



Photographs in Films Starring Ruan Lingyu: Considering Geometric Regions of the Motion Picture Frame

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Abstract

This multimodal essay utilizes the Semantic Annotation Tool (SAT), an open-source drop-in module, to create samples of time-based annotations for still photographs in Chinese films starring Ruan Lingyu.¹ Exemplary films include *Love and Duty* (*Lian'ai yu yiwu*; 1931), *The Peach Girl* (*Taohua qixue ji*; 1931), and *The New Women* (*Xin nüxing*; completed in 1934, released in 1935), all produced by the United China (Lianhua) studio. It shows that the photograph is a motif across the three films, an object that oscillates between the screen world and the social world and a device that makes the viewer pensive. As an experimental attempt, it testifies to the ways in which close film analysis, archival research, and computational methods can be combined.

Introduction

Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos.
—Susan Sontag²

The photograph is perhaps the most mysterious of the geometric regions that make up the motion picture frame. My desire to write on photographs in Chinese films starring Ruan Lingyu (1910–1935) corresponds to a painful tenderness—each time I watched one of Ruan’s films, something bruised me. It was as if all her films existed just for me. I know that something was not, or not merely, a recognition of her tragic fate—she committed suicide on March 8, 1935, at the age of twenty-four, leaving a chilling note: “Gossip is a fearful thing.”³ It must be something that has its traces in the silver screen. I hesitate to call it *punctum*, because Barthes insists that *punctum* occurs only in the still photograph.⁴ At moments of hesitation, the stills in Ruan’s films—portraits of Ruan or not—offer me an entry point for a discussion that takes up this line of inquiry: What happens when a film viewer is confronted with a geometric region called the photograph, or a diegetic act of picture-taking in a fiction film? In such circumstances, how does the still photograph transform the film, and vice versa? What follows could, therefore, be taken as an invitation to understand this puzzle—or at least a viewfinder that takes views of the possibility of understanding it—especially in the context of the late silent years of the Chinese film industry.

Intimacy in the Eyes of the Camera

A picture-taking scene beckons from *The Peach Girl* (*Taohua qixue ji*; Bu Wancang, 1931), starring Ruan Lingyu in the role of Lingu, a country girl, and Jin Yan in the role of De'en, a young master. As if to escape his desire for a kiss, she allows him to take a photo of her. Obviously, for the country girl, this is her very first photograph; she doesn't even know she has to face the black box called the camera. For him, the camera is a tool of power. He is granted the privilege, by the camera, to ask her to turn around, to smile, to turn her head toward him, and to see her in a close-up. The act of picture-taking grants her—our film star, Ruan Lingyu—a different form of privilege: to look directly into the camera and pose. Because of the photo-taking event that is sutured into the film narrative, breaking the fourth wall is no longer a taboo. The camera is perhaps the best prop for a budding romantic relationship not despite but because of the distance required by the picture-taking ritual; the overtones or undercurrents of desire can only be constituted at a distance. A way of certifying a relationship, the photo-taking event is also a way of certifying its fugitive nature—the shimmering, evanescent bubble that we call romance. The moment we press the shutter, the moment is no longer with us.

Some film audiences might be frustrated here, as the scene does not immediately show the photograph. However, it appears midway through the film, as a surprise to Lingu and the audience alike. Looking in the direction De'en points, she sees her own portrait, a seemingly enlarged one, on the wall. As she shifts her line of sight, two more portraits come into view: a photograph of Lingu and one of De'en, of the same size, are sitting on a desk. This is their own



Figure 1. The transformation of Lingu in *The Peach Girl* (1931).

household that he arranged in a single night. The still photograph is not just an image but an object. A framed photograph whose materiality is enhanced can be used to decorate the apartment walls, as we see in *The Peach Girl* and two other United China (Lianhua) pictures starring Ruan, *Love and Duty* (*Lian'ai yu yiwu*; Bu Wancang, 1931) and *The New Women* (*Xin nüxing*; Cai Chusheng, 1935). In *The Peach Girl*, with a *qipao*, high heels, earrings, and a headdress, Lingu soon transforms herself into a fashionable city girl befitting the household. The whole process of her transformation is completed in front of her own portrait (Figure 1). The composition stages a shape contrast between her earlier look and the present one. For Lingu, the version of her wearing *qipao* and earrings is a new, peculiar self. For film audiences, however, this is a far more familiar image, a regular look for Ruan—one that could be symbolically possessed by virtue of purchasing a star photograph of her, a point to which we will return.

