. This is why I decided to choose this genre, but I intended to make it unique and original. (Guan Haifeng 21)

Guan Haifeng's recollection explains how and why the crime genre films became the first choice in Chinese early film production.

The first Chinese crime genre film was *Yan Ruisheng*, a film based on the real murder case mentioned above. The case was widely known in Shanghai because of the wide coverage

local newspapers had given Yan's murder. Its fame had been further increased by a stage play with the same title that had aroused great interest among the audience (Qin 39). The crime itself was said to have been the result of a direct imitation of foreign detective movies, as Yan himself confessed during the trial, declaring that his knowledge of killing techniques was drawn from American serials. The film was shot and screened in July, 1921, and was unexpectedly successful at the box office, earning up to some 4000 *yuan* in its first week screening. Another example of a film based on a real-life murder trial was *Zhang Xinsheng* (1922). This film was finally banned apparently because of some shocking scenes, including a couple involving strangling and an autopsy (Cheng, Li, and Xing 59). *Hong Fen Ku Lou* (ten sisters, 1921) was based on a foreign detective novel. The settings, make-up, black headgear, uniforms and skull and bones mark were all copies from a popular American chapter play, *Hidden Dangers* (William Bertram, 1920).

Catering to the taste of Chinese audience of this period, these crime genre films were targeted at a market dominated by foreign serials. Not surprisingly, critics immediately warned that they would be harmful to the construction of a common sense of social morality. Some critics argued that the function of Chinese cinema should be to show the greatness of Chinese culture to the world, in such a way that other countries might be able to learn about oriental customs. This was a concept thought to be important in the early stages of communication between China and the foreign world.

The early Chinese crime films were considered the results of the American cinema's negative influence on national mores. But putting moralism aside, today we can see how American serials created an unprecedented public sphere where Chinese spectators could imagine what western culture looked like and how Chinese culture might assimilate it in its way to modernity. As an extreme example, *Yan Ruisheng* evinced the transformative influence of American cinema both on and off screen. Although colonizing in approach and exploiting an "unmoral" imagination, American serials represented an important passageway to modern culture for many Chinese people.

Most importantly, however, the traditional negative comment on the influence of American serials simply overlooks issues of gender, as the films discussed were typically "masculine movies," with most of the female characters involved in the standard role of the crimes' victims. What is missing in this account is the similarly significant but "positive" influence that American serial queens exerted on Chinese women, offering them a new female image that could stand as a model of modernity.

### *Serial Queens in China*

As mentioned above, female serial stars were particularly admired in Shanghai. Alongside Pearl White, whose films were always triumphantly acclaimed, several more actresses had their films screened in this city during the 1920s. There was Marie Walcamp in *The Red Glove*

and *The Dragon Net* (Henry MacRae, 1920), Grace Cunard in *The Broken Coin* (Francis Ford, 1915), Eileen Sedgwick in *The Great Radium Mystery* (Robert Broadwell, Robert F. Hill, 1919) and *The Terror Trail* (Edward A. Kull, 1921), Eileen Percy in *The Third Eye* (James H. Horne, 1920), and Ruth Roland in *The Red Circle* (George Ridgwell, 1915), *The Tiger's Trail* (Robert Ellis, Louis J. Gasnier, Paul Hurst, 1919), *The Adventures of Ruth* (George Marshall, 1919), *Ruth of Rockies* (George Marshall, 1920) and *Ruth of the Range* (Ernst C. Warde, 1923).

An advertisement on *Shun Pao* on May 5, 1916 informs on a screening of Pearl White's *The Perils of Pauline*. The title is listed in the program of the Ai Lun theatre, a venue that was the first to exhibit serials in Shanghai. Since then and to around 1920, all of White's following serials were screened in Shanghai, including *The Exploits of Elaine* (Louis J. Gasnier, George B. Seitz, Leopold Wharton, 1914), *The New Exploits of Elaine* (Louis J. Gasnier, Leopold Wharton, Theodore Wharton, 1915), *The Romance of Elaine* (George B. Seitz, Leopold Wharto, Theodore Wharton, 1915), *The Iron Claw* (Edward José, George B. Seitz, 1916), *Pearl of the Army* (Edward José, 1916), *The Fatal Ring* (George B. Seitz, 1917), *The House of Hate* (George B. Seitz, 1918), *The Lightning Raider* (George B. Seitz, 1919) and *The Black Secret* (George B. Seitz, 1919).

