

Film, Modernity, and Nationalism in Republican China: a critical perspective

by

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The Republican Era, 1911- 1949 was time when the Chinese tried to redefine China as a “modern” nation. The Nanjing Decade, from 1925- 1936, was a time of political, social, and cultural uncertainty. This paper better explains developing ideas of nationalism and modernity through the critical perspective of four Chinese films created between 1925- 1936.

for my grandmother, Edith Earle Clark

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I. Introduction

The focus of this paper is Chinese film from 1925 until 1936. This period, also known as the Nanjing Decade (when the Nationalist government was in power), was a time of political, economic, and cultural instability for China. While the Guomindang government (GMD) struggled to maintain political control, the country tried to strengthen its image in the international setting by improving its domestic policies. Students, workers, and intellectuals, as well as the GMD debated how to implement reforms to modernize China. The four films I analyze are all films of contemporary change; they are predominately critical comments on changing modernity in China. Each film addresses three important aspects of contemporary change: the role of women, both as victim and as villain, the role of the family, and the role of the urban and rural divide within China. An analysis of these three aspects of change will give historians better insight to the Nanjing Decade's modern reforms.

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid, often confusing, political change. Despite the dramatic change in the nature of the Chinese government, from imperial bureaucracy to republic, there was no coherent and self-sufficient government in China until the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Although the Nationalist government did succeed in forming a unified government in 1926, it had to accept the existence of warlords, (local strongmen who often ruled large territories backed by their own armies) who still ran much of the countryside.

The Nanjing Decade was a time when the Chinese tried to redefine China as a "modern" nation. In order to create a "modern" China, Chinese had to re-think the

traditional roles of women, the structure of the family (based on the Confucian idea of filial piety), and the relationship between the countryside and the city. Often Western ideas were the basis of social, political, and economic reforms.

Nationalism and the idea of modernity were potent at this time because the Chinese people were trying to re-define themselves as a country while they were struggling to develop a new and strong government. The continued threats of Western and Japanese imperialism pushed the Chinese to want to “modernize” China; powerful nationalist sentiment motivated the Chinese towards modernity. But this modernity was also based on the *appearance* of modernity. There was a widespread belief that if China was a “modern” nation politically, economically, and socially, then the Chinese could defeat the threat from imperialists. The Confucian traditions of the past were challenged from a variety of perspectives. The balance between maintaining a Chinese identity and developing a “modern” identity was difficult and a key part of nationalist modernity reform debates.

The films discussed in this paper reveal many of the tensions and uncertainties of the Nanjing Decade and some films, like *Pearl Necklace*, clearly praise modernity in some scenes, but all of the films challenge the real social changes modernity. Often the contemporary ideas of modernity meant a challenge to the traditional roles of the subordination of women, the centrality of family, and the primacy of the countryside.

II. Historical Context

The Republican period was a time of social, political, economic, and cultural uncertainty in China. Under the turbulent conditions of the Republican period, the GMD found it difficult to develop stability that would allow effective governing of China. The GMD, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, emphasized economic reforms modeled after the West. However, the GMD was constantly facing domestic challenges to its power. During this time, Shanghai was under an economic boom in the 1920s and 1930s; most of China was extremely poor; the resulting economic gap undermined the unity of China. Culturally, too, Chinese students and intellectuals struggled to redefine Chinese culture as “modern” because there was no unified agreement as to how to reform China. Some reform movements urged abandonment of traditional Confucian ideals, like filial piety and the authoritarian family, others emphasized the liberation of women, while still others, like the GMD, urged a synthesis of Confucian values and modernity reforms. Reformers, students, intellectuals, and the GMD often borrowed from the West that which they believed would empower the Chinese. At the same time, they hoped to preserve the distinctly Chinese ideas that would help strengthen China.

Political Problems

During the Nanjing Decade, China faced internal division as well as external attack. Contesting political parties and warlords undermined the efforts of Chiang Kai-shek to establish a strong central government, even though the GMD’s claim to power as the government of China was the strongest. Chinese citizens still felt the

threat from imperialists, both from the Japanese, who later did invade China, and from the Western powers, who maintained a presence in the treaty ports.

By 1928, the GMD was under the control of Chiang Kai-shek, with its government base in Nanjing, where Chiang established training schools for his military. The government in Nanjing developed military politics and Western styled economic reforms. Throughout this time, Chinese nationalism was on the rise. Nationalist sentiment continued to grow with the increasing aggression of the Japanese and the continued presence of foreigners. The May Fourth Movement, which arose from protests against the Chinese concessions at Versailles on May 4, 1919, was an example of nationalist reaction to imperialism. Although May Fourth is the most famous nationalist demonstration, nationalist movements by no means disappeared after 1919.

The Economic Divide

The political disunity and uncertainty of the Nanjing Decade was reflected in the government's economic policies. As mentioned earlier, the GMD embraced Western style economic reforms to modernize China's economy. Chiang's ideas of modernity were based on urban, industrial economic reforms. As a result of Chiang's policies, the economic differences between the cities and the countryside increased dramatically.

Whereas the cities benefited from the presence of foreigners and the foreigners' construction- Shanghai, for example, developed into an economic center of East Asia- the countryside lacked modern developments, demonstrating the limited

effects of Chiang's economic policy. The countryside had no new hospitals and electricity; the countryside's universities did not have the sports fields and laboratories which city universities developed. Railroads, streets, and transportation all flourished in the cities. Cinemas and radios could be found in Chinese cities, but not in the countryside. James Sheridan wrote of the stark contrast between urban and rural China:

Under Chiang's government, there were two China's: one was the modern, semi-Westernized cities of the eastern coastal provinces, inhibited by an urban elite of Westernized intellectuals, businessmen, merchants, professionals, and officials who had little contact with life in the countryside; the other was rural China, unchanged in its poverty, ignorance, and hardships, the helpless prey of local officials, warlords, and the conservative local gentry.¹

Sheridan's quote makes clear the disparity between urban and rural China, and I will later return to this theme as one of the major ironies of modernization.