The Star Photograph Business

Without a picture frame, a photograph of a beloved girl is an object slim enough to be hidden under a pillow, as De'en does in *The Peach Girl*. In *The New Women*, Mr. Wang, who wants Wei Ming—a talented music teacher and fiction writer played by Ruan—to be his concubine, steals a portrait of her while paying an unwelcome visit to her household. It is, after all, a slice of her. An August 30, 1926, article in *Shenbao*, written in the fashion of classical Chinese, aptly describes the

shifting social etiquette of giving one's photograph. "A young woman sees her own photograph as the most valuable object in the world, one that could not be easily obtained," writes the author, whose pen name is Fengyuan. "A man may beg for one for one or multiple years, yet his two hands are still empty."⁵ On the one hand, the author insists that a young woman should be as cautious as possible when giving her own photograph to avoid gossip. On the other hand, the author acknowledges that the unsatisfied man is a poor creature. This very tension, however, has been changed all at once because of the female movie stars, whose numerous photographs, "like a pouring rain," satisfy the thirsty receivers.⁶ These star photographs, disassociated from the idea of a romantic or sexual relationship, function in the first place as a vehicle for a star's rise to fame. It is, as noted by the author, for the sake of the art of the silver screen, women's liberty, and friendship.

The shifting moral image seems to find a footnote in *The New Women*: Yu Haichou, an editor, owns a photograph of Wei Ming. Yet in his definition, she is just a friend. Written in the mid-1920s, a time when Ruan was yet to be a superstar, the *Shenbao* article cites the photographs of Zhang Zhiyun, one of China's first-generation female movie stars, as examples of good posture. The generational change of female stars in the Chinese film industry, to some degree, is encapsulated in a love triangle: Tang Jishan, a tea tycoon, abandons his lover Zhang Zhiyun and soon passionately pursues Ruan.

"The star photograph blurs the lines between publicity and privacy, art photography and everyday photography, the screen world and the social world."



Figure 2. An advertisement for *Chinese Female Film Star Album* in *Lianyou* (1934).

The star photograph blurs the lines between publicity and privacy, art photography and everyday photography, the screen world and the social world. Stars, photographers, moviegoers, film producers, and magazine editors are all active agents that contribute to the star photograph business. It's not just an object that one can purchase, keep as a secret, and look at again and again, but also something one can hold in one's hands and play with—a *wanwu*, literally “plaything.” It is, very often, a trigger for a reverie.

A 1934 issue of *The Young Companion (Lianyou)* magazine announced the publication of *Chinese Female Film Star Album (Zhongguo dianying nümingxing zhaoxiangji)*, a kit of eight photo albums. The first volume presented Ruan, along with seven other contemporary stars, in all her glory (Figure 2). The album included carefully selected photographs from everyday life as well as art photographs taken by photographer Chen Jaizhen specially for this publication. The slogan of revivifying the national film industry was used in the advertisement to increase sales. Its high price—one silver yuan per album—reflected the high-quality printing techniques, full-color covers, and fine paper.⁷ The price also included free domestic shipping, yet a shipping fee was required if the album was to be shipped abroad. Albums with the stars' signatures would be offered should the eight albums be purchased all at once.⁸

The Ruan album of the first volume, which came out in 1935, presented a package of thirty-five different facial expressions.⁹ Viewers could also find stills from her films—not images from the movie but rather photos taken on the film set.¹⁰ They were immediately recognizable as scenes or moments from specific films, yet they were in fact outside the films. It was among these stills that, paradoxically, the truly filmic emerged.¹¹

Movie fans who couldn't afford the price could make their own collections of star photos simply by cutting them out from the pages of newspapers or magazines, just as in *Love and Duty* (1931), in which the old Yang Naifan, played by Ruan, cuts from a not-so-well-printed newspaper two small photographs of her grown son and daughter—the latter also played by Ruan.