Interestingly, in all of her serials Pearl White was known as *Baolian* (an original transliteration of Pauline, meaning “precious lotus”). Following Bao's understanding of Miriam Hansen's notion of the vernacular, the global impact of Hollywood cinema depended both on its translatability and its worldwide subjection to local practices of translation. Bao observes that the translation of Pauline as *Baolian* resonated in popular memory with the *Baolian deng* tradition [lantern of the precious lotus] that was revived in the 1910s on the stage of the *gailiang jingxi* [reformed Beijing Opera]. The rendition of White's last name as *Bai* evokes an association with the White Lotus image, and even with a religious sect called *Bailian jiao* [white lotus]. Bao argues that this rendition further removed the actress's proper name from its original model (Bao 194). Integrated into a new local socio-cultural context, Pearl White's cinema naturalized itself as a familiar part of the Chinese entertainment's landscape.

Moreover, popular practices of free translation, in contrast with the rigid transliteration codes more commonly practiced by intellectuals, were preferred in cultural forms like the *yuanyang hudie pai* [mandarin duck and butterfly literature], as well as in the cinema since the late Qing dynasty (1636-1912). Aiming at a wider reception, the translators adapted the originals according to the tastes of Chinese working class readers and spectators. In most cases, this activity involved a considerable work of rewriting. The translation of American films—including titles, star names, and genre definitions—was accomplished in such a way that it could help bridge the gap between the tradition and the new cinematographic form of entertainment. For example, all the serials and the feature films that contained dramatic fight and action scenes were characterized as “errantry spirit” and labeled as *wuxiapian* [martial art films], whereas melodramas were more commonly referred to as *yanqingpian* [film of amorous feelings] or *aiqingpian* [film of sad feelings] (both *wuxia* and *yanqing* or *aiqing* are

extant categories or genres in traditional Chinese literature and drama).

Like Pearl White's, Ruth Roland's name underwent a similar rendition. Almost as admired as White among Chinese audience, Roland was known as *Luo Lan* (where *Luo* is a very common Chinese family name, and *Lan* means "orchid," a name that is also widely given to Chinese girls). Such practices of localized rendition undoubtedly played a role in the popularity of both Pearl White and Ruth Roland. At the same time, however, the same translation strategies did not work well with other stars such as Marie Walcamp, Eileen Sedgwick and Eileen Percy, although their Chinese names also sounded quite like traditional Chinese female names. In any event, Pearl White was indisputably the queen of the serial queens on screen in Shanghai.

This non-standard translation practice does pose problems to the researcher today when she tries to identify the serials that were shown in Shanghai. Although we know that all of White's serials were shown in Shanghai, it is difficult to match the Chinese titles with the original ones. After tracing the films' release date, distribution company, exhibition date, characters, story plots, and (sometimes) images published in the *Shun Pao*, I want to suggest here that *Heiyidao* [the thief in black], one of *Baolian's* most successful serials in China, most likely derives its Chinese title from the cloaked figure known as the Clutching Hand in *The Exploits of Elaine*. Newspaper ads referring to *Guai Shou* [strange hand], might present an alternative translation of the same title, since the wording "strange hand" recalls closely the evil character of the Clutching Hand in the Elaine trilogy, especially if one considers that *The Iron Claw*—following immediately after in White's filmography—was translated as *Tieshou* [the iron hand]. I would also argue that *Shifeiquan* [the circle of trouble], which Bao mentions in her paper, was likely to translate *The Fatal Ring*, as *quan* [circle]; this suggests the "ring" in the original title. *The New Exploits of Elaine* was translated as *Zhongguo juesidang* [Chinese gang fears no death] because of the character of Wu Fang (played by Boris Karloff in one of his first roles) and other figures of Chinese gangsters shown in the film. The rendition of *Pearl of the Army* into *Baolian Congjunji* [the story of Baolian in the army] was very close to the original. Likewise, *The Lightning Raider* was translated as *Feidianniang* [flying lightning lady] and *The Romance of Elaine* as *Nüxiadao* [the female errant-thief]. The Chinese title for *The House of Hate* is still unidentified.

In May 1920, *The Black Secret* reignited the Chinese audience's enthusiasm for *Baolian* when it was released in Shanghai. Some of White's former serials were rerun for the occasion, and theaters published promotional texts and comments as a way to advertise *Baolian's* new appearance on screen. For instance, in the "motion picture news" section of the *Shun Pao*, an anonymous reporter commented, "the most world-wide renowned stars in the motion picture world are just two people, one is the comedy king Chaplin, the other is the famous female movie star *Baolian*" (*Shun Pao*, May 28, 1920 n. pag.) Another ad said, "Madam *Baolian's* serial movies are at the top in world's cinema because of her beauty and performing talents." (*Shun Pao* May 31, 1920).

