

Disappearing Politics and the Politics of Disappearance: Female Subjectivity, Left-Wing Films, and the Representation of 1930s Shanghai in *Center Stage**

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Abstract

This paper examines the intertextual structure and its dynamic employment of (de)constructing female subjectivity in Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (1992). In this study, I suggest how the film's fundamental reconstruction of the life experience of Ruan Lingyu (1910-35) is intertwined with representational erasure of 1930s Shanghai that in turn testifies to Hong Kong's own subjectivity. I focus on the places in *Center Stage* where remakes of certain scenes of Ruan's films along with original footage are inserted into the reconstructed narration of Ruan's life. By examining the appropriation of these clips in *Center Stage*, I demonstrate how a parallel is created between the female characters' experience in these 1930s films with the purported situation of Ruan Lingyu on the reconstruction level. I argue that in the filmmaker's effort to seemingly reconstruct the female subject, the narrative in fact serves to de-politicize the 1930s films, especially the leftist ones. With the postmodern meta-cinematic structure of this film, not only does the reconstructed female subjectivity dissolve in the self-reflexive move, but the leftist progressive ideologies are also undermined. The representational erasure of the leftist elements on the discursive level is supported by the art direction in *Center Stage*, in which painted paperboards are used as background. On these two intermingled discursive and visual layers, Kwan tackles the apocalyptic anxiety of Hong Kong society in the 1990s with a unique representational hegemony of 1930s Shanghai.

Keywords

Ruan Lingyu, *Center Stage*, left-wing film, subjectivity,
intertextual, depoliticization, Hong Kong

* Thanks to Ackbar Abbas's seminal study, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, for inspiration for the paper's title.

Stanley Kwan's 1992 masterpiece film *Center Stage* (also known as *Actress*) reconstructs the life experiences of Ruan Lingyu (1910-35) in a postmodern text.¹ Ruan, one of the greatest actors of the Chinese silent movie era, began her career at age sixteen and committed suicide at the height of her fame at age twenty-five. Employing an intertextual form, Kwan's film incorporates multiple layers of narratives, namely the reconstruction of Ruan Lingyu's life with the Hong Kong film crew in color, black-and-white footage from the surviving copies starring Ruan Lingyu, and monochrome interviews between Kwan, his Hong Kong crew, and film veterans who worked with Ruan.

The film's subject matter and the meta-cinematic structure have given rise to considerable scholarly discussion from various perspectives. Julian Stringer asserts that Kwan's utilization of multiple diegeses and focus on female/private history in *Center Stage* redefine the genre of bio-pic. Examining the dynamics between image and voice, the remake and the original, Shuqin Cui reflects on the (im)possibility of an autonomous female subject in a postmodern text. Taiwan scholar Lin Wenqi reads *Center Stage* as a macro-"political text" and national allegory on Hong Kong people's collective fate, while Bérénice Reynaud views it on a micro-scale and examines how Kwan's own sexual orientation generates in him an ambivalence toward femininity. Despite these differing perspectives and varying foci, a common theme remains: the film seeks to understand Hong Kong's contemporary socio-cultural transitions by reconstructing the female image and film history from the past. This paper revisits this theme by examining the dynamics between the reconstruction of the female subject and the appropriation of the 1930s Shanghai silent films, especially those historiographically iconized as left-leaning productions, as well as its implication on the cinematic representation of 1930s Shanghai in *Center Stage*.

To pursue in this direction, a brief overview of China's left-wing film movement (*zuoyi dianying yundong*) is in order. Whether there was a unified leftist literature and cinema movement in the early 1930s has always been an issue of scholarly debate. In his monographic study of the 1930s left-wing cinema productions, Laikwan Pang reflects on the historiographical myth-making of the movement. According to Pang, the concept of "left-wing films" (*zuoyi dianying*)

¹ The film screened at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards (1991) and the Berlin International Film Festival (1992) was the original director's cut (148 minutes). A 121-minute version for commercial release appeared in Hong Kong in February 1992. In 2005 Fortunate Star released a digitally remastered version (154 minutes). The content of this version is identical to the director's cut, but runs at a slightly slower pace (Hjort 21-23). My claims in the paper hold equally to these two versions.

was first raised in 1931 by the Chinese Left-Wing Dramatists Association (*Zhongguo zuoyi xijujia lianmeng*). Yet, soon more politically-neutral terms like “Chinese Cinema Culture Movement” (*Zhongguo dianying wenhua yundong*) or “Progressive Chinese Cinema” (*Zhongguo jinbu dianying*) were used instead of “left-wing film” (Pang 4). According to Pang, the term *zuoyi dianying* was revived when two state-sanctioned film histories—*Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* (*History of the Development of Modern Chinese Cinema*) and *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* (*Chinese Left-Wing Film Movement*, hereafter as *ZZDY*) were written in the PRC era.² These works describe the left-wing film movement as an integrated and well-organized social-cultural movement led by Chinese Communist Party members, a typical strategy to retrospectively legitimize the Party’s sovereignty over cultural activities (Pang 5-7). *ZZDY* iconizes seventy-four films from the 1930s as left-wing films and valorizes them as “revolutionary films” produced under the guidance of the CCP that represent the ideals of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and anti-Japanese. Of Ruan’s nine films addressed in *Center Stage*, five are classified as left-wing films.³ In these works, Ruan plays roles ranging from the daughter of the oppressed poor family, the woman devoured by the dark society, and the awakened new woman. In fact, scholars have pointed out that “film historians in the PRC tend to attribute the rise of Ruan to the fact that she came under the influence of directors such as Tian Han and Wu Yonggang of the Chinese Communist Party’s left-wing film movement” (Chang 144).⁴ In this regard, any

² As the first comprehensive historiography on Chinese cinema written after the establishment of the PRC, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* bears a distinct trademark of the time—an ideologically oriented framework that foregrounds the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and the left-wing films in the cinematic landscape of early 1930s. *ZZDY*, composed in 1993 to commemorate the Left-Wing Movement, systematically describes how the CCP members unite the Chinese Left-Wing Dramatists Association and the progressive intellectuals and lead the movement in various direct and indirect ways. See *ZZDY* 885-901. In recent years, a number of revisionist film histories have been written, including Jubin Hu’s *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (the pre-incarnation of this work is the book that Hu co-authored with Li Suyuan in 1996 in Chinese, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* [*History of Chinese Silent Film*]) and Yingjing Zhang’s *Chinese National Cinema*. See Zhang’s (59-71) and Hu’s (75-114) discussion to see how commercial interests, aesthetic explorations, and ideological struggles complicated the monolithic narrative of the first “golden age” of Chinese cinema in *ZZDY*.