Even though the GMD economically favored the cities, the GMD was unable to retain the support of the city-dwellers. Chiang required enormous amounts of capital to support his military. Parks Coble wrote of Chiang's military spending,

During the first five months of 1928, ... T.V. Soong operated without a budget. Chiang simply required him to raise 1.6 million yuan every five days for military purposes. Under these chaotic conditions, Chiang and Soong continued to float millions in loans and purchases.²

Chiang's economic policy was ultimately a failure for two reasons. First, Chiang allowed the gap between the urban and rural inhabitants to drift too far apart,

¹ Sheridan, James E., China in Disintegration; The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912- 1949 (The Free Press, 1975), 23.

² Coble, Parks. The Shanghai Capitalists and the Nationalist Government, 1927-1937 (HarvardUP, 1980), 44.

effectively creating two Chinas and secondly, Chiang taxed his urban support until they too, did not support Chiang's economic policies.

Cultural Confusions

Indeed, the GMD had an ambivalent attitude towards reform; their economic reforms were “modern” whereas their cultural reforms called for more traditional policies. At the same time as Chiang’s conservative ideas of cultural reform flourished, a popular view arose that if China wanted to develop a “modern” appearance then the Chinese would have to allow women greater freedoms, liberate the individual from the family (which was a common theme in literature), and develop an urban consciousness.

An important aspect of the cultural unrest was the New Culture movement that responded to the perceived limitations of Confucianism. The popular New Culture newspaper, *New Youth* (founded in 1915), challenged Confucian traditionalism with what came to be known as “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science”, two ideas that directly attacked the authority of Confucian thought. The New Culture Movement focused on a reformed central government for China, but cultural and social reforms developed independently from the government. The New Culture Movement reformers often followed Western models for reform and tended to radically change Chinese traditions. It was during the New Culture Movement that the ideas for women's liberation, family reforms, and the focus on the disparity between urban and rural China were promoted by leading intellectuals.

In response to the liberal reforms upheld in the New Culture Movement- liberation of the family, equality for women, Western education, democracy, and rights for workers- Chiang began his conservative New Life Movement in 1934, which was meant to offer a conservative response to the radical reforms and provide an alternative model for reform. The New Life Movement was a system for organizing society that complemented Chiang's military lifestyle and reflected the Confucian idea of disciplining the nation by disciplining the self that Chiang advocated. Robert Payne describes those who joined:

The New Life Movement attracted youths dedicated to cleanliness and virtue; it also attracted youths who were anxious for promotion in the ranks of government. The physical manifestations of the movement were the toothbrush, the tight buttoned collar, the slightly glazed eyes of the youth waiting for an order to obey.³

This type of obsession for cleanliness can be seen in *Song of China* when the grandmother inspects her orphans while they wash themselves at the sink. She inspects the boys for cleanliness and watches over them to insure their hands are properly scrubbed. The obsession with cleanliness was a typical aspect of the New Life Movement because cleanliness is good, orderly, and part of the *appearance*. The idea followed that clean people are more organized, responsible and will help create a stronger, better looking China.

Robert Payne quotes an anecdote from Chiang's official biographer to show that Chiang really saw his New Life Movement as part of China's modernity. Chiang was giving a speech and wanted a photographer to take many pictures of Chiang, but

³ Payne, Robert, Chiang Kai-shek (Weybright and Talley), 164.

the photographer was poorly dressed, a fact that offended Chiang: “ ‘Observe’ said the Generalissimo, ‘that he has a modern machine in his hand, but otherwise there is nothing modern about him- he belongs to the old decadent China, that has no place in the new China.’”⁴ The marching and the obsession for cleanliness were Chiang's ideas of modernity for China and Payne's quote and the hand-washing scene in *Song of China* illustrate the limited sense of Chiang's modernity.

The New Life Movement focused on discipline and China's global image, reiterating the importance of the image of modernity. The New Life Movement “implored Chinese peasants to ‘correct their posture,’ avoid spitting on floors, pursue ‘right conduct’ and, most important, respect existing government and social authority.”⁵ Chiang hoped the New Life Movement would provide reform and structure for people to follow while supporting his regime.

All of the various reform efforts, the New Culture Movement, the May Fourth Movement, and the New Life Movement, were responses to how China would look to others; the movements were part of the image of modernity. The end goal was to make China a stronger nation. While many reformers advocated the liberation of women, the restructuring of the family, and a turn to a more modern urban ethic, these films show the directors' reactions to these liberal reform efforts and the perceived threat and consequences of too-liberal reforms.

⁴ Payne, 164.

⁵ Schaller, Michael, The United States and China in the Twentieth Century (OxfordUP, 1990), 45.

III. Nationalism and Modernity

Nationalism was the largest motivation for the development of Chinese modernity. The Chinese perceived China as weak and felt threatened by foreigners and wanted to change this perception. Leading intellectuals, student groups, and the GMD efforts to reform China and make China more "modern" were in part the result of increased nationalist sentiment. The four films under discussion here reveal, to varying degrees, Chinese nationalist pride in certain emblems of modernity: police, factories, and Western style living.

One example of the Chinese efforts at strengthening their nation through efforts of nationalism was the Shanghai police force. The Chinese in Shanghai wanted to reassert their claims to the city mirroring efforts to reclaim China. The police force was one of the targets for Chinese to regain control of their city. As Frederic Wakeman pointed out,

The Shanghai Public Security Bureau's *raison d'être* was the reassertion of Chinese Sovereignty over the treaty port. The new Chinese police were not only going to demonstrate that they could impose law and order in order to justify their reclamation of sovereign rights in the city; they were also going to pursue vigorously and aggressively every opportunity they could to supplant the jurisdiction of the International Settlement and French Concession police with their own *jingquan* (police sovereignty).⁶

The efforts by the police to reassert Chinese strength and capabilities as a *Chinese* police force echoed the rest of China's search for identity in the face of the foreign presence. The economic presence of foreigners helped develop the cities and

infrastructure, but the Chinese were losing control of their cities because of foreign extraterritoriality policies. In *Pearl Necklace*, there are numerous images of the police force stepping in to help apprehend a thief, a sign of Chinese capabilities to conduct their own affairs. Police identity came not only from being a police officer but being a police officer who was trying to supplant the international communities' police forces and regain control of China's rights as a sovereign nation.