A Prophecy of Death

It might not be incidental that each of the three films in my discussion, *Love and Duty* (1931), *The Peach Girl* (1931), and *The New Women* (1935), in which the repeated occurrence of the still photograph is notable, climaxes with the death of Ruan's character. In *Love and Duty*, a photograph on the wall of the Huang household marks Yang Naifan's very last appearance in the film. Her three children look up to the photograph of their dead mother and kneel. The sudden stillness of the image provides a strong sense of closure; it's as if the whole life of Yang Naifan existed only to end in this photograph.

“The gallows that must exist outside the borders of the photograph—all that it can do—merely foregrounds the announcement of death in a direct and intensified fashion.”

Her children's gaze is just a way to direct the viewer's gaze toward the photograph. In mourning, time slows down. If the movie viewer is often hasty, it is largely because of the succession of images that keeps bursting into one's eyes, an experience that can be quite exhausting. The presence of the still photograph in cinema, however, privileges the mode of very slow looking and makes the viewer thoughtful.¹² The presence of the

photograph in cinema also creates a double. It's an image embedded within another image, an art form that reflects on another art form, a medium remediated in another medium. Remediation is not just “the representation of one medium in another” but also the transformations that involves.¹³ In

this situation, either the photograph or the film isn't quite itself.

Barthes's discussion on punctum is ultimately about time. Fascinated by the photographic portrait of a handsome young man waiting to be hanged, taken by Alexander Gardner, he articulates the expression of punctum in a way that is unprecedentedly apparent: "The *punctum* is: he is going to die."¹⁴ The announcement of death, in silence, is a common trait of all portrait photographs rather than a particularity of this photograph. The gallows that must exist outside the borders of the photograph—all that it can do—merely foregrounds the announcement of death in a direct and intensified fashion. That is to say, the still's recognition of death takes on the form of a prophecy.

In *Love and Duty*, *The Peach Girl*, and *The New Women*, the still photograph, as a prophecy of death or "an invitation to sentimentality," takes on a narrative dimension.¹⁵ To put it more precisely, the still photograph tackles the film narrative, both centripetally and centrifugally. On the one hand, the recurrence of the still photograph across the three films supports the film narrative that confirms "she is going to die." In an online lecture on *The New Women*, which is convenient to cite given the format of the present study, Christopher Rea has noticed that Wei Ming's apartment walls are conspicuously decorated with photographs of herself and commented on the photograph of her in a close-up, seen at the moment the word "Miss" is added next to her name on the manuscript cover: "The repeated focus on this flat image suggests that it is not who a woman is, but rather how she is viewed, that determines her fate. The photograph becomes a ubiquitous presence that haunts Wei Ming's life and hastens her death."¹⁶ Perhaps we can say that Ruan's photograph, as a film prop, is there throughout the three pictures because the prop spins rather than serves the narrative. On the other hand, the presence of the still photograph in cinema refuses the film narrative. It pulls the audience temporarily out of what appears to be a steady stream of moving images, out of the story, and makes them realize that what they are seeing is merely some images. In this sense, the still photograph that occupies part or all of the screen defines a suspended, self-reflective, and centrifugal moment.



Figure 3. Ruan's funeral [Source: *New People Weekly (Xinren zhoukan)* 1, no. 28 (1935)].

