

「尋存與啟迪」

香港早期聲影遺珍

EARLY
CINEMATIC
TREASURES
REDISCOVERED



EASTMAN .117. 118.

NITRATE FILM.

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119.

The Difficulty of Imagining Southern Women/China in Modernity

// Yau Ching

The first Chinese sound movie was born in 1931¹. From 1931 to 1935, Chinese cinema gradually evolved from silent films to the talkies. Many historical data show that the 30s were a heyday of Cantonese films, so much so that the Nationalist government felt that Mandarin cinema was threatened and had to ban the making of Cantonese films in 1937.² However, due to the melting down of films for silver nitrate by Japanese troops during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong,³ we can only study the (at least) several hundred Hong Kong films made from the 20s to the 40s through photos and texts (such as scripts and publicity materials) today.

The earliest Hong Kong Cantonese film that we can now see is *The Light of Women* (1937). Prior to the discovery of its print in the basement of a cinema owner's house in San Francisco and its shipment back to Hong Kong,⁴ our only impression of old Cantonese movies came from *Twin Sisters of the South* (1939) sparingly aired on late night TV. Both films are dominated by female characters. Is this a coincidence?

In his work *Da Tong Shu*, Kang Youwei wrote, "When we enrol students and hold examinations to pick talent, the only criterion should be ability rather than appearance." He advocated that women should be allowed to sit for imperial examinations and participate in politics. In 1912, Tang Qunying, the first female member of the United League

("Tongmenghui") to return to China after studying in Japan, petitioned Dr. Sun Yat-sen to give women the right to vote and be nominated for election in the nation's constitution. In the same year, while serving as education secretary of the Provisional Nationalist Government in Nanjing, Cai Yuanpei introduced co-ed primary schools. In 1914, ten female students went to study in the US on government scholarships. By 1920, the Beijing University had enrolled female students.

During the May Fourth Movement, part-time female students started organising working women's mutual-help study groups and set up tutorial schools for women. In 1919, these organisations sprang up in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Tianjin. In the same year, the Tianjin Patriotic Women Comrades' Association set up a Common People's Girls' School with free tuition. In 1922, the Common People's Girls' School set up by the Chinese Women's Federation in Shanghai offered subjects including English, Mathematics, Chinese, Economics and Sociology. Its students also manufactured clothes to pay for board. During the same period, women were also encouraged to receive vocational education (women's vocational schools offered additional subjects such as Medicine, Agriculture, Industry and Commerce), or even study abroad under the work-study scheme. Women's organisations, such as the Women's Martial Arts Society, the Tianjin Patriotic Women Comrades' Association, the Beijing Society for Women

in Politics, the Guangdong Women's Liberation Society, the Hunan Women's Work-Study Society for Studying in France, among others, actively engaged in politics on top of education. The Women's Rights Movement League advocated abolishing the constitution that protected men's rights, especially men's monopoly on inheritance. They demanded "gender equality" leg including marriage laws, laws banning concubinage, prostitution, mui-tsai and foot-binding. Xiang Jingyu, who went to study in France in 1919 and joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1922, set up 30 evening schools for silk factory female workers in Shanghai in 1923. In 1924, she organised a strike by some ten thousand female workers from 14 silk factories. The 1920s were a momentous period for women's liberation and the advocacy of equal rights for women in China. But in contrast to the social and political contexts, few early Chinese films had depicted women advocating for social and political changes, as political or educational activists.

Nevertheless, Chinese films in the 30s abound in women as protagonists and as subject matter. Popular movies included *Three Modern Women* (1933), *Little Toys* (1933), *The Goddess* (1934) and *New Women* (1935) starring Ruan Lingyu, who played various roles such as factory laborer, peasant woman, sex worker, writer and teacher. Women as subject in films of this period provided intellectuals a convenient venue for the reflection, construction, debate, projection and consumption of Western/modern concepts such as "civility", "democracy" and "freedom". The mass medium of film, amongst the male-dominated state and ideological apparatuses, served to alleviate male anxiety