In 1921, the first issue of China's first film journal *Yingxi zazhi* [shadow play magazine] featured a photograph of Pearl White just beside one of Chaplin, once again demonstrating that they were considered to be the most popular American films stars among Chinese audiences. According to Guan Jian, a screenwriter who worked in those days, not only Shanghai audiences:

are familiar with the names of *Baolian*, *Meibaier* (Mabel Normand), *Quebolin* (Chaplin), *Feidi* (Fatty Arbuckle) and *Luohe* (Harold Lloyd), but they can recognize their faces immediately when they appear on screen. Among these stars, *Baolian* and Chaplin are particularly popular. I once heard a woman spectator saying that she would dearly love to pay ten *yuan*<sup>38</sup> to see *Baolian* in person if anytime she wanted to come to visit Shanghai. (Guan Jian; China Film Archive 1314)

In January 1923, a news item in the paper about *Baolian*'s "new work" announced that "the English title of the new movie is *Plunder*, meaning *dao* [robbery or loot] in Chinese. A more proper translation is expected to be found when the film is screened" (*Shun Pao* Jan. 18, 1923). Any news connected with *Baolian* was considered to a big scoop for both the media and the audience.

White's celebrity also further extended itself into the world of popular fiction when *The Iron Claw*, *The Exploits of Elaine* and *The Black Secret* became the subjects of as many novelisations, all written by Lu Zhanan around 1920.

#### *Yin Mingzhu and the New Female Image*

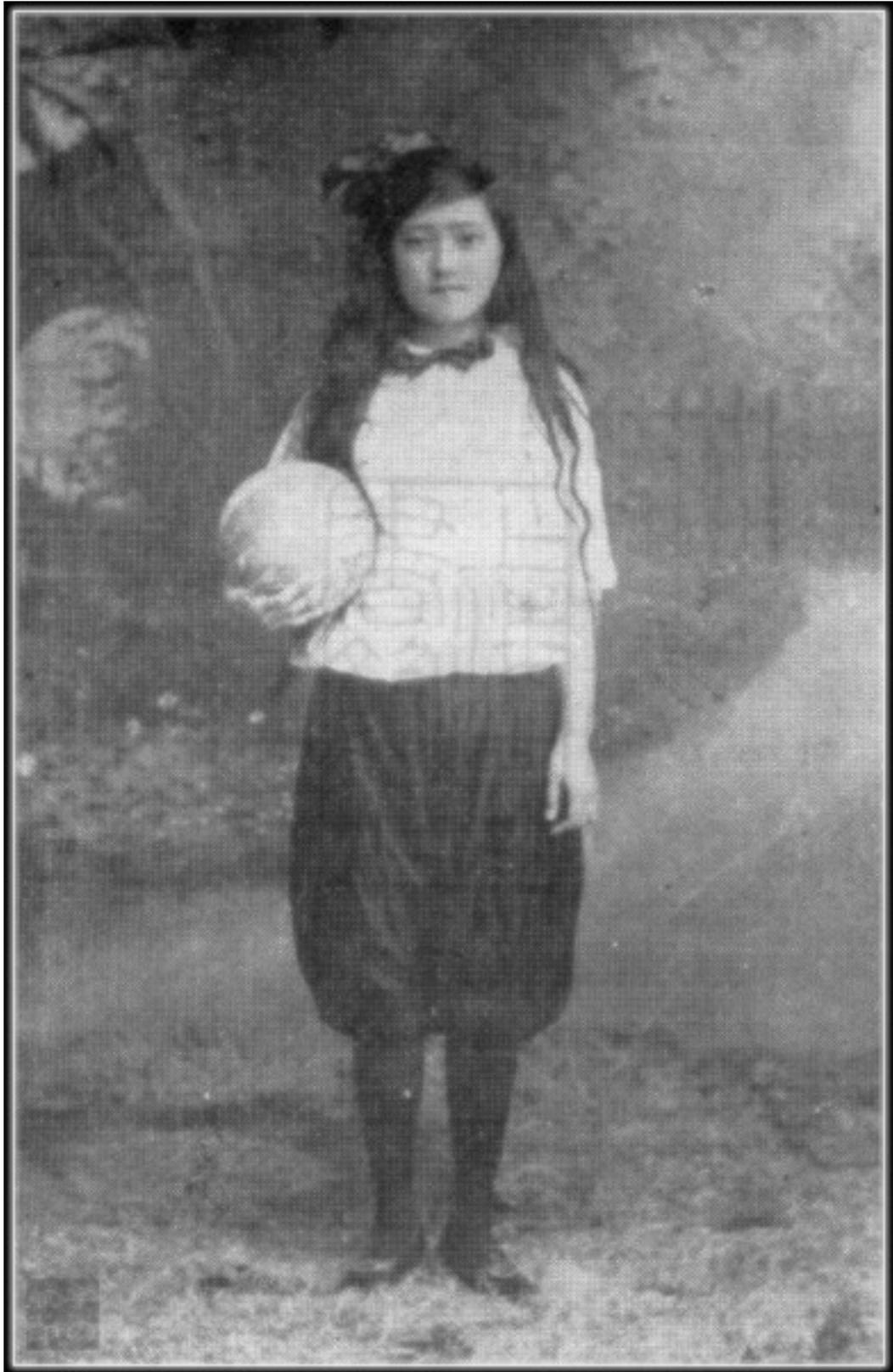
When the last emperor was driven out of the forbidden city in 1911, China bade farewell to the Qing-dynasty, an imperial power, and established a nation-state with a republican political system. Greatly pushed by the republican government's decrees, "queue-cutting and dress-changing" and the abolition of foot-binding became an important part in the formation of a new national identity. These changes were an expression of both an aversion to the imperial system and a strong desire to be connected with the outer world, especially the more advanced western countries. Obviously, modernity in China was closely related with westernization.