If the diegetic suicide of Wei Ming in *The New Women* can be said to be a result of the still photograph's prophecy, her death seems to function as a prophecy of Ruan Lingyu's suicide on International Women's Day in 1935, just one month after the film's premiere. What further complicates the scenario is that the plot of *The New Women* is based on the life of actress Ai Xia, who committed suicide in 1934 shortly after starring in *A Modern Woman (Xiandai yi nüxing; Li Pingqian, 1933)*, for which she was also credited as a scriptwriter. The tragic suicide of Ruan in what we call real life, therefore, became a double of a double. The libel in the press attacking Ruan before and after her death was strikingly similar to what Wei Ming endures in *The New Women*. According to one news report, "When Ruan Lingyu took her last breath, the situation was just like a scene in *The New Women*."¹⁷ As Kristine Harris has pointed out, the "theatricality of [Ruan's] funeral was intensified by the use of the same photograph of Ruan Lingyu that had circumscribed Wei Ming and represented her rise to fame in *The New Women*" (Figure 3).¹⁸ Less known, however, is that Ruan's other films may also play a part in blurring the lines between

the fictional and the real. On the cover of *New People Weekly* (*Xinren zhoukan*), for example, a photograph of Ruan's public funeral, staged in Nanjing Road, Shanghai, is juxtaposed with an empty shot of peach blossoms in full bloom. The photograph on the bottom is titled "Taohua yijiu xiao chunfeng [Peach blossoms are still smiling in the spring wind]," a line borrowed from a Tang dynasty poem by Cui Hu. In the poem, the girl whose smile was as splendid as the peach blossoms last year is now nowhere to be found. The well-chosen, well-titled photograph not only evokes a sea of sentimentality in regard to Ruan's passing but also ambivalently links to *The Peach Girl*, in which Lingu's smile is unforgettable and her fate is said to be tied to the peach blossoms.

The best souvenir from a star's funeral is no doubt a photograph. The United China Film Company gave Ruan's photograph to those authors whose eulogies for her were, for some reason, not published in *United China Pictorial* (*Lianhua huabao*) as a souvenir.¹⁹ The large-scale funeral photograph of Ruan also took on a miniature form—it was made into a badge with the words "Tang's wife, Ms. Ruan Lingyu, memorial badge," which Tang Jishan gave to the funeral attendees. Yuan Congmei, an actor who often played villains, attended Ruan's funeral wearing the black sunglasses often seen in his films. Yuan used a pocketknife to remove the words "Tang's wife" from the badge.²⁰

Destroying a Photograph

"While it takes little effort to physically destroy a photograph, a fragile silver gelatin print, the act of destroying it might be, emotionally speaking, extremely demanding."

A photograph is a fragile object—it can be destroyed. The act of destroying or attempting to destroy a photograph becomes a motif that ties together the three films in the present discussion. In *Love and Duty*, which premiered no later than March 1931, the inner struggles of Yang Naifan as she is about to elope with her lover, Li Zuyi (Jin Yan), are

rendered visible by her relation to the photographs of her family. Over the phone, she tells Li Zuyi to come over at once. At this moment, in the background is a family photograph of Yang Naifan, Huang Daren—her husband—and their two small children; it is as if the family in the photograph on the apartment wall are looking at her. As the film cuts to Naifan leaving a note for Daren, the same family photograph has been suspiciously moved to the writing desk, right in front of her.

In Zuyi's point of view, the family photograph appears in a close-up. A dissolve signals his hallucination: the photograph is torn apart, with Naifan and Daren separated by the tear. The destroyed photograph soon dissolves back to wholeness. Zuyi's determination to separate the couple and his fear that they might still stay together as a family are conveyed in this scene. Along with Zuyi, the audience sees what is not there, situated in a reinvented point-of-view structure, and they know that in the filmmaking process, that photograph was indeed destroyed. It is a hallucination in the film narrative but a physical act in the making of the film. To give another example, in *The Peach Girl*, which premiered no later than September 1931, De'en, who has been imprisoned by his mother in their own house and separated from Lingu, attempts to destroy a photograph of his mother in a moment of rebellion and agitation. But he is too cowardly to do so. The indexicality of the photograph, after the fashion of a fingerprint, always propels one to identify or misidentify it with its subject. While it takes little effort to physically destroy a photograph, a fragile silver gelatin print, the act of destroying it might be, emotionally speaking, extremely demanding.