³ These five films are *Chengshi zhiye* (*City Night*, 1933), *Sange modeng nüxing* (*Three Modern Women*, 1933), *Nüsheng* (*Goddess*, 1934), *Xin nüxing* (*New Woman*, 1934), and *Xiao wanyi* (*Little Toys*, 1933). The first four are discussed in detail in this paper.

⁴ *ZZDY* describes the Left-Wing Movement to have attracted artists from various fronts of filmmaking, including directors such as Sun Yun, Cai Chusheng, Fei Mu, Bu Wancang, and actors such as Jin Yan, Li Lili, and Hu Die. Many of them worked closely with Ruan Lingyu and exerted influence on her career (*ZZDY* 1119).

reconstruction of Ruan's life will inevitably address these leftist films said to have significantly contributed her stardom. Therefore, Kwan's appropriation of these 1930s films, especially the leftist ones in *Center Stage*, provides us a unique vantage point to examine this reconstruction of her life from 1990s Hong Kong.

This paper focuses on the places in *Center Stage* where either original footage or a remake of certain scenes of Ruan's films (or sometimes a juxtaposition of both) is inserted into the narration of Ruan's life. By examining how the archival clips and remakes are transplanted into *Center Stage*, I demonstrate how a parallel is created between the female characters' experience in these 1930s films and the purported situation of Ruan Lingyu (during the time these films were shot) on the reconstruction level. In doing this, I argue, in an initial effort to construct the subjectivity of Ruan in the 1930 diegesis, the narrative displaces the representation of social reality of 1930s Shanghai and the corresponding ideological concerns in these 1930s films, especially the leftist ones. However, the reconstruction is simultaneously undercut by the insertions of Kwan's interviews with 1930s Shanghai film industry veterans and the Hong Kong crew. The fragmented narratives in this postmodern meta-cinematic structure preclude any autonomous female subject as well as a centralized grand narrative (Cui 60-61). In this way not only does the female subjectivity dissolve in this self-reflexive move, but the leftist progressive ideologies are also further undercut. This representational erasure of the leftist elements is accompanied by a unique art direction of using painted paperboards as background in *Center Stage*. This selective representation of 1930s Shanghai on both the ideological and physical fronts renders the space homogeneous with (hence, non-threatening to) the 1990s Hong Kong and, in doing so, testifies to the "localized subjectivity" (Stringer 28) of Hong Kong and its entanglement with the "mainland complex."⁵

Illegitimate Wife, Mother, and the Ethical-Sentiment Films

The reconstruction of Ruan's life begins with her arrival at the Lianhua Studio, one of the most important film companies in the 1930s. The narrative of the film proper begins with a long take and close-ups of half-naked male bodies in a public

⁵ For essays on Hong Kong and its "mainland complex," see *Public Culture* 23 (1997), special issue "Hong Kong 1997: The Place and the Formula."

male bathhouse.⁶ At the bathhouse, the founders of the Lianhua Studio, Li Minwei (1893-1953) and Luo Mingyou (1900-67), along with Lianhua directors known for producing “serious” films, Bu Wancang (1903-74) and Sun Yu (1900-90), are discussing Ruan’s transition to Lianhua. The exchanges between the men reveal their plan to transform Ruan’s on-screen image from a “bad woman,” which she is known to play to perfection, to a chaste sing-song girl. This stark contrast between these polarized images will, as they anticipate, grab the audience’s attention and enable them to “have a super-star like Hu Die” (Butterfly Wu, 1908-89).

Several ostensible signs of phallic domination can be found at work in this scene. First, women are treated as “pawns,” with their fates controlled by men. Before Ruan Lingyu even starts working at Lianhua (and prior to making her way into the reconstruction narrative), she is objectified as a “chip” bartered between competing film studios, and her career trajectory is decided by the men in her absence. Second, the scene suggests an over-simplified dichotomy, conceptualizing women as either *femmes fatales* or virtuous quasi-saints. Third, the scene demonstrates the male consumption of these two types of images (as revealed by the enthusiasm of the directors as well as their optimistic anticipation of the acceptance of these two images). The male bathhouse setting and the close-ups of male nude bodies seem to constitute an exclusive male land where females are simultaneously excluded and subjugated in absentia. As the narrative continues, Jin Yan, a Lianhua actor, interrupts the conversation and is told by Sun Yu to go to join the other men in the bathhouse. Jin Yan leaves the room by jokingly remarking, “I will go to compare the size [of my penis] with those men then.” This immediately reminds the viewers of what the men just claimed that they would do with Ruan, i.e., use her to compete with their peers. In this scene, the narrative is explicitly directing viewers to see the phallic domination working and how it translates into patriarchal dictation on Ruan Lingyu. Li Minwei further associates Ruan’s transformation and the subsequent success of Lianhua Studio with “reviving the national movie industry” (*fluxing guopian*).⁷ Therefore, the phallic domination is

⁶ In *Nansheng nüxiang (Yang ± Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema, 1996)*, the documentary film that Kwan made as his reflection on gender in Chinese films, Kwan reveals that the bathhouse scene “reemerges from his childhood memory when his father would take him to a public bathhouse like this.” Many critics read this scene and his explanation in *Yang ± Yin* as a disclosure of his gay identity (Reynaud 32).

⁷ This slogan was first raised by Luo Mingyou around 1930. Facing the reality that the Chinese cinema market in the early 1930s is dominated by films in the veins of “mandarin duck and butterfly” romances, ghost stories, and swordsman/martial arts stories as well as foreign films, the slogan calls for making Chinese films that address social reality and advocate traditional ethical values (Li and Hu 202-03).

further justified by the ultimate legitimate reason of the time—the grand national cause (Lin 188). As many scholars point out, reconstructing a female/private history in *Center Stage* is a gesture of revolt against the grand (male) narrative (Lin 186). In fact, the theme of “revolt” (*fankang*) runs through the film and is echoed at the end when Ruan repeatedly tries to pronounce this word in Mandarin (discussed below). In this sense, the absence of women and the all-too-apparent male domination in the bathhouse scene emphasize not only the patriarchal oppression but also its manifestation under the rubric of nationalist discourse.

