

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH - SUNDAY 26 MARCH 2017

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Saturday 25th March | 16.30 **The Goddess (Shen nu)**

Dir. Wu Yonggang | China | 1934 | 1h 13m
With: Ruan Lingyu, Tian Jian, Zhang Zhizhi

Performing Live: John Sweeney (piano)

Screening material courtesy of China Film Archive

Supported by: Confucius Institute for Scotland and The University of Edinburgh

If you ask ten Chinese film historians to vote for one film that represents the highest achievement of Chinese cinema in the silent era, *The Goddess* is highly likely the winner. A masterpiece of social realism, *The Goddess* features Chinese superstar Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935) as a struggling mother who takes to prostitution on the streets of Shanghai in order to shelter her son from the corrupt city and give him a better chance in life.

This devastatingly beautiful and recently restored film, made by first time director/writer/designer Wu Yonggang (1907-1982) at the age of just 27, draws its great power from Ruan's striking and subtle performance. Her heart-rending and sympathetic portrayal of a self-sacrificing woman at the mercy of society's hypocrisy was a sensation that was tragically echoed in her real-life. In 1935, on the eve of her trial for adultery and after months of tabloid harassment, Ruan killed herself aged 25, just one year after the release of *The Goddess*.

Ruan Lingyu was born in Shanghai of working-class Cantonese parents. Shortly after the early death of her father, she and her mother lived with another Cantonese family named Zhang, as servants. By the time she was sixteen, the Zhangs were on the decline, and Ruan became the common-law wife of their fourth son, Zhang Damin. A year later, after screen-testing for the Mingxing Studio, she embarked on a highly successful screen career firstly at Mingxing and latterly at the Lianhua Studio, making nearly thirty films before her death in 1935.

In counterpoint to the glamour of her stardom, Ruan's personal life was turbulent and painful. Her relationship with Zhang deteriorated as Zhang was addicted to gambling and exploited Ruan as a ready source of money. One attempt at separation had culminated in a failed suicide attempt at the age of nineteen. Only at the height of her popularity, in 1933, was Ruan able to formalise the separation through a lawyer, and a few months later she moved in with another man, Tang Jishan, a wealthy businessman. But when Tang and Zhang began suing each other over property division and slander, the press placed Ruan at the centre of the scandal. This tragically drove her to a suicide that seemed to re-enact the narrative of a film she had just completed, *The New Woman* (dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935), which features a female writer and music teacher who commits suicide due to manifold harassments by men.

Despite her early death, Ruan Lingyu has enjoyed an enduring reputation in Chinese film history for her outstanding gift in performance and the expressive, tragic roles she played that mirrored the important page of woman's history in China in the early twentieth century. *The Goddess* provides a lens through which you can catch a glimpse into the multiple facets of women's struggles, both on-screen and off-screen, in a time of profound social change in 1930s China in an increasingly globalised context.

By Dr Xuelei Huang, Chancellor's Fellow-Lecturer and Dr Julian Ward, Senior Lecturer in Chinese, Asian Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh.



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