Permit me to dwell, for a moment, on the wedding photograph in *The New Women*. My analysis of the photograph is built mainly on Harris's and Weihong Bao's readings of it but pushes some of their insights in different directions. On a train to Shanghai, an aunt of Xiao Hong—Wei

Ming's daughter—rather reluctantly gives her a Western-style wedding photograph of her parents. The photograph becomes a trigger for the aunt's explanation about Wei Ming's hidden past, which is rendered visible as a montage sequence—a flashback—which displays “for Xiao Hong (and the film viewer) her mother's romance and elopement with a college sweetheart, their simple home, and the father's dissatisfied abandonment of mother and child.”²¹ In particular, the very brief scene in which Wei Ming and her college sweetheart are eating an apple—the forbidden fruit—appears to echo a very similar romance scene from *Love and Duty* featuring two pairs of young lovers on the tennis court of the Huang household. The vignettes of the montage sequence in *The New Women* are linked together through a set of quick zoom blur transition effects, creating a slightly giddy feeling.

This is a sequence of media entanglements. Here, cinema announces its privilege over both the photograph and the oral account. While the photograph is often afforded credibility, it cannot offer a full narrative. And while the oral account supplies a narrative of some sort, it can be easily falsified and is therefore not always reliable. Cinema, however, combines the advantages of the two. The sequence ends with “an act of media violence”: crying out “I don't want this terrible dad . . . I want Mum!”, Xiao Hong violently grabs the wedding photograph and destroys her father's image.²²

What further complicates the scenario of media entanglements is that the flashback seems to be the basis for the novel that Wei Ming has written, titled *The Tomb of Love* (*Lianai de fenmu*), referring to marriage. And yet, when the same wedding photograph was reprinted in *United China Pictorial* (*Lianhua huabao*), it was retitled *Lianai de guisu*, which could be roughly translated as “the destination of love” or “the belonging of love” (Figure 4). As Susan Sontag astutely puts it: “Because each photograph is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted. A photograph changes according to the context in which it is

seen.”²³ In this case, it seems that the reprinted wedding photograph is deliberately isolated from its cinematic context, adding ambiguity to its meaning.

The motif of tearing apart a photograph evokes the medium of comics. A comic remediation of a photograph of Ruan—the very portrait used to publicize Wei Ming's novel and Ruan's funeral—was published in 1935 in *Modern Sketch* (*Shidai manhua*; Figure 5). As Lu Shaofei, the editor of *Modern Sketch*, indicated in a note printed on the last page of the inaugural issue, the magazine aimed to grasp the era.²⁴ A call for submissions in the sixteenth issue stated that the magazine welcomed comic materials that “critique problems in everyday life, be they large or small.” Photographs could be sent as well if they were “cartoon-like.”²⁵



Figure 4. The wedding photograph from *The New Women* [Source: Reprinted in *United China Pictorial* (*Lianhua huabao*) 4, no. 26 (1934)].

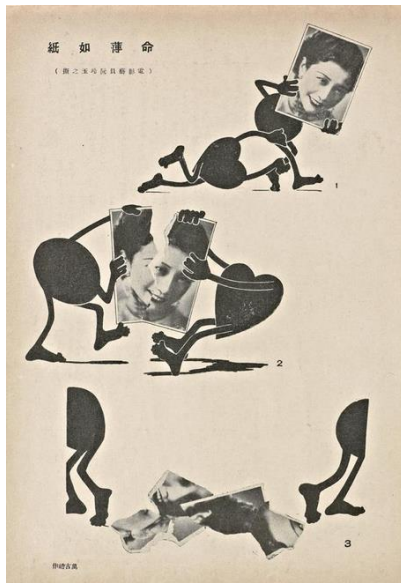


Figure 5. “Fate, fragile as a piece of paper,” Wan Guchan. [Source: *Modern Sketch* (*Shidai manhua*), no. 16 (1935)].