As is well known, foreign concessions began to appear in Shanghai in the late nineteenth century. They brought western technology, arts, education and ways of life, and made this city culturally hybrid. This heterogeneous cultural environment nourished a more open-minded, flexible and tolerant attitude towards non-Chinese, non-traditional cultural elements. Serial queens, therefore, were easily adopted as models into the lives of women more quickly in Shanghai than in other cities.

The image of the daring, athletic heroine created by the serial queens contrasted sharply

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<sup>3</sup> Ten *yuan* roughly equals twenty times of the regular price of one ticket at that time.



Yin Mingzhu.

with the traditional Chinese representation of women, who are often characterized as reserved, depressed and confined to a very limited domestic space, not only because of the dominant Confucian morals, but also due to their physical liability—bound feet. Zhou Shoujuan, a film critic and a prefacer to Lu Zhanan's novelisations, wrote in a review:

*Bai zhu niang* [Pearl White] is a famous American actress who starred in *The Exploits of Elaine*, *The Iron Claw* and other films where she always impresses the audience with her loveliness, braveness and uprightness. She is known in Shanghai as *Baolian*. Here all *Baolian*'s movies are welcomed by most of the audience. The shows are already sold out before the screen turns bright. Recently *The Black Secret* has caused a huge sensation. In the movie, *Baolian* played the role of a secretary in an American scout troop on the war front . . . Being a beautiful female secretary, she should supposedly stay behind a desk, doing letter writing for her husband. Instead she throws herself into a scout troop and goes to the front. In the middle of a bloody war, she tries to spy out the enemy's military secrets in spite of infinite difficulties. How incomparably strong-willed, determinate and brave she is. Looking back at our own country, women have long been far away from this heroic spirit, only burying themselves under rouge and powders, makeup and dresses, only to end up as trophies of vanity. Would any of them be willing to fight as boldly and resolutely for the interests of our country? *Baolian* simply does her job as an actress, a performing artist, but her brave exploits on screen are something that goes beyond what an ordinary women can reach. I would like to ask, Are there any sisters in our country [who] can do that? (Shoujuan n. pag.)

Here Pearl White's screen image is highly appraised both for her beauty and her heroic behaviors. Her image prompted a comparison with Chinese women who, in this critic's opinion, did not have anything to match. He explicitly invited the female audience to be as brave, heroic and patriotic as *Baolian* in her films, suggesting that Chinese women should model themselves after the screen image created by White. A physically free and spiritually bold image such as that of *Boalian* was indeed very encouraging to those many Chinese women who were then striving to step out of the shadows of traditional culture. Some Chinese women, especially those who were exposed to western education, were extremely eager to keep pace with the modern world.