One scene in *Pearl Necklace* incorporates both modernity and nationalism and shows the entwined ideas of nationalism and modernity. Inside Mar Yue Loon's cotton mill the camera takes a panoramic shot of the cotton machines. These images of China's potential for production evoke a sense of pride that China has the capabilities to produce machines that Chinese have seen in the West. At the same time, this shot highlights China's industrial production capabilities and potential. The shots from the inside of the cotton mill reinforce ideas of nationalism by allowing the Chinese a feeling of pride in technical abilities. At the same time, Chinese modernity is shown off in its industrial capabilities, exemplifying nationalism and modernity in film. This scene is important because the *appearance* of modernity was very important to Chinese nationalism. If China was not entirely modern, China at least had to *appear* modern to the rest of the world.

One final scene worth understanding is at the original birthday party Sui Ch'ing attended. Here Mar Yue Loon, boyfriend to Foo Mei-Sian, and later instigator to the pearl necklace theft, is introduced. Mei-Sian and Yue Loon share a scene where they eat a noodle; Mei-Sian begins at one end with Yue Loon at the other end

⁶ Wakemen, Frederic E., Policing Shanghai, 1927- 1937 (CaliforniaUP, 1995), 60.

and they eat the noodle until they have joined lips at the center of the noodle. Their silliness exemplifies the indulgence of the rich; they have time to play fun senseless games with food because they can afford to. The “modern” son and the daughter-in-law in *Song of China* also enjoy frivolous food games. The irony of their food games is that many people in China were starving and these “modern” city people could afford to play games with food, yet another critique of the city.

Understanding modernity is admittedly a difficult task. While watching Chinese films for the first time, one may be struck by the “Western” appearance of the films with so many “Western” props in the films, such as clocks, typewriters, fireplaces, wallpaper, and carpeting. Although these objects may appear to be only props for a movie, their meaning is much deeper. One can observe in these Western props the depths of the Chinese adaptation of modernity. Although these items (the clock, the typewriter, the wallpaper, and the thick carpeting) were props in the film, they also were actual representations of wealthy “modern” Chinese daily lives. The Chinese clearly developed their sense of modernity by adapting Western ideas because the West was the role model for modernity. The props in the films were not used to illustrate Chinese modernity; they *were* Chinese modernity because the wealthy, urban Chinese had adapted these symbols (clocks, wallpaper, etc.) as part of their daily lives.

Although these films indicate pride in the emblems of modernity, they do call into question the social effects of modernity. The Chinese borrowed images and reforms from the West but the Western ideas could not replace the basic values and social ideals of the Chinese.

As this scene demonstrates, nationalism and modernity were intimately linked for the Chinese. Many of the ideas of modernity were western inspired and did not have a role in traditional Chinese society: the development of mass produced machines (cotton mills) displaced the traditional method for a new modern method of production. At the same time the modern social reform efforts displaced the traditional roles for men, women, family, urban and rural China. While reforms and government restructuring all had good intentions, Chinese society was drastically redefining itself in a new world.

IV. Chinese Film in the Nanjing Decade

Western influence characterized the film industry and the films that were Chinese made. Thus these films, like those used in this paper, hold historical value for the history of Chinese modernity because they critique the domestic movements within China. The series of censorship laws that the GMD passed were a nationalist move to help protect Chinese identity. By studying Chinese film, historians can gain another perspective into the Nanjing Decade, and a perspective that critiques many contemporary social and political movements. Perry Link has described fiction as an “access” into the minds of the reader.⁷ I propose that film, too, provides an “access” to the producers and the cultural atmosphere from 1925- 1935.

⁷ Perry Link discusses the access in terms of the “Butterfly” fiction that was the predecessor to the May Fourth era writing style. I have adapted his idea of access and expanded it into the realm of film. See Link, Perry. Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth- Century Cities. (Berkeley; UP, 1981), 1-15.

I am using the 1925 film *Pearl Necklace* directed by Li Zeyuan, the 1931 film *Peach Girl* directed by Bu Wancang, the 1934 film *The Plunder of Peach and Plum* directed by Ying Yunwei, and the 1935 film *Song of China* directed by Luo Mingyou. All of the films were directed and acted by Chinese people and made in China. Considering the fact that only 50 Chinese films were produced in 1929,⁸ a Chinese produced film was a rare thing. *Song of China* is a GMD propaganda film but it, like the other three films, reacts to contemporary politics and social reforms. This paper only incorporates one talkie film; the others are dependent on screencards⁹ to inform the reader of the dialogue.¹⁰

The film industry was heavily influenced by the west. The first film was shown in Shanghai in 1896 at a teahouse and in Beijing in 1902.¹¹ Since the 1896 screening until the 1980s, Shanghai was the film capital of China. Shanghai was also the largest treaty port and filled with Westerners. In fact, film "audiences were confined to segments of society inhabiting the most Westernized parts of China, notably Shanghai and the other treaty ports."¹² However, the Western influence went beyond the city of Shanghai.

⁸ Clark, Paul, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*, (CambridgeUP, 1987), 7. (from, Way, E.T., "Motion Pictures in China," U.S. Department of Commerce. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. *Trade Information Bulletin*, No. 722. 1930.)

⁹ A screencard shows in writing the words spoken on screen. Screencards are similar to subtitles but the screencards in these films are in both Chinese and English and always produced at the time of the film, not after production like subtitles.