Wan Guchan, who was later hailed as the forefather of Chinese animation, created here a work that utilized the photograph as found material for the comic. Three vignettes are laid out on a single piece of paper: an anthropomorphic circle and an anthropomorphic heart scramble for the photograph of Ruan, tear it apart, and eventually abandon it. It's another form of montage, rendered in space, with a clear order of events implied in the three vignettes. The in-between motion is also implied. One might recall here the violence that Ruan suffered from her two lovers: Zhang Damin, who sold calumnious stories about her to the tabloids, and Tang Jishan, with whom Ruan cohabited in the last phase of her life. But the abstraction of comic representation avoids adding another headline for gossip. At a more abstract level, it comments on the fate of a woman as an image, as a plaything. Her fate, as the title of the comic indicates, is as fragile as a piece of paper.

The Montage of a Photograph

The note on montage brings us to the most striking use of the photograph in *The New Women*. In one scene, Mrs. Wang—Wei Ming's former classmate and Mr. Wang's wife—discovers the fragments of a photograph of a woman, like the plucked petals of a rose, on the bedroom floor, a sign that she almost immediately recognizes as her husband's infidelity. She searches around and tries to piece all the fragments back together. When the final bit—the eyes—is added, the still photograph comes to life. Technically speaking, the shot of the reassembled fragments is superimposed on another close-up of Wei Ming smiling charmingly. She is, literally and metaphorically, a motion picture. The on-screen process of piecing together the fragments, or as we may call it, assembling a jigsaw puzzle, can be read metaphorically as cinema's mechanism of montage, especially in the film viewer's experience. Every shot is a fragment. By splicing the shots together, a new meaning is born in the viewer's mind. Mrs. Wang's puzzle takes on a spatial form, whereas cinema's montage takes on a temporal form.

While Harris, Bao, and Rea have all offered insightful discussions on the use of the still photograph in *The New Women*, which I lean on, and Rea's account has touched on this scene, curiously missing in all their accounts is another important photograph in the scene. At the beginning, Mrs. Wang rushes to sit down and admire a stage photograph that she obviously cherishes. From her point of view, the audience is given a close-up of the photograph. Mrs. Wang's reverie is cut short as she discovers the evidence of her husband's infidelity. Yet even while discovering her husband's affair, Mrs. Wang steals another glimpse of the stage photograph.

This scene suggests, in a fashion that is not entirely speculative, that Mrs. Wang has her own love interest—a Peking opera actor who specializes in female roles. In 1930s Shanghai, the star photograph business was by no means limited to film stars. Peking opera remained a form of popular entertainment and retained its own reputation, standards, tastes, stars, and fans. As we can clearly see, the star in the stage photograph carries a flower sickle and a basket. The two props, together with the magnificent headdress, allow for a tentative judgment: it was from *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon* (*Chang'e benyue*), a new play with period costumes that Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) created in 1915.



Figure 6. [*Chang'e's Flight to the Moon*, starring Fu Shilan [Source: *National Play Pictorial* (*Guoju huabao*) 1, no. 31 (1932)].



Figure 7. *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon*, starring Li Xiangjun [Source: *Beiyang Pictorial (Beiyang huabao)* 23, no. 1138 (1934)].

In one scene, Chang'e, who has become the goddess of the moon, dances with a sickle and a basket as she picks flowers to make wine in preparation for the Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Moon Festival.²⁶ In the mid-1930s, Fu Shilan (Figure 6), Li Xiangjun (Figure 7), and Li Shifang (Figure 8), among others, were younger-generation actors who played the role of the goddess Chang'e and gained considerable recognition. The version starring Li Xiangjun, who was hailed as "the most handsome man in the world," was performed in Beijing at the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1934.

My purpose here is less about identifying the actor in the stage photograph and more about how the existence of two photographs in one film scene adds another layer of meaning to our discussion on competing media. Ruan's smiling face is in motion. Even Mrs. Wang, who is obviously a Peking opera fan, could not move her eyes away from the cinematic motion that is so vivid, real, and evocative. Montage is another tool that belongs to the cinema but not the theater. Cinema wins over opera in two regards: motion and montage. Cinema and opera, both in the disguise of a photograph, compete for the surface of Mrs. Wang's desk, the surface of the screen, and "the surface culture of display" in the social and cultural milieu of 1930s China.²⁷



Figure 8. *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon*, starring Li Shifang [Source: *Bimonthly Play Magazine (Banyue jukan)*, no. 6 (1936)].