In this heady environment, a very young Yin Mingzhu became a woman of the hour in Shanghai for her western style dresses and her imitation of Pearl White's attire. When Yin Mingzhu's gentry family moved to Shanghai in 1918, she was sent to an English high school where she became one of the best students, learning to speak English fluently. As one commentator recalls, "She had very new ideas and new manners, she was good at dancing, swimming, singing, horse-riding, bicycling and driving. In a society that is still confined to its traditional way of living, these are the new activities that most celebrity ladies would not even dare to try" (Zheng Y., *ying Tan Jiu Wen* [memories of the past] 15). In a photograph taken at the age of fifteen, Yin is seen wearing a western horse-riding outfit while she holds a ball

in her right hand, creating a daring and sporty image of a young girl. Very interestingly, the name Yin Mingzhu itself presents an implicit relationship with Pearl White, as *ming zhu* means “bright pearl” in Chinese. It is not clear if this linguistic connection may have subconsciously induced Yin to identify with Pearl White, but the identification itself seems unmistakable. Nicknamed Miss FF, i.e. “foreign fashion,” because of her western dressing style, Yin was also famous for dressing in *Baolian*-style attire. Cutting a new modern figure in Shanghai, her photographs were often seen in newspapers and magazines. In one of these, we can see that her hairstyle, make-up and jewellery were all extremely westernized. Leaning against a motorcar, Yin indicates a modern way of life for Chinese women, outgoing, independent and free-spirited. Influenced and even enchanted by the film world, Yin had a tremendous interest in the cinema. Her fame and beauty attracted the attention of an early filmmaker, Dan Duyu, who became acquainted with Yin through his relatives. Dan asked Yin to star in his first film *Hai Shi* [swear by God] (1922), one of the three first Chinese feature-length films. With only one other amateur actress playing a supporting role in *Yan Ruisheng*, Yin’s appearance on screen as protagonist was a real breakthrough.

The plot of the film is very similar to John Griffith Wray’s *Lying Lips*, which was exhibited in Shanghai in November 1921. In *Hai Shi*, Yin plays the role of a young girl (Yin Fuzhu) who is rescued by a poor artist after being robbed in the street. She falls in love with the man but later on she can’t avoid being forced by her family to marry her wealthy cousin. At her wedding, Yin Fuzhu suddenly recalls how she and the poor artist swore to love each other forever. Overcome by sorrow, she goes to the seaside and kills herself.

Although it is not confirmed that *Hai Shi* was a Chinese version of *Lying Lips*, the influence of American cinema is clearly visible in this film, which displays a typical westernized form of narrative pattern. Cheng Bugao, a filmmaker who was active between the 1920s and the 1940s, wrote in his memoirs that “*Hai Shi* was a new style movie, a modern love story, which started a new trend. A new plot, new costumes, new settings, new ideas and feelings, new ways of living, all never before shown in Chinese cinema; it was called “modern-costume” genre. Essentially, it represented a kind of westernization” (Cheng, 61–62). Considering that arranged marriage was still prevalent in China at this time, the love story portrayed in this film between two young people was very non-traditional and non-Chinese. Unfortunately, the film has been lost and the only visual document we have about it is a single still photograph, a blurred image of a woman bearing a sweet and self-confident smile.

Due to Yin’s popularity as a *modeng nüxing* [modern girl], the film was quite appealing to Chinese audiences. In fact, Dan Duyu intentionally exploited Yin’s off-screen fame in the protagonist’s name Yin Fuzhu (*fu zhu* means “lucky pearl” in Chinese), an allusion to Yin Mingzhu herself. Yin’s performance in the role of a lively young girl was moderately approved by critics.

*Hai Shi* initiated the *shizhuangpian* [modern-costume films], a new film genre that exploited women’s attraction for fashionable dresses. As Zheng Yimei, a writer and historian recalls,



Yin Mingzhu in one of her modern young girl outfit.

the modern-costume genre was especially welcomed by women in the inland cities of China who were willing to adopt the Shanghai dressing style, considered to be the ultimate one. Sometimes they even asked their tailors to go to the theatres with them to learn about the new styles (Zheng Y., *Ying Tan Jiu Wen* [memories of the past] 40). Movie stars like Yin Mingzhu were in the position of fashion leaders who offered a new image to young Chinese women. The American serial queens, and Pearl White in particular, became a model for change even through the mediation of Chinese actresses such as Yin Mingzhu.

Fu Wenhao, one of Yin Mingzhu's schoolmates was also well known as a fashion leader and she too was connected with cinema for a brief period of time. Nicknamed Miss AA (a shorthand for her English name Anna), Fu Wenhao was the first Chinese woman to get a driver's license in Shanghai. She was asked by Dan Duyu to star in his second film, *Gujing chongpo ji* (the widow wants to remarry, 1923), a love story between a widow and a young man. Regretfully, Fu gave in to family pressure and was unable to pursue her career as Yin did.