¹⁰ Of all of the films that I watched that used screencards (*Pearl Necklace* and *Peach Girl*, and *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*) each film flashed the screen card in both Chinese and English. The use of both Chinese and English languages proves the directors expected foreigners to watch these films.

¹¹ Clark, 6.

¹² Clark, 5.

In 1929, 90% of the films shown in Shanghai were American made.¹³ Most of the films shown in China were imported, and the film companies hired foreign nationals because of their necessary technical expertise.¹⁴ While the most important aspect of the film industry was its Western influence, the films studied in this paper are not Western films but domestically produced films from China. These films are able to critique society from a Chinese viewpoint and offer Chinese perspectives from the 1920s and 1930s.

The Western influence changed as nationalist sentiment grew. Reacting to the Western role in Chinese film production, the GMD established strict censorship laws responding in 1928 to pressure from the public as well as the film industry. The Guomindang passed a series of laws that prohibited movie houses from showing films offensive to the Chinese people or hurting the Chinese dignity.¹⁵ Usually these were American-made films with American stereotypes of Chinese as characters. Although the Guomindang was trying to respond to public demands, the government was also a heavy censor of films. Some of the laws the Guomindang passed regarding film censorship included, the requirement that foreign films get a license (to be renewed every three years), that no films that encourage superstition or “feudal practices”- ideas that conflict with modernity images, and that no undermine to morality or to the public peace.¹⁶

¹³ Leyda, Jay, Dianying, An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China (Massachusetts Institute of TechnologyUP, 1972), 64.

¹⁴ Clark, 7.

¹⁵ Xiao, 37. See his footnote. “Neizheng bu gongbu dianying pian jiancha guize”[The Ministry of Interior announced regulation regarding film censorship], *Shen bao*, September 6, 1928.

¹⁶ Leyda, 60.

The content of the imported films tended to portray the Chinese people as “opium smokers, gamblers, servants, and thieves.”¹⁷ The Chinese were angry at the Americans’ use of stereotyped Chinese people so, Western films were censored. The censorship laws also represented a nationalistic move to help China regain control of its domestic film industry but also provided strict government censorship laws for domestically produced films.

The time of these films' production was marked by political, economic, and cultural turmoil. In trying to stabilize China and make China look stronger, Chinese nationalism grew in an attempt to redefine China's identity. The focus on nationalism gave rise to Chinese people focusing on developing "modern" China. The films studied in this paper are all Chinese made which was a rarity from a film industry characterized by Western influence. A closer look at the films’ content reveals the conflicting views of nationalism and modernity critiqued in the films.

Part II.

I. Introduction

I will look at what images or scenarios directors used in their films. The images of women, family, and society all contribute to how China constructed its own identity. Here, looking at 1) women as both victim and villain, 2) the family, and 3) the divide between urban and rural China, I want to show that these directors did have ideas of nationalism and modernity and used these ideas to critique modernity efforts.

¹⁷ Sheridan, James E., China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912- 1949 (The

II. Women in Film: Victim or Villain?

Victims in Film

Gail Hershat, in her work Dangerous Pleasures, addresses the idea of nationalism in terms of women. She discusses reformers' beliefs that the status of women in society was linked to national strength. Many of the reformers "found the position of China's women, as indicated by everything from Confucian aphorisms to foot-binding and illiteracy, to be crucial indicator of China's weakness."¹⁸ That women as a group could be an indicator of China's weakness meant that as a group, they needed to be reformed. Women were included in discussions about nationalism for two reasons. First, the early reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao had included woman in their earlier discussions of strengthening China, so there was an historical precedent. Secondly, women were a huge factor in the labor force and involved in many reformers' plans for the future. Both of these reasons for women's reform were for the betterment of China, *not* for the improvement of women's conditions per se. In the films, the directors express their reservations about women's reform.

The films make a clear social commentary through their repeated theme of killing off women. The women are seen as helpless once they leave the protection of their families and husbands. No matter how virtuous a woman may be, she is still a victim of the "modern" social reforms.

Free Press, 1975), 23.

¹⁸ Hershat, Gail, Dangerous Pleasures, Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth Century Shanghai

In the film *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, for example, Li Lilin (Plum) is the victim of sexual attacks from her boss, of crushed hopes, and of her husband's boss' selfishness. Li Lilin is the young wife married to Tao Jianping (Peach) in *Plunder of Peach and Plum*. They begin their marriage as a happy couple who were childhood sweethearts. However, their happy family falls into trouble after Jianping quits his job. Lilin takes a job as a secretary to support the family. After a few weeks her boss lies to her and requests that she attend a fraudulent business meeting so she can take notes. Once she arrives at the alleged dinner meeting, her boss hits on her and tries to kiss her. Here, Lilin is victim of her boss' affection and lust. She has little escape but to flee the restaurant. This scene shows that even though the boss was a jerk, city men can not control themselves in the presence of women in the workplace and if women like Lilin remain workers, then it is more likely women will be shamed by their bosses.

After her husband quits his second job, Lilin encourages him saying, "You're still young, ambitious, and work hard" while supporting him emotionally in his search for work. She is the hope in their relationship and it is she who finds work as a secretary while he is unemployed. Lilin soon realizes she is pregnant and she and Jianping are happy. For a moment, the viewer is lead to believe that the young couple will triumph over the new society plagued with immoral people and no jobs, but their tragedy deepens.

Women are also victims to the contemporary economic reforms; the death of Lilin perceivably could have been avoided if Jianping's boss was not a corrupt

capitalist. *Plunder of Peach and Plum* portrays 1934 as a time when men seek only to serve themselves and make a dollar at any expense. The bosses for whom Jianping works make hasty business choices in order to make a little extra money. However, when Jianping pleads with his boss for an advance on his paycheck in order to pay for a doctor to visit his wife, his requests are firmly denied and he is told advances on paychecks, “are against the rules.” Bending the rules to benefit a worker (and possibly save a life) is not permitted but the company easily bends the rules (overloading a ship) to make themselves more money. Lilin is the ultimate victim of the boss' selfishness and narrow focus on money.