As if to demonstrate that she has no say about her career plan, Ruan first shows up in the 1930 diegesis as “silent” woman. Her first film re-presented in *Center Stage* is *Gudu chunmeng* (*Reminisces of Peking*) directed by Sun Yu in 1930. The original copy of this film is lost and this information is conveyed to the audience by the Chinese characters laid over the filming scene of the remake. The absence of the original causes a dearth of context, which provides both a necessity and an opportunity for re-contextualization. The context for the remake of the selected scenes from *Reminisces of Peking* is provided through the men’s discussion of both this film and *Yecao xianhua* (*Wild Flower*) in the bathhouse scene, exerting authority on both the actress in diegesis and the audience of *Center Stage*. The first part of the remake sequences begins with a crane shot of the glassed-in sound stage with the diegetic filming apparatus seen. Ruan (played by Maggie Cheung in period costume and makeup) is appreciating roses as well as her own reflection in the mirror, in a narcissistic fashion. The scene visually reinforces the men’s bathhouse conversation about the actress as playing the “wallflower” (a pun using roses in this scene) type of role to perfection. As Ruan/Cheung has no lines in this scene, the “muted-ness” of her character could be read as an allegory of her inability/impossibility to offer any counter-opinion to the men’s judgment. A jump cut directs the audience to the second set of the remake where the character engages in a fight with a man only to reveal her identity as the man’s concubine. As the argument intensifies, the female character grabs the tablecloth and tries to tear it as an expression of her anger. However, the tablecloth does not tear as expected. Ruan stops to apologize to the within-the-scene director and then continues acting. The scene ends with her signature on-screen expression—*wuyu wen cangtian* (looking up with a puzzled expression).

Having the actress speak to the diegetic director is to have her break the illusion of the remake voluntarily. The effect of this Brechtian moment needs to be read against the conversation that Ruan has with Lin Chuchu (Cecilia Yip) in the coming sequences. In their talk, Ruan reveals her troubled relationship with Zhang

Damin, the dissolute son of a once-wealthy family. Not married to him, she is in a position not unlike the role she plays in the remake of *Reminiscences of Peking*. Here Kwan deliberately selects the scene that indicates the female protagonist's "illegitimate" role in the relationship for remake. The pondering look on Ruan's face before she resumes acting leads viewers to believe that she has just undergone a self-reflexive examination of her own situation. The voluntary pause by Ruan in the filming process creates the moment for this reflection and further legitimizes this reading. Therefore, by creating a parallel between Ruan and her on-screen role and, more importantly, by suggesting her awareness of this shared fate, the historical subject under reconstruction is granted her agency. In this light, the character's inability to tear the tablecloth can be viewed as an intentional allegory of Ruan's own situation—unable to tear the net that traps her in real life. The puzzled look on Ruan's face in the last frame of the remake is ambiguous; the observer cannot tell whether it reflects the situation of the character or of the actress who plays her.

Dialogue between Ruan and Lin in a second film creates another parallel between Ruan and her role, this time as a mother in *Wild Flower*, discussed as well by the male directors in the bathhouse. In their conversation, Ruan reveals to Lin her confusion over her role as a mother and asks whether childbirth is indeed as painful as she has heard. Ruan adopts a girl, Xiaoyu, but wonders whether she would love Xiaoyu more if she were her own child instead of adopted. The inquiry about giving birth, an experience she has not had, reveals Ruan's self-reflection on maternity, or rather, the lack of it. As the conversation ends, Ruan exits the room, removes her fur coat, and grovels in the snow to feel the cold. She also pretends to hold a baby in her arms and bites her finger. This again returns the viewers to the bathhouse discussion when Sun Yu introduces the opening of *Wild Flower*, in which a mother has to feed her baby with her own blood as they are stuck in the snow fleeing a famine. Viewed against her expressed anxiety over motherhood, Ruan's action on the snowy ground has undoubtedly gone beyond the professional rehearsal. Moreover, the female body plays an important role in this sequence. Unable to experience the physical pain of childbirth, exposure to the cold and pain offers a rough substitution and gives her a chance to experience her own version of maternity—a demonstration of her subjectivity. The confusion as to whether she would love Xiaoyu differently is eventually resolved at the end of the film when Cheung as Ruan, after swallowing the sleeping pills, utters her last words to Xiaoyu: "I love you more than my own child." Having Ruan eventually find the answer to her question and complete her inquiry on motherhood, *Center Stage* further

demonstrates Ruan's subjectivity. Cheung as Ruan in the 1930 diegesis experiences anxiety and confusion over her role as a mother and at last finds out how she truly feels as a mother. In this sense, Stringer admits that *Center Stage* remains true to the spirit of bio-pic.⁸

Although the crossover between Ruan's fate and that of the characters she plays manages to reconstruct the agency of the historical subject on the reconstruction level, these instances are also the places where the *raison d'être* of the original 1930s films is undermined. Shuqin Cui argues that these remake fragments are "taken out of their textual entirety" and are dislocated from the social-historical context (60). Through the process of deliberate extraction and recontextualization of these scenes in *Center Stage*, the female characters in the original 1930 films are "particularized" as a testimony of Ruan's life experience. Not only is the agency of the characters in these 1930s films manipulated, but, more importantly, the historicity of the 1930s films dissolves. As the first production of Lianhua, *Reminisces of Peking* catches the critics' attention as a social-realist work in contrast to the ghost stories and action films then pervasive in the industry (Zhu 123; Shen 88).⁹ However, instead of conveying the major social issue addressed in the film—"a young man devoured by the decadent, dark society" (Li and Hu 261)—the remake snippet only foreshadows Ruan's troubled personal relationship. As for *Wild Flower*, a tragic love story of a young couple from different social classes (Li and Hu 262-63), the part selected by Kwan elicits thoughts on Ruan's anxiety over motherhood. However, as Kwan chooses this scene and deliberately alludes to the similarity between the role and Ruan to account for her subjectivity, the female character is "displaced" by Ruan. In this process, the two films, dislocated from any context as well as "the time and space of their cultural/cinematic production" (Cui 64), become footnotes to Ruan's personal tragedy as well as the enacting agent's self-consciousness on the reconstructed level in *Center Stage*.

In addition to being recontextualized in the 1930s diegesis, the remakes are also placed under dual-directorial disposal in *Center Stage*. On the narrative level,

⁸ In his article, Stringer reflects on the bio-pic generic model established in the classical Hollywood period and argues that this model requires to see clear motivation and character development in the famous personages (30-31). In this sense, Ruan's "confused-to-enlightened" trajectory as a mother fits this model.