Gazing at the Geometric Regions of the Motion Picture Frame

To retrace our steps, we have explored the still photograph and its remediations in cinema

and pictorial magazines in the complex cultural landscape of the 1930s. Scalar, the digital publishing platform used in the current study, allows me to experiment with and combine some unconventional research methods: diving into Chinese-language digital databases to identify a photograph, citing online video lectures, and using SAT to create time-based annotations for subclips. These digital humanities endeavors, as we might call them, enhance media access at a very practical level; while art historians have almost all gotten used to spending more time looking at the paintings in an art history essay than reading the text, it's novel for media scholars to find media objects so accessible in print. The use of SAT also enhances the mode of extremely close viewing by drawing attention to certain geometric regions of the motion picture frame that might be otherwise overlooked.

The time-based annotations in this study were created manually. A description and tags were added to each subclip. The new mode of readership—viewing a media object along with the tags that go with it—is, in fact, an old one in the Chinese context. The “rouge” versions of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the eighteenth-century novel that marks the pinnacle of Chinese literature, contained comments and annotations in red or black ink, seemingly added by different commentators whose identities are a mystery. An intertextual pleasure arises when we read the novel along with the annotations, when we view the media object anew along with the descriptions and tags, and when we discover the motifs and connections across Ruan’s films.

"This study resists an ending and replaces it with a beginning, a calling, a hope that historical imagery can be reawakened."

If many more time-based annotations were created by scholars or as a result of machine learning, the descriptions and tags would themselves become a body of work in which a keyword could be searched, and a tag might lead us to a variety of subclips. Besides the photograph, there are many more kinds of geometric regions of the motion picture frame: painting, calligraphy, map, newspaper, mirror, and calendar poster, just to name a few. Therefore, this study resists an ending and replaces it with a beginning, a calling, a hope that historical imagery can be reawakened.

A Note on Transliteration

This essay uses the Hanyu Pinyin system of romanization for Chinese names, which might be different from the spelling of the names of fictive characters in the bilingual intertitles of silent film prints. The Chinese order of names—surname followed by given name—is used for historical and fictive figures. For contemporary Chinese scholars active in the West whose Anglicized names are already in circulation, I generally follow their own habit to determine the order.

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A list of external links featured in this essay can be found here.²⁸

About the Author

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¹ For an introduction to the development and potential of SAT, see Mark Williams and John Bell, "The Media Ecology Project: Collaborative DH Synergies to Produce New Research in Visual Culture History," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2021). <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/15/1/000524/000524.html>.

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 15.

³ A reprint of the well-known suicide note can be found in *Mass Fiction Pictorial (Qunzhong xiaoshuo huabao)* 3 (1935): 38. Lu Xun borrowed this phrase to name his short article, which was published in 1935 under the pseudonym Zhao Lingyi. See Lu Xu, "On Gossip Being a Fearful Thing (*Lun renyan kewe*)," *Taibai* 2, no. 5 (1935). The authenticity of this suicide note, however, has been a point of dispute. A different version was published in *Siming shang xuebao*, a newspaper whose circulation was rather limited, and reprinted in "Tang Jishan Falsified the Suicide Note (*Tang Jishan weizao yishu*)," *Voice of Cinema (Diansheng)* 4, no. 17 (1935): 344.

⁴ For Barthes's reflection on a still photograph's punctum, see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), especially 25–27. For Barthes, cinema seems unable to activate the punctum, or to activate it in a similar way. See Barthes, "On Photography," in *The Grain of the Voice*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 353–60.

⁵ Fengyuan, "The Photographs of Female Movie Star" (*Dianying nümingxing zhi zhaopian*), *Shenbao*, August 30, 1926.

⁶ Fengyuan, "Photographs."

⁷ The star photo album was relatively pricey compared with other pictorial publications. For example, *Modern Sketch (Shidai manhua)* was usually two jiao per issue. According to an interview conducted by Chinese film historian Zhen Zhang, "at the time the average salary for a journalist was 50 yuan, and a junior college professor earned about 60 yuan a month." (Interview with Shu Yan, November 16, 1996.) This line appears as an endnote in Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 399.