Her last scene is at her deathbed, where the doctor says that if he had only been called sooner he might have been able to help her. The critique here is that the capitalist focus on money in the new modern society destroys people's sense of right and wrong – and that woman will inevitably end up victims in this harsh and immoral new world. Lilin's death illustrates the severe consequences of selfish-minded urban businessmen.

Here the circumstances force Jianping to face his problems without friends or family. It is the first example of the critique of how the new economy and political structure is capable of destroying a family. This desperate situation is passed on after Lilin's death to her child. Jianping leaves the child at a "Baby Reception Box" (a receptacle for unwanted children) in the pouring rain, an ominous sign for the child's future.

The film *Peach Girl* also portrays a woman as a victim, and shares similarities with *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*. Miss Lim dies as part of a critique of the

problems within China. Miss Lim's lover, King Teh'en is a city man and also her landlord. Like Jianping and Lilin, Miss Lim and King met as young children and fell in love. In contrast to Jianping and Lilin's early days of happiness, there was little time for happiness for King and Lim. From the days of their childhood the two are lovers; Lim and King are seen as children forming their romance at an early age. The screencard flashes on the screen, "class distinction does not exist among children" so King and Lim's romance is understood. However, as they grow older Lim is deceived both by society and by King.

In the city King's and Lim's lives fall apart when Mrs. King discovers the two are lovers and she sends Lim back to the countryside. King reassures Lim that he has approved the new situation with his mother and keeps Lim in a secret apartment. However, their parents discover King and Lim. After the two lovers are torn away from each other, literally, Lim screams to King, "You deceived me!" Lim's outburst allows women to scream in protest at their treatment. Lim was deceived by the opportunities and modernity of the city; Lim came to the city and became a concubine. The viewer wonders if she is talking only to King or to the society in general. The film critiques the contemporary society in which Lim lives, on one hand it purportedly promotes women's liberation and the urbanization of society, but it is after she leaves the countryside that Lim falls victim to tragedies and shame. The "modernity" of the city and the family and moral code weakened by reform efforts destroyed Lim because Lim was incapable of surviving without the traditional protection of her family and father.

Miss Lim and King are lovers, but are victims of class distinction; they have to break up and can not be lovers because of their class backgrounds. Here is an example of the old traditions the New Culture Movement sought to change; the New Culture Movement called for an abandonment of past filial traditions. Mrs. King delivers the final blow to the young lovers' separation by her direct reproach to King saying that Miss Lim is "socially unsuitable." Mrs. King, and most of China, must adhere to a strict measure of class separation to which Lim falls victim; Lim and King are separated by an old social code that dictates what is socially acceptable.

Mrs. King represents the Confucian ideal of a wife. The viewer sees Mrs. King call on the picture of her dead husband for strength and guidance. Ideas of filial piety and of the wife serving the husband, also subjects of *Song of China*, are alluded to in this scene. Mrs. King is a victim here, too, because she has been taught to follow rules that entail her subordination to men and the family, but now economic and social changes had undermined the authority of the family. Mrs. King is caught between past Confucian obligations, losing her son and struggles to fulfill her role as mother.

Like Lilin, Lim falls ill upon her return to the countryside. Moreover, like Lilin, Lim does not receive medical attention in time and dies. King rushes from the city to be by Lim's side and manages to see her before she dies. Again, for a moment the film leads the viewer to believe that the lovers will be reunited, but that hope is destroyed and Lim dies and her son is left without a mother. The city played an important role in Lim's death. Once she left the countryside, the city sapped her life from her and left her broken, betrayed, and lonely. Although she tried to survive in

the city, she couldn't; the conclusion is even if women tried to survive outside of the county, the city would corrupt and ruin them.

Villains in Film

In the world of victims, women are also villains, bringing shame and misfortune to their families. There are two clearly defined roles for women, victim or villain. Women are the victims because they are too weak to survive in the new "modern" society. If they leave the countryside, as Lim did, or try to work to support their family, as Lilin did, the pressures of Western influenced modernity will destroy them. Sui Ch'ing, from *Pearl Necklace*, is a weak character who was able to reform because she saw her faults, but the daughter-in-law in *Song of China*, threatens the family stability. So while it may appear that women have two identities, either as victim or villain, all four of the films promote a traditional identity for women. All of the films advocate specific ideas and themes through their critique of women in "modern" China.

In *Pearl Necklace* the family's troubles stem from a borrowed, then stolen, pearl necklace. Sui Ch'ing, wife to Wang Yu Song, is a "villain" because she attends the party, asks for the necklace, and is vain, a common flaw of women. One major theme in the *Pearl Necklace* is this urban woman's vanity, which is "the source of trouble in women." The early scene in which Sui Ch'ing, the wife, attends the party and leaves her husband and son at home sets the tone for Sui Ch'ing's shortcomings: she attends the party without her husband and leaves her young child at home. The party she attends is the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), hardly a time to leave

one's husband home alone. Before attending the party, Sui Ch'ing says to Yu Song, "Without good ornament of dress I may be looked down upon by others." Yu Song immediately decides to borrow a necklace for his wife so others will not look down upon her.

The viewer sees the wife's responsibility in the young couple's predicament because after the thief has stolen the necklace, Yu Song quickly says to Sui Ch'ing "Because of your ostentation, you got me in trouble." His blame of his wife removes significant responsibility from him and makes his wife the cause of the problems. Yu Song disregards his own actions in borrowing a necklace in order that his wife could be the token displayer of his wealth and success. That the fall of the family is Sui Ch'ing's fault is emphasized in scenes where Yu Song is in jail, talking to Sui Ch'ing on the telephone: the screencard reads "*Ah, lamentation is heard on the phone. My vanity errs him,*" says Sui Ch'ing, reiterating her responsibility and role in the family's current problem. She reflects "An act of my vanity I have made you a prisoner, now it's too late for me to repent." Women are generally seen as selfish and vain.