⁹ This point, made by film historians, is also mentioned by Kwan himself in the film. At the beginning of *Center Stage*, Kwan informs Cheung that when Ruan first started making films the market was dominated by *shenguai pian* (ghost stories) and *wuxia pian* (costume martial-arts films).

the diegetic directors gathered at the bathhouse dictate the fate of the female subject. On the meta-cinematic level, Kwan's interpretation and annotation are inserted into the reconstruction flow in a postmodern fashion. *Center Stage* begins with a series of film stills of Ruan accompanied by a voice-over commenting on her early career. Shuqin Cui contends that the male voice-over produces a discursive authority that bridges "image with sound, past with present," and, most importantly, "history with explanation" (62). This is especially obvious with the second round of exchanges between Kwan and Maggie Cheung. The puzzled look—the last shot in the remake of *Wild Flower*—cuts to clips of similar expressions on Ruan's face in her other works. This leads to a sequence of conversations between Kwan and Cheung on Ruan's perceived sexuality and her triangular love relationship with Zhang Damin and Tang Jishan, the tea king that she later lives with. Tired of taking care of Zhang Damin financially and emotionally, as Kwan says, it is not surprising that Ruan would fall for Tang Jishan, a mature and wealthy merchant. This scene begins with the shot of the back of Kwan's head and Cheung's face in a frame: indicating that Kwan is sitting opposite to Ruan as they are having this conversation. However, as the shot pans to the right and the Hong Kong filming crew is shown in the frame, with a mirror behind Cheung, Kwan appears to be talking to her from her back in the mise-en-scène (Figure 1).¹⁰



Figure 1. Kwan explains to Maggie Cheung his take on Ruan's personal relationships. With a mirror behind her, Kwan, who is sitting opposite to her, appears to talk to her from behind.

¹⁰ Stringer contends that this pan in a cold and formal documentary style "contrasts starkly with the graceful tracking shot and elaborate lighting designs of the period reconstruction" (32).

With this composition the two-way conversation between the director and actress now transforms into a one-way instruction from Kwan to Cheung. Kwan's rationalization, "taking on a discursive power" (Cui 68), annotates history and instructs Cheung on her comprehension of the past. The insertion of this conversation and, more importantly, the revelation of the deliberateness of this scene and the filming process of it undermine what is represented in the reconstruction layer as "fact" of the past. The exchange between Kwan and Cheung tells viewers the "fact" is none other than a conspiracy of heteroglossia and cinematic creation (Chen 183-84). What is being presented here is not "past," but how the representation of the "past" can be appropriated.¹¹ Read this way, the *raison d'être* of the remake alludes to Ruan's fate on the cinematic level and serves to testify to Kwan's interpretation of the past on the meta-cinematic level. As *Center Stage* explicitly reveals the arbitrary process of the reconstruction, the subjectivity of Ruan Lingyu in the reconstructed narrative is simultaneously elided/erased.

The Oppressed, the Villain, and Leftist Films

Kwan's efforts to reconstruct Ruan's life set her on a trajectory where her various identities (for example, lover or mother) find referent in the fates of the roles she plays in the ethical-sentimental films. Similar parallels could also be found in Kwan's remakes of leftist films in which the leftist ideology dissolves in the remakes. A case in point is the remake of Fei Mu's (1906-51) silver screen debut: *Chengshi zhiye* (*City Night*, 1933). In the 1930s diegesis, Cheung as Ruan is filming the scene in which the girl she plays is crying over her dying father at the door of their shabby house which is soon to be torn down for a dog race track. Ruan's emotion appears to be especially intense on set. The diegetic Fei Mu reveals to his cinematographer that Ruan's own father died in a similar situation when she was six. Here Fei Mu—who points out the similarity between the character and Ruan and indicates that Ruan is experiencing a self-reflexive moment—becomes a mouthpiece through which the strategy Kwan uses throughout *Center Stage* is pronounced. *City Night* is labeled as one of the left-wing films in *ZZDY*. Its theme,

¹¹ Wayne Stein analyzes this scene in "Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage* (1992): Postmodern Reflections of the Mirror within the Mirror." Emphasizing the use of mirror and the presence of cameraman, he claims that "this scene captures the collaborative nature of filmmaking as well as the interplay between the time and space of the film's production and the biographical narrative of Ruan Lingyu's life" (220).

as the CCP filmography discourse summarizes, is about the clash between the proletarian and the capitalist as well as the suffering of the former (ZZDY 253). However, as Kwan chooses this scene and articulates the similarity between the role and Ruan to underscore Ruan's subjectivity, the tragic female character who is supposed to represent the proletarian in the original film is "particularized" as Ruan. Consequently, the focus is shifted from class oppression and struggle in the original film to family tragedy in the remake.

This displacement of the so-called "major conflict" (*zhuyao maodun*) in the leftist film is further demonstrated through the juxtaposition of the original clips and remake of *Nüsheng* (*Goddess*, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1934), considered the most representative work of both Ruan and of Chinese silent film. The 1930s diegesis shows Tang Jishan flirting with actress Liang Saizhen while playing mahjong downstairs in his home. Upstairs, Cheung as Ruan walks across the room, sits on a table and begins smoking a cigarette after tapping it on the back of her hand (Figure 3). The scene then reverts to a black and white clip (clearly a segment from one of the existent copies) in which the female character (impersonated by Ruan in the 1930s) is doing exactly the same thing (Figure 2). Tang enters the room, approaches Ruan and the latter responds with a sneer. Assuming a streetwalker's stance, Ruan stands next to Tang, asking "Who would you choose if both me and Liang were prostitutes?" (Figure 5). Then, once again, a clip is inserted with a streetwalker standing next to a man in the street in a similar posture (Figure 4). The context of the clips is introduced in a retrospective manner when the filming process of *Goddess* is reconstructed. In the 1930s diegesis on the set of *Goddess*, director Wu Yonggang explains to Ruan the meaning of those poses. He says that the rascal helps the prostitute escape from the police and then asks her to repay by spending the night with him. Knowing that she has no way to escape, Wu explains to Ruan that her various poses, such as sitting on the table and smoking, imply resistance even though she knows the power of that resistance is too weak. The conversation between Wu and Ruan outlines the fate of this "insulted and humiliated" prostitute as well as the dark society represented by the vicious scoundrel, which is also the long-standing reading of this celebrated leftist film. However, when this conversation is recontextualized in *Center Stage* with Ruan's behavior with Tang Jishan, once again the referent of the remake becomes "particularized." The very act of juxtaposing her in the same posture in front of Tang with the scene of the prostitute and the rascal in *Goddess* creates yet another parallel between Ruan's situation and that of the prostitute. Tang Jishan helps her to escape from the life with Zhang Damin and gives her the material safety she has desired for her mother

and daughter. However, as he now starts to favor another woman she finds out that she will not “escape the villain’s palm” (as Wu Yonggang puts it). To have Ruan act out what the mother-cum-prostitute does in the film is to have her associate her own situation with that of the character and offer her own resistance (although, as Wu explains, it is almost in vain). With this deliberately arranged juxtaposition, Ruan gains her subjectivity on the reconstruction level of narrative.



Figure 2. The mother-cum-prostitute sits on a table and begins smoking a cigarette after tapping it on the back of her hand.



Figure 3. Maggie Cheung as Ruan in the same pose.



Figure 4. The mother-cum-prostitute stands next to a potential client in the street.



Figure 5. Maggie Cheung as Ruan stands in the same pose next to Tang.