while it was being challenged in the process of rapid modernisation. These complex processes of construction, projection and consumption are often full of contradictions. While the solidarity and independence of working women in *New Women* for example, is apparently portrayed in positive lights, the heroine participating in various public spheres, from writing, teaching to sex work, was not particularly satisfied in any. As a modern, educated woman, Weiming (Ruan Lingyu) says contemptuously in one of the opening scenes, "Marriage! What good is marriage to me?" Her translation of "lifelong companion" into "lifelong slave" expresses her critique of women's oppression within the institutions of marriage and the feudal family. But as the plot unfolds, this "celibate" is shown as a loser, first abandoned by a man, then incapable of taking care of her daughter or herself, and finally, attempts to kill herself after being "fallen". However, the *mise-en-scène* of the film directs the audience's gaze on Weiming as the only object of desire. The male elite literati projects his own desire for revolution against and liberation from old powers onto the "New Woman" as he clings onto consuming and/or identifying with the glamorous femininity from old life. In contrast to Aying the female factory worker as an epitome of "progressiveness", the representation of Weiming in the film swings between sympathy and mockery. Aying signals politically correctness but she is not desirable. Aying's rising and Weiming's fallenness speaks to the contradictory identifications and desires of new people in the Republic.

Not unlike *New Women*, *The Light of Women* projects the desire for social reform and constructing Chinese

modernity onto women, while men become the spokesmen of feudal society. Even the “seemingly modern” man who shares ideas of “equality” and “self-empowerment” with the female protagonist, the rich young master wearing a Western suit and a tie played by Kwong Shan-siu, turns out to be bound by premodern ties, failing to meet Mo-jing’s modern requirement: “Have you completed the divorce formalities with your ex-wife?” Even though he remonstrates with his mother, saying, “There are no emperors now!”, to emphasize his modern thinking, his entanglement with his ex-wife and her family, his “lack of spine and indecisiveness” (ex-wife’s words), and his mother who wants him to marry someone of his own status, render him not up to standard for Mo-jing climbing up the ladder of becoming an independent new woman. In the breakup scene with Mo-jing, he expresses hope that his daughter Sau-wah could become her “mui-tsai”, contrasting with her wish to bring Sau-wah up to be a “useful person”. This conflict between the two characters highlights the contradiction between feudalism and modernity, and how the film seeks to build identification with and desire the modern. In Mo-jing’s journey to modernity, the elder maiden ladies become her role models and advisers, and at times, plot commentators for the audience. They help to dispel the illusions of marriage, and teach her to “do good for society”. The representation of the “self-combing” (*zishu*) tradition serves to signify here early modern South Chineseness that the film tries to inherit and explore.

What was “self-combing” like? Could it be modern or traditional? Did it serve to reaffirm the institutions of family clans or rather, facilitate women’s escape from the tyranny

of marriage? The scramble to interpret this custom also reflects the changes in modern state power and intellectual desires. When the “self-combing” tradition began is still a matter of contention. *The Chronicles of Shunde County* during the Ming Dynasty in 1585 already contain records of women who remained single all their lives. In Panyu, many women chose not to marry during the reign of Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (circa 1774). During the reign of Guangxu and Xuantong (before and after 1908), in the south village of Panyu with a population of a few thousand, only a handful of women got married in a year. In the year 1909, there was no record of any woman marrying. “Self-combed women (zishunü) were a unique social phenomenon in the history of the Pearl River Delta. From the 18th century, due to factors such as the development of mulberry fish ponds and the silk industry, a group of self-combed women emerged in the Pearl River Delta who made a pact not to marry. This practice gradually spread. By the mid-20th century, women went through a ritual to put up their hair and tie it into a bun, making a vow to remain single. This spawned a series of special customs...”, such as “lesbian relationships” and “sworn sisters”.⁵ “This custom was only widespread in the Pearl River Delta, and was rare in other regions. The Pearl River Delta was rich in cash crops and had a thriving handicraft industry, so that women had more opportunities to make a living. During the boom of the silk industry in Shunde, there was a host of female silk workers. The 'self-combing' and 'delayed marriage' (*buluojia*) practice was especially rife.”⁶ Historian Wu Qingshi said that both his younger sisters were “self-combed” women: “My second sister set up the Wing Wah Silk Sock Knitting Factory in

Guangzhou. The few hundred knitters were all 'self-combed women' from the same village. My third sister set up a private school in the country with a few hundred students. The older ones all became 'self-combed' women later, and entered the same professions as their predecessors."⁷ The "self-combed" women and married women who moved back with their parents (*buluojia*) mostly worked as cotton cloth or towel knitters or embroiderers. Those in Shunde and Nanhai worked mainly in the silk factories and silk industry. By the late 20s, raw silk from Shunde could not compete with Japanese artificial silk on the international market. As a result, they switched to other knitting industries, while some moved to Guangzhou and Hong Kong to become "amahs".

