

August
2007

Friday Noon Film Series

EARLY CHINESE CINEMA: Stars in Revolution

Center
For
East
Asian
Studies

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Fridays
at
12:40pm

During the “Golden Age” of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking were creatively appropriated by filmmakers who sought both to attract wide audiences and to deliver progressive and even revolutionary social messages. Inventive and sophisticated directors such as Sun Yu, Wu Yonggang, and Fei Mu combined with superstar talent like Lilly Lee, Butterfly Wu, Ruan Lingyu, and Zhao Dan to make films that were simultaneously entertaining, artistically accomplished, and socially challenging. Several of the masterpieces of the period were released earlier this year in new DVD editions with English subtitles by Cinema Epoch, making them available to wide audiences in the West for the first time. This series takes advantage of this development to screen some of the acknowledged classics of Republican-era Chinese cinema.

Presented by Jason McGrath, Visiting Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Studies

September 28: *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (Yinhan shuang xing)

SHI Dongsan, 1931, 100 min

A love story, morality tale, and self-reflexive comment on and by the film industry. Wang Renmei, aka Violet Wong, a famous 1930s actress in one of her earlier roles, plays a talented young opera singer who is discovered by commercial filmmakers and made into a star. In the process she falls in love with her dashing co-star, but he conceals a secret that threatens to doom the relationship and thus her happiness. The conflict between traditional values and modern ostentation plays out in settings ranging from a movie set for a Chinese opera film to a putt-putt golf course to a spectacular Art Deco dancehall.

October 5: *Twin Sisters* (Zimei hua)

ZHENG Zhengqiu, 1933, 90 min

Leading movie star Hu Die (also known as “Butterfly Wu”) stars in a dual role as two sisters separated at birth. One grows up modern, urban, and Westernized, while the other is a traditional poor rural girl. As adults, the latter ends up serving as wet nurse for the former’s baby. Tragedy strikes, but family reunion is thereby enabled. A curious mixture of leftist political impulses and conservative themes borrowed from contemporary “mandarin duck and butterfly” popular literature, the film uses technically ambitious double-exposure photography to depict both sisters at once.

October 12: *Daybreak* (Tianming)

SUN Yu, 1933, 115 min

A classic by one of early Chinese cinema’s greatest directors (Sun Yu) and starring one of its most alluring stars, Li Lili (Lilly Lee), who plays a country girl eventually forced into prostitution. Meanwhile, her boyfriend joins the revolution, and eventually she must help him flee the authorities. All of this leads up to an over-the-top melodramatic execution sequence inspired by the similar Marlene Dietrich scene in Josef von Sternberg’s *Dishonored*. As in many films of the period, ostensibly serious political content is uneasily balanced against melodrama and pure spectacle.



October 19: *Queen of Sports* (Tiyu huanghou)

SUN Yu, 1934, 83 min

The director-actress team of Sun Yu and Li Lili reunite for an early sports film, anticipating a genre that would later become a favorite of socialist realism under Mao. A rich girl is admitted to a school of physical education, where she learns the value of altruism in the world of athletic competition. Though enthusiastic about training, she is immature and unprepared for the difficulties ahead. Her natural talent leads to initial success, and she becomes intoxicated with the attention of the press, her fans, and some handsome young men. However, after she loses interest in training and then faces tragedy among her teammates, she realizes the real meaning of athletic competition. Audiences of the 1930s would of course have understood that the moral lessons provided by sports could only be conveyed through the prominent display of Li Lili’s athletic body...

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October 26: *The Goddess* (Shennü)

WU Yonggang, 1934, 77 min

A timeless, devastating performance by the tragic movie star Ruan Lingyu (who would commit suicide the following year) as a good-hearted prostitute who struggles to raise her beloved son and get him through school even as she deals with her vicious, greedy pimp and the condemnation of society. Inventive camerawork combines with acting that is well ahead of its time to produce a haunting masterpiece, very nicely transferred to DVD and provided with piano accompaniment by the San Francisco Silent Film Festival. "Using prostitution as a symbol of oppression and victimization, the film is regarded as a classic of the silent Chinese cinema, comparable to the best contemporary films from the West." --*Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*

November 2: *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi)

YUAN Muzhi, 1937, 95 min

One of the great Chinese films of the 1930s, inspired in part by Frank Borzage's *Street Angel* and *Seventh Heaven*. Urban youths in Shanghai's poorest district try to survive and help each other amidst the dangers of violence and exploitation. The protagonist is a young trumpet player who is in love with an exploited teahouse performer played by Zhou Xuan, a popular singer as well as movie star of the 1930s. Combining such disparate elements as experimental city montage, slapstick comedy, musical, melodrama, and critical realism, the film builds up to an emotional condemnation of contemporary social conditions.

November 9: *Crossroads* (Shizi jietou)

SHEN Xiling, 1937, 105 min

The story of four friends who struggle to survive in Shanghai after graduating from college. Faced with the unemployment and housing shortages of the time, they cope in ways ranging from suicide to fighting the invading Japanese. One prominent narrative line enacts a classic Hollywood-style romantic comedy of misrecognition, in which a young man simultaneously falls in love with a woman and battles an unseen neighbor, all the while without realizing they are the same person. An accomplished example of 1930s Chinese cinema's combination of social critique with lighthearted entertainment.



November 16: *Song at Midnight* (Yeban gesheng)

WEIBANG Maxu, 1937, 120 min

A Chinese interpretation of *The Phantom of the Opera* and one of the earliest extant examples of Chinese horror film. Ten years after supposedly being killed in an opera house, Song Danping returns to relate his story. After falling in love with the daughter of a rich feudal landlord, he was beaten, disfigured with acid, and left to die in the burning opera house by her father. Waiting in the rebuilt theater for someone to take over his artistic mantle, he's now chosen the opera troupe's new young star. A genuinely creepy film that has attracted much scholarly interest in recent years.

November 30: *Spring in a Small Town* (Xiao cheng zhi chun)

FEI Mu, 1948, 90 min

When the centennial of Chinese filmmaking was celebrated in 2005, this 1948 masterpiece of psychological realism topped many critics' lists as the best Chinese film of all time. Yuwen lives in the war-damaged ruins of a family compound with her invalid husband Liyan and his naïve young sister. When Liyan's old friend Zhichen arrives unexpectedly for a visit, reignited old passions threaten to break up the family. What makes the film a uniquely complex emotional experience is the semi-omniscient voiceover narration of Yuwen, who thus emerges as both a bit of a femme fatale *and* a compelling and sympathetic psychological study.

**ALL SCREENINGS ARE FREE AND TAKE PLACE AT JUDD HALL 302, BEGINNING AT 12:40PM.
ALL FILMS ARE SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.**

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