However, as Ruan’s subjectivity starts to take shape, the female characters in the original films undergo a double manipulation and the leftist concern dissolves. The first layer of manipulation involves the leftist interpretation of the images. The daughter in *City Night* and the virtuous prostitute in *Goddess* signify the insulted and humiliated people. In the leftist discourse their fate is most meaningful if metonymically read as representing the whole proletarian class. However, Kwan “frees” them by dislocating them from the leftist text, only to manipulate them a

second time by reducing them to the signifier of Ruan's personal tragedy. The insertion of the original clips and remakes interrupts the narrative flow of the 1930s diegesis. Yet, at the same time, it creates another sub-flow by connecting Ruan's fate with that of the roles she plays. Ruan's character as a daughter and as the lover of Tang Jishan is further developed, and the viewers are able to see her own reflection on these identities. But this allusion to Ruan's fate eclipses the female protagonists (as well as the oppressed class they represent). As a visual component to this eclipse, in the remake of *City Night* the close-up shots of the daughter's body—especially the body curve under her soaking-wet *qipao* (traditional dress)—render her a sexualized object for the modern audience. This rendering also takes place in the scene of Ruan's exchange with Tang where a prostitute-like female body and gesture are emphasized by closer shots than in the original. Therefore, as the reconstructed female subject—Ruan—further takes shape in *Center Stage*, the historicity of 1930s Shanghai and the leftist concerns in the original films dissolve.

The Awakened Woman and Self-Reflexive Exposure

In addition to Ruan's character development in her private life, *Center Stage* entangles it with a "puzzled-to-awakened" trajectory of her public life, i.e., her gradual involvement in the works of left-wing directors and her awakened awareness of her role in the public realm. In the remake of *City Night* and *Goddess*, Kwan reconstructed her awareness of the oppression in the private sphere. In the two films discussed in this part, Kwan reconstructs her agency as a public "new" woman. In the 1930s diegesis, Ruan returns to the Lianhua Studio after escaping the Japanese bombing in Hong Kong. As she walks down the corridor, the viewers hear a male voice-over (soon to be identified as Bu Wancang) saying that "modern women are not those who drive, dress fashionably, but those who are independent and care for the people." The voice-over discursively defines "modern women," contrasting with the other two types of "fake" modern women: the romantic one who cowers when facing the revolutionary tide and the naive one who commits suicide when deserted by men. To convince Bu Wancang that she is able to play the role of a plain "female worker," Ruan converses with him against the backdrop of painted buildings. She takes off her coat, reveals her plain clothes underneath and wipes off her lipstick. Kwan then immediately inserts the interview between the Hong Kong crew and Shen Ji, Ruan's biographer, in which Shen elaborates on Ruan's "progressive request" (*jinbu yaoqiu*). This interview, with close-ups of Shen Ji and a reverse shot of Cheung listening to him, again produces a male discursive

judgment on Ruan's gradual awareness of her social responsibility. Meanwhile, Shen's elucidation of Ruan's "progressive request" as a result of combined influence of different social factors further conceptualizes her agency as "a social rather than purely an individual force" (Stringer 31). The use of documentary here echoes Kwan's conversation with Cheung on Ruan's personal relationship, and demonstrates to viewers an intricate reversal in the use of documentary and filmic narrative: "It is the fictional or narrative part of the work that recounts the known fact of Ruan Lingyu's life, while it is the documentary part that provides the elements of speculation and exploration" (Abbas 46).

This interview transitions to a sequence of conversations between Kwan and Qin Han (playing Tang Jishan), and Kwan and Lawrence Ng (playing Zhang Damin) in which they lament the pathetic last years of Tang's and Zhang's lives. One detail Kwan reveals to Ng, intended or not, is yet another self-reflexive critique of the documentary-like interviews in *Center Stage*. No sooner had Ruan committed suicide, as Kwan says, than her complicated private relationships became prime subjects for films and plays of 1930s Shanghai.¹² Zhang Damin, with his first-hand experience of Ruan's life, was invited to play himself on stage.¹³ To have one of the protagonists in this relationship "play the role of himself" (*xianshen shuofa*) is an ostentatious strategy to create an aura of authority for the play. Yet the tone used by Kwan and Ng calls into question the veracity of Zhang's story. Underneath this seemingly causal exchange lies the profound concern for "the disappearance and rearticulation of history" (Cui 62). In the sense of reconstructing Ruan's life, how different is the act of remembering in *Center Stage* from the plays that were put on soon after her death in 1930s Shanghai? On the one hand, Kwan is interviewing historical witnesses, such as Li Lili and Chen Yanyan, to *xianshen shuofa* just as those plays recruit Zhang Damin for his role as a historical witness. At some point, *Center Stage* also appears to attempt to restore history, as those plays claim to do. One good example is Kwan's interview with Li Lili, who reveals a detail about Ruan's funeral. When she was standing next to Ruan's deathbed, Xiaoyu, Ruan's

¹² In 1935 a "civilized play" (*wenming xi*) titled *Lingyu xiangxiao ji* (*The Death of Ruan Lingyu*) was staged in Shanghai and was referred to in Lu Xun's famous commemorating essay, "Lun renyan kewei" ("On 'Gossip Is a Fearful Thing'") (Zhu 283). This play was soon adapted into a Shanghai opera (*huju*)—*Ruan Lingyu zisha* (*The Suicide of Ruan Lingyu*) and was performed in the same year.

¹³ Soon after Ruan Lingyu passed away, Yueming Studio wanted to produce a film about Ruan's suicide. The project fell through because the studio could not meet the pay that Zhang Damin asked for (Zhu 283). But he did play himself in *Shei zhi guo* (*Who's to Blame*, 1937) directed by Shen Jicheng in Hong Kong.

adopted daughter, asked why she was not crying as everybody else. Later in the reconstruction layer, Kwan deliberately adopts this detail in his filmic reconstruction and has the diegetic Li (played by Carina Lau) refuse to cry, echoing Li's revelation. This act appears to suggest that the historical witness's accounts are reliable and that the "historical truth" could be restored through these accounts, which is exactly the same rationale behind inviting Zhang Damin to play himself in those Shanghai plays. However, Kwan's critique of Zhang Damin's participation undermines the authority of the historical witness, and the fact that he discloses the filming process of the funerary anecdote cunningly reveals the reconstructed nature of the realistic aesthetic.¹⁴ This kind of practice, as Stephen Teo argues, creates a "self-critical text in an attempt to write film criticism within the context of his own work" (192). As the viewers see how one witness's words could be easily translated into "fact," they would see that the so-called "historical truth" is no more than a pastiche of accounts from various perspectives. With the "truthfulness" of the cinematic narrative not holding up, the purported agency and the awareness of social responsibility demonstrated in *Ruan* is also nothing but a historiographical reconstruction.