As a collective tradition of celibate women peculiar to South China since the 18th century, "self-combing" was often formulated (by scholars) as indecent and even "rebellious" vis-a-vis Confucian ethics, family values and heterosexual marriage. In his *Twenty-four Admonitions*, Weng Xincun, an educational supervisor in Guangdong between 1825 and 1828 during the Qing Dynasty, wrote: "The eastern part of Guangdong, being near the border area, is especially out of track. Its men are seduced with evil thoughts, giving rise to the fraternal organisation known as Tiandihui; its women become sworn sisters, such as the Sisterhood of the Ten. Such degenerates are certainly not allowed among our upcoming generations". In order to condemn it as "evil" and "degenerating," the convention of sworn sisters here was categorically analogised to the revolutionary Tiandihui which aimed at overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming Dynasty, and both reinforced the idea of Guangdong

as an ungovernable “border” region. During the Daoguang and Xianfeng era, Peng Changzuo condemned the “intimacy” between sworn sisters as “lustful”, and expressed his outrage: “As I understand, nothing is more corrupting than lust. In ancient times, profligate and homosexual behavior, indecent as it might be, was still within the bounds of human nature. Today, no profligate and homosexual behavior exceeds that demonstrated by the relationships between women in east Guangdong, known as *baixiangzhi*. Even worse, there are virgins who make mutual vows not to marry. Their intimacy is more lascivious than the intercourse between husband and wife!”⁸

Since extant copies of South Chinese films before World War II are hard to come by, we have no way of knowing how “self-combing” is interpreted in most early films – such as in *Women of Independent Means* (like *The Light of Women*, it starred Lee Yi-nin). *The Light of Women* makes rare references to the popular convention, showing for example, the ways in which self-combed women set up live-in vocational knitting schools for young women. We also see the close ties between the “maiden ladies” from the “maiden lady house”, the female students and the knitting factory (“maiden lady houses” were financed by self-combed women, or sponsored by elderly and rich self-combed women. Some were built with funds from the clans). It establishes how the self-combing culture promoted women’s independence through education and the transmission of skills, creating a tradition of its own. All of these would probably be self-evident to viewers in the 30s. When the mother and daughter are forced to run away at the end of

the film, it also suggests the waning of this tradition.

However, the representation of “self-combing” culture in *The Light of Women* is also curious in some respects. It deliberately glosses over the intimacy between women (the young Mo-jing has to sever her friendship with a girlfriend before leaving home). It chooses to skip all the rituals and vows of “self-combing”---because these might be seen as “too traditional” and not modern enough. It also downplays the loyalty of self-combed woman to their natural families and clans (without mentioning any collaborative efforts or support of the clan communities), replacing it with diligence in order to repay “society” and nationalistic ideas of serving the country. As for the hasty departure of mother and daughter on a boat at the end, was it an echo of the expatriation of many self-combed women (to Hong Kong or Singapore) for work, or a response to the calling of the nation at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, as they approached the briefly glimpsed national flag? The ambiguity of this ending aptly captures the dilemma of that generation of intellectuals caught between modernity and nationalism.

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[Translated by Christine Chan]

Notes

- 1 The first Chinese talkie released was the sound movie *Song Girl Red Peony* by Mingxing Film Company released in March 1931. See Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen (eds.), *A History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, Vol. 1, Beijing: China Film Press, 1981, pp61-163 (Chinese only).
- 2 Sam Ho, "Beyond Virginity: A Precious Glimpse of Women Sensibilities in 1930s Hong Kong Cinema", *Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 66, Nov 2013, p.8.
- 3 "One of the most destructive actions by the Japanese against the Hong Kong film industry was to melt down a large number of the pre-war films to use the silver nitrate for military purposes." David Carter, *East Asian Cinema*, Harpenden, UK: Kamera/Oldcastle Books, 2010 (Kindle Edition).
- 4 Priscilla Chan, "Mr Jack Lee Fong and His Time Capsule", *Newsletter*, Hong Kong Film Archive, Issue 66, Nov 2013, pp.4-6.
- 5 Guo Shenghui, "The Custom of Self-combed Women in the Pearl River Delta and Its Evolution and Origins", *Folk Custom in China*, Guangzhou, Jun 2009, pp.31-33 (Chinese only).
- 6 Chen Yuzeng, Li Sifu and Wu Qingshi, "'Self-Combed Women' and 'Delayed Marriage'", *Literature and History*, Nanning, Guangxi Province, Mar 1994, p.41 (Chinese only).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.44.
- 8 Peng Changzuo, *Miscellaneous Notes, Vol. III, Three Eccentric Customs of East Guangdong*, 1853, block-printed edition (Chinese only).