In the end the family is saved and Sui Ch'ing learns her lesson. In the hospital Sui Ch'ing remarks to her husband and their friends "All your mistakes are due to my vanity. *Vanity is the source of trouble in women.* No more vanity for me." This implies that women do have the ability to change and stop bringing harm and shame to the home, the family and China. Sui Ch'ing sheds her villainous image because of her willingness to stand by her husband and baby and because she recognizes her deviant wrong doings. The Wang family is saved and Sui Ch'ing, and hopefully the

women of China, have learned the dangers of vanity.

In *Song of China* the woman is very clearly the villain. First, the daughter-in-law disrupts the patrilineage by telling her husband what they will do, reversing the "correct" relationship between husband and wife. The fact that she is an urban daughter-in-law is important because she has a duty to follow and yet she does not follow her husband. Here, the directors make a clear and easy commentary on Republican- era family values; this type of woman is a source of family weakness. The daughter-in-law persuades the son to leave his family and start a new home in the city so that they, as a couple, may have more freedom. The daughter-in-law then fumes when the father-in-law tells her husband they are *all* returning to the country because of the problems in the city. She smashes a cup and storms off, reinforcing the viewer's sense of her poor behavior and lack of respect. Clearly, she is a great source of corruption and disobedience for the son.

Later, the daughter-in-law further destroys a sense of family by encouraging her sister-in-law to leave the countryside and her family, to marry Chang Li, an unsavory urban playboy. The daughter-in-law tells the daughter to conduct the marriage without her parents' consent because "parental consent is a timeworn tradition," a frequently expressed May Fourth idea. Her comments, coming from such an unruly and disobedient woman, are indicative of a person who may not want to adhere to "timeworn" traditions and the problems that arise from disobeying these traditions. This is clearly a GMD attack on the concept of women's liberation from family authority, an attack that associates such an idea with the city. The parents are crushed to discover their daughter leaving them.

The daughter falls victim to the daughter-in-law's advice and brings ruin on herself. The daughter becomes a victim after she and Chang Li move to the city, Chang Li leaves her and the viewer draws the conclusion that the parents could have helped prevent this tragedy. Again, the city has destroyed another virtuous country girl who tried to survive in the city. The mother comes to the rescue of her daughter and takes the grandchild and daughter home to the countryside. The daughter's son is rescued from the fate of Lim's and Lilin's children because the grandparents will raise the child and give him a better future in the country. However, had it not been for the villainous daughter-in-law, the daughter would never have faced such ruin and shame.

Women are largely symbols of reform and usually fall into two groups. First, women are victims to the inevitable corruption and destruction of economic modernity and urban reform such as Lim in *Peach Girl* and Lilin in *Plunder of Peach and Plum*. Secondly, like Sui Ch'ing in *Pearl Necklace* and the daughter-in-law in *Song of China*, the women are, to different degrees, symbols of the problems of Western styled reforms played out socially. The significant threat of modernity was the changes to the social structure as it affected women.

III. Family Critiques

The connection from women to family is easy because women are part of the family and as women's roles changed, so too did the family: many of the critiques of women spill over to critiques of the family. In *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*, the new economy and society place unbearable pressures on Jianping and Lilin. In *Peach Girl* city life destroys the good family from the countryside. In *Pearl Necklace*, set in the city, Yu Song loses his family and friends and can not rely on his family for support and in *Song of China*, the country family is the "good" family.

In *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*, the family falls to pieces because of the changes in the new economy. An early scene shows Lilin and Jianping playing and having fun. The two young lovers return from receiving their diplomas, playing and flirting as they go; they appear happy and carefree. However, once they return home, Jianping's mother (Lilin's aunt), tells them "Stop that. Don't act like a child. Now that you've graduated, you should act like adults." She then proceeds to inform Jianping that he must prepare for a family and begin a career and that Lilin should take over running the family; Jianping's mother hands Lilin the bankbook. Their roles as husband and wife are defined according to traditional roles and the couple is not prepared, presumably like many other young couples, for the challenges they will face in a "modern" society.

Jianping's frustration is fueled by the reversal of the "correct" situation"; here it is Lilin who supports Jianping. Jianping quits two jobs for moral reasons; he does not support the policies of his employers. The changed economy destroys the moral

fabric of the Chinese people. Jianping comes home frustrated with his unemployment and jealous of Lilin's job as a secretary because she is supporting the family and Jianping feels ashamed to be supported by his wife. Here is a critique of the "modern" woman glorified in Western modernity, the woman who can support her husband. She comes home after the alleged dinner with her boss, herself frazzled after the boss tried to seduce her, to an angry Jianping. Jianping yells at Lilin, accusing her of having an affair. He shouts "I'm jobless, I'm useless, I can't earn money" and then he hits her. Shocked by his own actions, he begs for forgiveness. That his situation could come to violence and his frustration could allow him to betray his and Lilin's trust shows how much pressure is brought by his new job pressures and Lilin's ability to support the family.

Once they are married and hardships plague the young couple, Lilin gives birth to a son. Although Jianping cares for his wife and wants to support her during the birth, he is unable to take off the time from work because the boss demands Jianping for the full hours of his shift. Jianping misses the birth and his neighbors scold him for his absence. That the neighbors look down on him, and that the boss would not permit him to leave reflects the two different views of the economy and the role of the family. The neighbors placed their priority with the family, whereas the bosses placed their money and welfare before Jianping's family,

In the family structure in *Peach Girl*, Lim's family works hard in the fields and the father is a man who cares about his daughter. The film shows the mother and father playing with young Lim and taking care of her while they tend the fields. Once Lim moves to the city she changes her dress to show her assimilation, or attempted

assimilation, to city life. Although country life and city life do demand different attire, there is clear distinction in the style and quality of their clothing because of their different urban/ rural habitation. Upon seeing his daughter dressed in a fancy *qipao*, Lim's father immediately orders her to change into appropriate attire, not wanting her to look like the city concubine she has become. The conclusion from Lim's experience is that if she leaves the countryside, she will become a city whore, or morally degraded like Jianping's bosses. This scene indicates that the women's problems are another aspect of the family problems; women are perceived to be more "pure" in the countryside, under the protection of the patriarchal family.