A similar dynamic of (de)constructing *Ruan*'s social conscience as an awakened new woman is demonstrated through *Center Stage*'s remake of *Three Modern Women* (dir. Bu Wancang, 1933). This remake concerns how Zhou Shuzhen (impersonated by Ruan Lingyu) takes the male protagonist, a petty bourgeoisie film star (played by Jin Yan), to the slum and educates him about real working class life. One irony in this scene is the contrast between *Ruan*'s on-screen and off-screen identity. Her action to convince Bu Wancang of her suitability for the role—removing her fine coat and revealing the plain clothes underneath—suggests the "acquired" nature of this identity as a working woman. Therefore, while she acts as the mentor of this film star who is distanced from the working class, the irony is that she is no different. As Tang Jishan (whom *Ruan* has gotten to know through a number of social functions at Lianhua) arrives at the production site, the crew tries another take. A crosscut connects two tracking shots: one catches Cheung as *Ruan* and Jin Yan walking with a concerned look at the laborers next to them while the other captures Tang Jishan looking at them while smoking a cigar. In the CCP filmography, *Three Modern Women* is regarded as the "representative pioneering work of left-wing film" (ZZDY 1120). Tianhan, the script writer,

¹⁴ Stringer argues that this moment shows how "*Center Stage* fills in its narrative gaps at the very moment the reconstructions are explicitly shown to be manufactured out of contemporary private fantasies" (34).

describes *Three Modern Women* as a work with a “fighting subject” (*zhandouxing tici*) produced under the CCP’s leadership (ZZDY 871). As the film juxtaposes the corrupted capitalist class and the sentimental petty bourgeoisie with an “independent, strong-willed, rebellious woman who represents the idea of revolution” (as introduced by the diegetic Bu Wancang), it has also been hailed as the first feminist film in China. However, in *Center Stage* the process of remaking the film becomes its very own parody. The revealed artificiality of the site where the extras “enact” heavy manual labor undermines the criticism of the dark social reality that the “realist” representation in the original film is said to have evoked. More importantly, the tracking shot of Tang Jishan and the subsequent point-of-view shot of Ruan Lingyu, who is playing the role of an independent woman, put her constantly under the male (Tang’s) gaze. Laura Mulvey defines the system of the gaze as a basic cinematic structure of active male domination of both the narrative and the woman. In this structure, the female character is often represented as the erotic fulfillment of male sexual desire. Here, as Ruan is represented as the object of Tang’s desire, the progressive quality of modern women, especially the “independence” that she is supposed to embody, is satirized. In this act of insertion, rather than creating a direct parallel, Kwan stages a stark contrast between Ruan’s situation and that of her character in this leftist film. On the one hand, he valorizes Ruan’s initiative to play a progressive new woman. However, on the other, he exposes how the “new woman” image is constructed in the original film and how the progressive quality actually speaks to the contrary. In the process, the concern with social reality and the celebration of the “modern” woman in the original leftist film is once again compromised.

The climax of the (de)construction of this agency happens with the last insertion in *Center Stage*—of remakes and archival clips of *New Women* (dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934). The final image of the *Goddess* cuts to a hospital room setting in which Ruan is trying to rehearse the scene of Wei Ming, the female protagonist who commits suicide, venting her last words. After a couple of takes, with Ruan not able to deliver the performance he is looking for, director Cai Chusheng (played by Tony Leung Ka Fai) enters the frame and explains, “You had to sell yourself to save your daughter. But those tabloid writers do not sympathize with you at all; instead they attack you. Before you wanted to kill yourself, but now you want to charge, to fight back.” But the next take still fails to meet Cai’s expectation. It is not until Cai tells her “I remember you once told me that you are similar in some ways to the character Wei Ming” that Ruan eventually delivers the “strong emotion” that Cai is looking for. This line from within-the-scene director (Cai), in fact, speaks for

the extra-diegetic director, Kwan, as well. As if the viewers are still not able to see the parallel between Wei Ming and Ruan (while Wei Ming sells herself for one night to collect the money for her daughter's illness, Ruan becomes the lover of Tang to have a secure life for her mother and daughter; Wei Ming is severely attacked by the tabloids while Ruan also experiences media scrutiny of her private life), Kwan has Cai make this connection blatantly explicit. In this sense, Kwan is deliberately informing viewers of the narrative strategy employed throughout the film and inviting careful scrutiny.

Ruan eventually delivers the intense emotion as Cai hopes. Cheung as Ruan cries out in the remake: "I want to live! I want to live!" (*Wo yao huo! Wo yao huo!*). These words transform into characters written over Wei Ming's face in the original clip. This theme of being silenced, if read against Ruan's problem with speaking Mandarin—highlighted at the dinner party that she attends on the last night of her life—is another allegory of the Shanghai and Hong Kong competition. Born into a Cantonese family in Shanghai, Ruan struggles with Mandarin Chinese.¹⁵ However, as revealed at the party, the entire Shanghai film industry is on the verge of making "talkies,"¹⁶ in which the actors will have to speak Mandarin. As a Cantonese-speaking actress, Ruan's "death" seems inevitable at this point (Harris 296, 298). Read against the return of Hong Kong to Chinese control after a century and a half of British control, the impending necessity of speaking Mandarin alludes to China's reclaiming of sovereignty over Hong Kong, and the unavoidable death of Ruan speaks about the anxiety of Hong Kong people facing this prospect. That said, no wonder after the news of making talkies, Ruan's last word in Mandarin at the dinner party is "revolt" (*fankang*).

Cheung as Ruan appears to have been deeply moved by the emotion of the characters and sobs under the blanket even after Cai calls "cut." Cai then sits quietly but uneasily by the side of the bed. As a close-up elegantly turns into a medium shot and then a long and high angle shot, the film fades into monochrome and the 1990s

¹⁵ Scholars have observed how Cheung (a Hong Kong native) as Ruan speaks in different languages to different audiences. She talks to her family in Cantonese; conducts exchanges with Shanghai directors, such as Bu Wangcang in Shanghai dialect; and struggles to speak in Mandarin with Lianhua colleagues such as Li Lili. Reynaud points out this "sense of fractured Chinese identity" and argues that by using a Hong Kong star to embody Ruan Lingyu, Kwan "reclaims" Ruan by stressing her Cantonese origins (33-34).

¹⁶ In early 1931, Mingxing premiered *Genü hong mudan* (*Sing-Song Girl Red Peony*, dir. Zhang Shichuan) and Youlian screened *Yu meiren* (*Yu the Beauty*, dir. Chen Kengran). These are the earliest sound films made in China. In both cases, dialogue and song were not synchronized on the soundtrack, but recorded first on a phonograph and then broadcast during screenings (Zhang and Zhiweu 17).