⁸ *Young Companion (Lianyou)* 99 (1934): 20.

⁹ *Chinese Female Film Star Album (Zhongguo dianying nümingxing zhaoxiang ji)* 1, no. 2 (1935): 27.

¹⁰ *Chinese Female Film Star Album*, 1.

¹¹ I am writing with a nod to Roland Barthes's notes on Eisenstein's stills. See Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Notes on Some of Eisenstein's Stills," *Artforum* (January 1973): 46–50.

¹² For two illuminating accounts of the pensive viewer in the cinematic context, see Raymond Bellour, "The Pensive Spectator," *Wide Angle* 9, no. 1 (1987): 6–7, and Laura Mulvey, "The Pensive Spectator," in *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 181–96.

¹³ Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

¹⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 71.

¹⁶ See also Christopher Rea, *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* (New York: Columbia University Press), 125. Kristine Harris notes that Wei Ming's photographs as wall decorations go beyond narcissism; they propel the film audience to see her as a star, an image commodified and subject to a kind of voyeuristic gaze. See Harris, "The New Woman

Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai," in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, Sheldon Hsiang-peng Lu, ed. (University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 277–302.

¹⁷ *Film Yearbook (Yingxi nianjian)*, 1934), 70.

¹⁸ Harris, "New Woman Incident," 293.

¹⁹ *United China Pictorial (Lianhua huabao)* 6, no. 2 (1935): 17.

²⁰ *Qingqing Films (Qingqing dianying)* 2, no. 1 (1935).

²¹ Harris, "New Woman Incident," 282.

²² Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 190.

²³ Sontag, *On Photography*, 105.

²⁴ Lu Shaofei, "The Editor's Note (Bianzhe bubai)," *Modern Sketch (Shidai manhua)*, no. 1 (1934).

²⁵ "Call for Submissions (*Shidai manhua tougao jianyue*)," *Modern Sketch (Shidai manhua)*, no. 16 (1935).

²⁶ For the script, see "Zhuiyuxuan Script: *Chang'e's Flight to the Moon (Zhuiyuxuan juben: chang'e benyue)*," *Mei Lanfang (Shanghai 1927)*, April 1927, 127–41.

²⁷ Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 189.

²⁸ Links Featured in "Photographs in Films Starring Ruan Lingyu: Considering Geometric Regions of the Motion Picture Frame"

The Peach Girl (Bu, 1931): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWOTy0F8QNQ>

Clip 1. *The Peach Girl* (Bu, 1931):

[https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/The%20Peach%20Girl%20\(1931\)%20Clip%201%20-%20Yang.mp4](https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/The%20Peach%20Girl%20(1931)%20Clip%201%20-%20Yang.mp4)

Christopher Rea's lecture on *The New Women*:

Part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp4RKHpaP2Y>

Clip 2. Part II: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/2AVfE5NYLR8?si=OjE8Hc552bD19aIH?start=113&end=160>

Love and Duty (Bu, 1931): https://youtu.be/jJJ_PYIOrgg

Clip 3. *Love and Duty* (Bu, 1931):

[https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/pub/Love%20and%20Duty%20\(1931\)%20Clip%203%20-%20Yang.mp4](https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/pub/Love%20and%20Duty%20(1931)%20Clip%203%20-%20Yang.mp4)

The New Women (Cai, 1935): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q4zhLxCBro>

Clip 4. *The New Women* (Cai, 1935):

[https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/pub/The%20New%20Women%20\(1935\)%20Clip%204%20-%200Yang.mp4](https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/pub/The%20New%20Women%20(1935)%20Clip%204%20-%200Yang.mp4)

Clip 5. *The New Women* (Cai, 1935): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-5-the-new-women-1935>

Clip 6. *The New Women* (Cai, 1935): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-6-the-new-women-1>

Clip 7. *The New Women* (Cai, 1935): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-7-the-new-women-1935>

Clip 8. *The New Women* (Cai, 1935): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-8-the-new-women-1>

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