When King sees Lim spinning he thinks to himself, "Such a chaste and beautiful girl can never be found in the city." Here is the first hint that the country has more moral appeal than the city for China despite the push for urbanization. King's remark implies that even the urban women, for all their modernity, are not equal to the women in the countryside. His next comment "a city girl's beauty depends on powder and rouge, but this girl is truly beautiful indeed" furthers his notion of the countrywoman's inherent beauty and pure nature. The countrywoman is the ideal wife. Therefore, despite China's urban growth, the moral ethic of the countryside is still the better option for a wife and for a family.

Pearl Necklace also reiterates the importance of family. One evening Sui Ch'ing attended the birthday party of a friend, Foo Mei-Sian. Yu Song agreed to remain at home and watch the baby for the evening while Sui Ch'ing went to the party. It is for this party that Yu Song borrowed the pearl necklace. Yu Song failed miserably as a babysitter for their son. The baby cried while dad watched him and Yu

Song does not know what to do. A screen card entered the picture and flashed "It is too hard to act as a mother." The screen card implies two things to the viewer, first, that the role of mother is a natural thing for women and secondly, despite the naturalness of motherhood, women should work hard to act as good mothers. The viewer then sees Yu Song fall asleep, drop the child, and leave the child's bottle empty. Although Yu Song is not fit for motherhood, his inability to act as a mother does not reflect poorly on him but alludes to Sui Ch'ing's absence and reflects poorly on her for leaving the child and abandoning her role as mother. The man's responsibility is to provide for the child financially and the woman will raise the family. When Sui Ch'ing returns home it is late and her night arrival supports the conclusion she is a bad mother.

The opening screen card in *Pearl Necklace* reads, "*There is nothing more precious than a sweet home*" immediately informing the viewer that family is important and that family is exactly what is threatened. Nevertheless, Yu Song is on his own; his family has fallen apart; he has lost his home, his job, and his family. However, if Yu Song had been more assertive and been the leader of his family, presumably he could have controlled his wife's vanity. Although Yu Song removed significant blame from himself, he failed to follow the Confucian principals for family structure.

The 1936 film *Song of China* is an example of a GMD propaganda film, which presents a simple-minded story promoting GMD values and polices: filial piety and order. The opening shot is of an old man with the sky behind him; the camera looks up to him having the effect that he is important and proud; the old man also represents

knowledge. The film then jumps to an explanation of what the “Song of China” is. The screen card informs us that filial piety has a 3,000 year history and filial piety is the dominant force in China’s culture and history and is found “in its religion, philosophy, drama, literature, and music, it [filial piety] is truly the Song of China.” The screen card continues by explaining the film is “produced, written, directed, acted, photographed, musically scored in China by Chinese.” This introductory screen card spells out the Guomindang political agenda: to reinforce China’s social tradition and to further nationalist pride.

Much like the opening scene in *Pearl Necklace*, *Song of China* has the young couple (third generation son and wife) attending a party while their baby son stays at home watched by the grandparents. The narrator remarks, “Each night son and daughter-in-law seek revelry forgetting they have a son.” Here is the director’s commentary on how “modern” parents treat their children. They are not dutiful parents and the viewer’s first impression is that the son is selfish and lazy. The young couples represent a threat to the family because of their disregard for responsibility.

From all of the films the family structure is under stress and is in danger of falling apart, whether the danger is from reform or lack of conservative adherence to traditional family roles: the family is clearly under the spotlight. These films critiqued the social structures that changed the traditional roles of the family. This reflects a larger crisis for the nation because the push for modernity, often Western objects and ideals, breaks down the traditional role of the family and, in these films, corrupting social relations as a result.

IV. Urban- Rural Divide

One of the major problems facing China, even today, is the gap between urban and rural China. The gap appears in the areas of economic development, social development, and political development. By watching how the gap is portrayed in the films, historians can develop a better understanding of how the gap between urban and rural China worked. The city, despite its urbanization and modernity, was not perceived as morally strong when compared to the countryside; the city in *Song of China* and *Peach Girl* represented corruption.

Song of China focuses on the urban/ rural split and highlights the contradictions of GMD policies; the GMD made a film promoting the countryside and traditional social and family values associated with it, while at the same time their domestic policy demanded urban industrialization. The film portrays the countryside and rural values to be the answer to China's urban problems. Many Chinese saw the quick paced changes and foreign presence in the cities as a weakness for China. *Song of China* follows a family through four generations while they cope with the challenges of modernity. Once the second-generation father realizes he has an unfilial son he tells the son "The great fault is to see faults and not try to correct them. We will return to the country," and the family returns to the countryside, presumably away from the city vices corrupting the son.

This quote about returning to the countryside is an expression of the GMD's efforts to correct the faults of China. Here the father sees the countryside as redemption for the ills of the city because when he lived in the city, the son partied,

gambled, and did not work hard. The film *Song of China* reveals a serious contradiction in GMD policy and attitudes. *Song of China* presents the values of the New Life Movement, filial piety and Confucian principles, and links the ideals to the countryside. Ironically, this film was produced when the GMD was still pushing industrial and urban modernity policies (and the film itself is a modern technology). *Song of China* exposes the contradictions of the GMD when the film is studied in a larger historical context.