Hong Kong filming crew and apparatus appear in the frame until Kwan says, “Jiahui, you forgot to lift the blanket and take a look at Maggie.” It is at this moment that the boundaries between characters and actors (Wei Ming and Ruan; Ruan and Cheung) blur (Lin 189). The deliberate revelation of the filming process once again discloses the “reconstructed” nature of “the past.” Here, although Kwan constructs a parallel between Ruan and Wei Ming to suggest Ruan’s agency, the real focus of the film has switched to the construction process itself. What Kwan takes delight in doing here is no longer the representation of the agency of the historical subject, but instead a demonstration of how the construction of this agency could be done. As the female character becomes a medium to explore the reconstruction of the past, both Wei Ming and Ruan remain mere images, and ideas of oppression and revolt dissolve in the transplantation.

Woman and the Painted City

The displacement of the social reality in the 1930s films through narrative transplantation in *Center Stage* is highlighted by its art direction. The life of Ruan, a film star who was on the “center stage” of the 1930s film industry, is also (de)constructed and “staged” in Kwan’s work. Kwan’s aesthetic experiments with painted backdrops of 1930s Shanghai street views to represent the city occur throughout the 1930s diegesis in *Center Stage*. This unique visual representation has multiple implications. First, the modification of old Shanghai-style buildings, as Mette Hjort notes, posed a predicament for Kwan during his research trip to Shanghai in 1990. Essentially, the large painted backdrops provide a “cogent and aesthetically interesting solution to the problem of settings” caused by the changing urban appearance (Hjort 64). In addition to practical convenience, the art-deco painting style is also a nostalgic return to the golden age of Chinese cinema. The strategy of using large painted backdrops was widely used in 1930s studio-produced films. In *Center Stage*, this practice can undoubtedly be read as an homage to the 1930s Shanghai film industry.¹⁷ Yet, mingled with these practical concerns, the use of painted backdrops poses a postmodern problem of social and spatial (dis)junction

¹⁷ Zhang Zhen also argues that many aspects that characterized the Shanghai cinema made in the first three decades of the twentieth century (for example, formal innovation) are reincarnated in the later Hong Kong cinema. In this sense, the Shanghai cinema is the “preconscious” of the latter.

between 1930s Shanghai and 1990s Hong Kong,¹⁸ and enables representational erasure of the “real” 1930s Shanghai, which further displaces its historicity.

Center Stage employs various uses of the painted backdrops. Often, they serve as the set of the Lianhua Studio for their productions in the 1930s diegesis. Examples include the modern apartment building in the scene when the diegetic crew is filming *City Night* (Figure 6) and the background of the river and dock when they are filming *Three Modern Women* (Figure 7).¹⁹ At other times, Kwan uses the painted backdrop as set of 1930s Shanghai for the 1990 Hong Kong crew. For example, the bathhouse scene begins with a glimpse of painted Shanghai buildings as a backdrop through the window before moving to the male nude bodies (Figure 8). In these cases, Kwan uses the backdrops to deliberately reveal the painterly nature of the background.

However, there are times when the backdrops are adopted for dubious purposes. For example, as Ruan and Bu Wancang discuss her suitability for the role of a working woman, the scene is filmed with them talking on the balcony against painted urban buildings (Figure 9). The composition of the frame as well as the distance and ratio between the two characters and the background make those painted buildings a seemingly realistic urban setting.²⁰ Meanwhile, the fact that the fates of the three are closely tied to the turbulent urban sphere also makes viewers wonder whether the painted urban buildings, in addition to being the Lianhua sets, are also meant to be simultaneously viewed as the 1930 Shanghai urban space for the reconstruction narrative. Another example is when Cheung as Ruan and Cai Chusheng discuss the cultural significance of the “squatting” gesture (Figure 10). Cai severely criticizes this gesture as a feudal remnant which reveals the backwardness of Chinese people. Their talk is conducted in front of an elaborate set featuring a gigantic painting of signature symbols of 1930s Shanghai—urban edifices, the Suzhou River, and the Wai Baidu Bridge. Once again, the composition of the frame makes it look like Cai Chusheng is squatting on the bank of the Suzhou River, lost in contemplation next to the running torrent—a long-established metaphor of time in Chinese literature.

In fact, the urban scene of 1930s Shanghai throughout *Center Stage* is almost exclusively presented in the form of painted boards. If local shooting in Shanghai

¹⁸ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the remaking process is conducted with an elaborate set featuring a gigantic painted board of urban Shanghai as the background. With the real city displaced, the leftist ideas of class oppression and struggle generated out of the social reality are undermined.

²⁰ Hjort argues from the perspective of color and states that the grey-tone paintings provide a striking backdrop for their exchange (66).

was out of the question due to the rapid change of the urban view over decades, then building a realistic set was also a possible option. Yet, it seems like Kwan does not bother to go in that direction either. Instead, the art direction in *Center Stage* seems to suggest that the painted boards could well serve the purpose of depicting the metropolitan city. *Center Stage* was made at a time when nostalgia was a prominent social phenomenon in Hong Kong society. Various forms of filmmaking, fashion, and popular music initiated a significant nostalgic trend that spoke to the contemporary social cultural identity of Hong Kong.²¹ Kwan's nostalgic filmmaking journey began in 1987 with *Yanzhi kou (Rouge)*, in which he juxtaposes 1930s and 1980s Hong Kong. The 1930s diegesis in *Rouge* is embellished in golden color, conveying a distinct sense of nostalgia. *Center Stage* adopts a similar practice in which the "1930s" is filmed in color while the "1990s" is in black and white, suggesting that the past is more colorful and desirable (Stringer 34). As Fredric Jameson has claimed, nostalgic cinema is one of the dominant forms of postmodern culture. It reconstructs the past in a stylized or allegorical form. Kwan claims that his generation's memory of Shanghai is mediated by the 1930s films that they watched (Hjort 64). Therefore, the practice of creating 1930s Shanghai with stylized snapshot-like boards not only speaks to the eternal unattainability of the past—a distinct nostalgic sentiment, but also creates a 1930s Shanghai that is more "real" and attractive to Kwan than any possible set or even the reality itself—a city created out of the memory. However, this "past" created through the simulacrum has no historical depth. Therefore, as Kwan salutes the practice of using painted backgrounds and substitutes the use of local shooting or realistic sets with the impressionistic painting, the "concreteness" of history is displaced by "thin" paperboard, and the historical 1930s Shanghai disappears in *Center Stage*.

Given this potential for displacement, the scene where the Lianhua crew discusses with Li Minwei the possibility of joining the students' protest against the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the September 18 Incident in front of a gigantic cardboard backdrop is quite provocative. The cardboard backdrop depicts in a highly stylized fashion the cosmopolitan skyline of Shanghai (Figure 11).