The modern, westernized new Chinese female image represented by Yin Mingzhu was also seen in other films. *Dayi mieqin* (aka *Xiayi Yuan*, for the sake of justice, Ren Pengnian, 1922) was produced by the Motion Picture Department of Commercial Press, and told a western-style love story. A young girl was rescued by her lover in a last minute race to secure an amnesty from the president. The story was perhaps inspired by *Orphans of the Storm* (D.W. Griffith, 1921), whose last-minute rescue scene had left a deep impression on the Chinese audience. The image and performance of young Chen Lilian was described as very westernized: one critic found she was "very lively and graceful, her walking, jumping and running appeared quite similar to how western ladies behave" (Zhou n. pag.). Special attention was given to the protagonist's ease of movement, indicating an implicit contrast between the westernized female image and the traditional culture of binding women's feet. This physical liberation would again resonate again in the late 1920s in the heroines of the *nüxia* genre, as discussed by Weihong Bao in "From Pearl White to White Rose Woo."

After persuading her mother to support her choice, Yin went back to cinema and married Dan Duyu in 1926. Yin's next starring role was in *Chuanjiabao* (family's heirloom, 1926). According to the extant synopsis (Zheng and Liu 490-494), the film was perhaps a Chinese version of the 1915 American serial *The Broken Coin*, in which the reunion of two half-broken coins would help people to get a precious treasure box in a haunted house. Several groups of people were involved in this narrative of seeking and fighting for treasure. Yin was cast as the daughter of a deceased man, owner of one half of the broken coin. Being a brave girl with a "knight-errant spirit," she boldly searched the house herself and even throws a sword at an enemy at one critical moment. When *Yang guifei* (concubine yang, 1927), in which Yin couldn't star due to her pregnancy, suffered a huge failure at box office and put Dan's Shanghai Shadow Play Company in a very difficult situation, Yin pawned all her jewellery to support the following shooting projects which did save the company (Zheng Y., *Ying Tan Jiu Wen* [memories of the past] 41).

Unlike other Chinese actresses—such as Wu Suxin (1905-?) (discussed by Weihong Bao) or Fan Xuepeng (1908-1974), another well-known *nüxia* star—Yin Mingzhu was never promoted mainly as a *nüxia* star, not even during the martial arts film craze. Carefully crafted by Dan Duyu—a painter-turned-director who had a particular interest in the expression of female physical beauty through artistic cinematography—Yin's screen image was given more sensuous color through the aesthetic display of the female body. It was a radical alteration of the "sensory reflexive horizon" (Hansen) of the Chinese vernacular culture, one that implied

a revision of the traditional Confucian concept of the female body as a property that had to be closely constrained.

Yin starred in several more films directed by Dan, such as *Huanjinji* (repayment, 1926), *Pansidong* (spiders, 1927), *Jingangzuan* (the diamond case, 1928), *Meimei Wo Ai Ni* (sisters, I love you all, aka *Feixingdadao*, the flying thief, 1929), *Meijianxia* (ogles of a knight-errant, 1930), *Huashiqian* (the case in the studio, 1930), *Gumuguairen* (stranger in the old house, 1931), and *Dongfangyetao* (oriental story, 1931). Yin ended her acting career after shooting her single sound film, *Taohuameng* (peach-blossom dream, 1935). In one of Yin's most successful movies, *Pansidong*, partly based on a classic Chinese novel, *Xi You Ji* [journey to the west], the power of female physical beauty was represented through the half-nakedness of the actresses, with Yin in the leading role. No wonder that her movies were often criticized for being too "westernized" and too "sexualized," largely because the practice of admiring beautiful female figures on screen contradicted the traditional Chinese suppression of sexuality. This inevitably led to disapproval and criticism among audiences and critics.

Presenting a westernized and fashionable female image on and off screen, Yin embodied and mediated the transforming influence of Pearl White on Chinese women. Her glamour as a film star and a fashion model brightened the rosy imagination of an alternative, modern way of life decidedly far from the traditional one. As one of the early film actress in mainland China, Yin's pioneering screen presence became an example of liberation from traditional sex roles, from the restrictions of the domestic spheres, from a bounded life. Her representation of female sexuality was an important breakthrough in Chinese cinema that deserves further exploration, analysis and discussion.

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