Peach Girl offers a more complex view of the countryside. On one hand the countryside is honest, clean, good, and the people are hard-working and moral, but on the other hand the peasants are poor and lacking the developments and manners found within the city: One day the landlady Mrs. King comes to inspect her lands. Upon her arrival, the peasants, her hired hands, flock to her and gawk at her city clothing and sedan chair. The gawking peasants illustrate the gap between urban and rural China because the peasants are clearly not as sophisticated, or modern, as the city woman. This example also highlights the limited scope of urban modernity, which did not reach the country side. The difference between King and the peasants is a painful awakening to the difference in urban and rural China.

A second example of the gap between urban and rural China is King and Lim's attendance at the temple fair. While on their date, Lim visits a fortune teller and becomes distressed once the teller reads her fortune; King responds by telling Lim he does not believe in that "superstitious nonsense." His comment reveals the gulf between the two because it reflects fundamental worldview differences between Lim, the superstitious country girl, and, King the "enlightened" city man. However, this

too, is a complex example because the film also preserves the "superiority" of the countryside. When King and Lim are at the temple fair he tells her she need not worry because he will "protect her from evil and harm," so despite his modernity, King still fills the role of the patriarch in the relationship. However, in the end, Lim's "superstitious nonsense" could have saved her from leaving the countryside. However, even King cannot save them from the powerful divide between urban and rural China. Lim dies at the end of the film and leaves the viewer realizing that the unequal development of China's urban and rural inhabitants threatens to break China apart much as it broke Lim and King apart.

The films *Peach Girl* and *Song of China* have conflicting views of the countryside. The shots of country life in *Song of China* have the grandson laying in the grass playing the flute and running with the goats--- a peaceful and gentle setting. In contrast, *Peach Girl* opens with a screen card that reads "The enjoyment of a country life." Yet the next scene shows peasants toiling in the sun-- one wipes his brow, another carries her child her back --- then the camera shows the huge number of fields needing work. The irony is that this scene is neither a modern urbanite's nor a peasant's idea of enjoyment, but shows *Peach Girl's* more complex view of the countryside.

The urban economy offers little hope for the future. There is little honest or decent opportunity under modern urban life. While *The Plunder of Peach and Plum's* Jianping searches for a job, the position has been filled, there are no jobs available, or there are dozens of other men applying for the same job. The corruption is seen when Jianping is almost offered a job at a shipping company but the boss interrupts and

offers the position to his nephew, even though the nephew lacks Jianping's qualifications. Jianping quits both of his jobs because a boss is either overloading a boat with cargo or passing inspection of a building before the approval is given. Both acts of corruption endanger the lives of innocent people and Jianping leaves his job because he does not want to support these dangerous, dishonest choices.

In *The Plunder of Peach and Plum* an honest hard worker with a college degree can not survive in the contemporary political, economic, and social atmosphere. In the past what may have meant success only means ruin under the GMD. The film focuses heavily on the youth "Shouldering the Nation's burden" and, as the students sing with optimism "We must stand and fight to the death. We don't want to be slaves, Today we are the young peaches and plums, Tomorrow we'll be the country's backbone." The promise and hope sung in the song is shattered when Jianping can not survive in society abiding to his conscience. The director critiques the society that has strong young nationalists, like Jianping, but disregards them. The "young peaches and plums" represent the promise of youth as well as Jianping and Lilin's fellow comrades in the contemporary society but the film shows their destruction. The young comrades, too, will be plundered by society unless they resort to the dishonesty and corruption that exist in the city in the contemporary society.

Song of China, because of its simple message- the country is good- and party rhetoric, did not realize the dangers in ignoring the gap between urban and rural China, yet the film illustrates to historians that even if the divide was not recognized as a problem, the gap certainly existed. *Peach Girl*, on the other hand, seems to anticipate the problems that would later plague China. *Peach Girl* does portray both

the positive and negative aspects of the countryside indicating an ambivalent attitude towards the split yet a split that needed to be portrayed. The gap between urban and rural China is politically an issue because the policies developed in Republican China did not recognize how deep the disparity was. Even today, China faces a huge split between urban and rural China that threatens to rip apart the new prosperity and order.

Conclusion

Despite the different approaches, all four films are critical of modernity. The ideas of modernity varied in the films: in *Pearl Necklace* the director uses the shots of the cotton mill to support modernity, in *Song of China* the family wants to maintain strong filial piety ties to protect the future from Western influenced modernity, but the films' messages are not that different. China was in a precarious position in the 1930s and the different films are critiques of modernity in an effort to preserve past traditions.

Women were symbols of modernity, usually symbolically critiquing the social reforms. Women were never praised as workers or as independent women. In *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, Lilin's boss tries to seduce her and her husband slaps her; she is too weak to stand up to modern reforms herself. It was when a woman tried to take advantage of modernity or was forced to interact with modernity that she fell victim to the dangerous "modern" society.

The family, too, stood as a symbol of the critiques of modernity. In *Song of China*, the daughter-in-law, who does not have a name, represented socially "modern" woman and the dangers she posed to family and order. Lim, in *Peach Girl*, was betrayed and shamed in the city, yet another example of why women should remain with the family, the countryside, and within the boundaries of traditional roles.

The gap between urban and rural China was an indicator of the limited success of Chiang's reforms. The countryside represented moral superiority of China while the cities held the emblems of modernity for China's image of modernity. Holding onto the morally "pure" countryside allowed urban dwellers to displace their discomforts with modernity; nationalist sentiment motivated reforms for modernity but nationalist sentiment also tried to safeguard Chinese identity in the face of Western ideals.

The films praise certain aspects of modernity such as the factories and Western accoutrements; these were *images* of modernity. But the film's critiques were social and moral critiques of modernity that effected women, family and increased the urban/ rural disparity in China. This contradictory relationship between praise and criticism is partly due to the complexities of understanding modernity and in part a result of adaptation of Western symbols while trying to maintain basic Chinese values.

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