The sequences begin with a close-up of the fireworks on the painted board, and then turn into medium shot of the Lianhua crew playing basketball in front of it. The fireworks and high-rises in the painting are similar to the interior wall-painting

²¹ Considerable scholarship has been developed on the nostalgic trends on various artistic fronts in 1990s Hong Kong. This paper benefits significantly from Chan Natalia Sui Hung's "Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and its Social Practice"; Yingjin Zhang's "Between Hong Kong and Shanghai: Nostalgia, Cinema, and Cultural Imaginaries" (in Chinese); and Blanche Chu's "The Ambivalence of History: Nostalgia Films Understood in the Post-Colonial Context."

in a bourgeoisie dancing hall appearing later in the narrative; both create an atmosphere of flamboyance and decadence. One of the onlookers is cheering for the players in English, saying, "Shoot! Shoot!", underscoring the international element in the scene. Against this background, the speech by Nie Er, a left-wing activist who later came to be known as the father of the PRC's national anthem, on national crisis and salvation movement is satirized. The image of Shanghai as a flamboyant metropolitan city eclipses what is "beyond the neon light," which makes all the leftist gestures, especially the anti-imperialist one in this case, ungrounded. This scene design in *Center Stage* represents the semi-colonial aspect of 1930s Shanghai and speaks to the relationship between these two metropolitan cities as well as Hong Kong's subjectivity (Hjort 18).

Just as Kwan uses the diegetic Cai Chusheng to explain the strategy of creating a parallel between Ruan's on-screen persona and off-screen life, the relationship between Shanghai and Hong Kong is also hinted at through an anecdote when Ruan flees to Hong Kong during the Japanese bombing of Shanghai. In a scene when Ruan and Tang Jishan are in a hotel room with the other middle-class refugees from Shanghai, they hear people around them complaining how small Hong Kong is and how "the roads of the Queen cannot compare with the roads in Shanghai." Those people also claim that "as the *fengshui* (luck) rotates, while Shanghai is being bombed Hong Kong starts to thrive." Li Minwei and Luo Mingyou, also in Hong Kong, are concerned that "if the Japanese continue to bomb, Lianhua will have to be moved to Hong Kong." Here the complex relationship between Shanghai and Hong Kong is explicitly expressed. As the prominent metropolitan cities in the geo-political map of modern China, Shanghai and Hong Kong remain pertinent to the understanding of each other's subjectivity. Leo Ou-fan Lee analogizes the relationship between Shanghai and Hong Kong as "a tale of two cities," and argues that understanding of one cannot be completed without resorting to its Other (326-41). The influx of mainland immigrants (especially merchants and intellectuals) during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese civil war, he argues, made Hong Kong experience a "Shanghainization" process (Lee 330). Meanwhile, while Hong Kong's economic miracle in the 1960s and 70s bestowed upon the city its modern glamour, Shanghai was conversely paralyzed during this era as a result of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland. Li Minwei's suggestion about moving Lianhua to Hong Kong could almost be read as a reflexive statement on the heritage and influence that the film industry of 1930s Shanghai has had on Hong Kong's film industry. The cultural capital that flocked to Hong Kong from the mainland during several critical times in modern Chinese history contributed

mightily to the rise of Hong Kong.²² Following the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the reclaiming of Hong Kong by the PRC, Hong Kongers faced considerable anxiety over reverting back to sovereign control by mainland China and its communist system. Meanwhile, the revival of Shanghai since the 1990s has once again altered the balance between the two cities. Produced in the wake of the Tian'anmen Square Incident (1989), the anxiety of being colonized by a communist regime became all the more intense in *Center Stage* (Hjort 4; Lin 191; Stein 224; Zhang, "The 'Shanghai Factor'" 153). In this light, how *Center Stage* deals with (pro-) left ideology from the "progressive" films starring Ruan after she joined Lianhua Studio also demonstrates how Hong Kong confronts—or fails to confront—its anxiety. Kristine Harris points out that on a psychic level, "the splendor and fear of 1930s semicolonial Shanghai on the eve of war matched the sense of fin-de-siecle uncertainty" of 1990 Hong Kong (298). Therefore, the Shanghai represented in *Center Stage* is deliberately selective. Except for a couple of instances where the characters are outside of rooms or buildings, almost all of the scenes in *Center Stage* take place indoors (Lee 337). The characters are active in ballrooms, coffee shops, film studios or hotel rooms—spaces with the characteristics that are homogeneous (hence, non-threatening) to Hong Kong. In contrast to the richness of the glittering indoor façade is the "flatness" and "thinness" of the paperboard city. The employment of paperboard views of 1930s Shanghai displaces the historicity of city with an "unbearable lightness" to "resist the unifying tendencies of Communist ideology" (Stringer 32).

Conclusion

Center Stage was produced and released during the traumatic period of Hong Kong's return to mainland China. As Zhang Zhen observes, "The interpretation of these two spaces [Shanghai and Hong Kong] and temporalities calls for a historical examination of their distinctive yet related film traditions" (147). In this article, I demonstrate how the film's fundamental reconstruction of the life experiences of Ruan Lingyu is intertwined with deliberate remembrance and selective representation of Shanghai that, in turn, testifies to Hong Kong's own subjectivity. This representational erasure is conducted on two related fronts. On one hand, *Center Stage* deftly recycles the archival 1930s films where Ruan resonates the fate

²² Leo Ou-fan Lee's epilogue in *Shanghai Modern* and Zhang Zhen's "The 'Shanghai Factor' in Hong Kong" offer detailed study on the unique similarity between Shanghai and Hong Kong in terms of urban history and examines their distinctive yet related film traditions.

of the female characters on different levels to reconstruct the missing star. In the name of reconstructing *her* life, an arbitrary parallel is formed between the fate of the female characters and that of Ruan. The clips are taken out of context and the leftist messages of the earlier films are displaced, erased or satirized. On the other hand, the erasure on the discursive level is mixed with nostalgia and anxiety over old Shanghai. The only actual on-site filming of Shanghai appearing in the film is of the Lianhua Studio, shown at the end of the film. The ruins of the golden past feed the nostalgic sentiment without posing any threat to it. Reading *Center Stage* as an “anti-nationalist” political allegory, Lin Wenqi argues that the “heteroglossia” in the filmic text “counter-acts the monolithic nationalist discourse that has been controlling China since the 1930s and was preying on Hong Kong” (Lin 195-96). Therefore, the disappearance of politics in *Center Stage*, instead of leaving behind an innocent text, speaks to the most political aspect of the film. In this sense, the representational collage that converge the two eras and spaces in *Center Stage* is also a representational erasure. With this representational hegemony of 1930s Shanghai, Kwan tackles the apocalyptic anxiety of Hong Kong society in the 1980s and 90s and demonstrates the cultural politics that are at work then and now in these two cities.

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