


HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music
WEDNESDAY 16 - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2022
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A String of Pearls (Yichuan Zhenzhu) (1926)

Sunday 20 March 2022

Performing Live: John Sweeney

Plus short accompanied by **John Sweeney**: extract from *The Necklace* (1909) (Library of Congress)

A String of Pearls (一串珍珠), directed by Li Zeyuan for the Changcheng (Great Wall) film company and released in 1926, is a dazzling melodrama about greed and redemption, class and social climbing.

Changcheng was founded in New York in 1921 by a group of young Overseas Chinese men: after shooting two short films which introduced Chinese customs to American audiences, they moved to Shanghai in 1924 taking the film equipment they had acquired with them. The company's first feature film, *Abandoned Wife* (1924), directed by Li Zeyuan with a screenplay by Hou Yao, was a melodrama heavily influenced by Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a work that inspired many works of China's New Culture movement of the 1910s and 20s.

The same team of Li and Hou were to come together again two years later with *A String of Pearls*, based on "The Necklace," a short story by Guy de Maupassant first published in 1884. For Li Zeyuan's film, Hou Yao's screenplay replaced the necklace with a string of pearls and moved the setting from Paris to Shanghai, China's most cosmopolitan city at the time with an estimated population of around two million, including some 30,000 foreigners. Indeed, Shanghai is in some ways as much the star of the film as the string of pearls: thus, the opening scene, a night-time tracking shot of the neon lights of the bustling Nanjing Road, Shanghai's premier shopping street, straightaway introduces the audience to a locale renowned as the very epicentre of decadence and excitement. In contrast, the comfortable bourgeois home of Wang Yusheng and Wang Xiuzhen, the couple at the heart of the story, appears to present a more sedate vision, but we soon discover that the city's multitudinous sensual passions and social aspirations are far from absent.

A String of Pearls takes place on the occasion of the Lantern Festival, an important moment in the lunar calendar that marks the end of the celebrations for Chinese New Year. The first full moon of the new year is a time traditionally associated with rare opportunities for unchaperoned romantic assignations, as seen in a much anthologised poem attributed to the Song dynasty female poet, Zhu Shuzhen (fl.1131).



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Last year at the Lantern Festival

The lamps in the flower market were bright as day.

The moon was touching the tips of the willow branches

When we met after dusk.

This year at the Lantern Festival

The moon and flowers were as before.

I couldn't see my companion from last year,

Tears soaked the sleeves of my spring clothes.

The hedonistic atmosphere of the Lantern Festival, which heightens the driving desires of the Shanghai bourgeoisie to be part of the in-crowd, pervades the film. In order to underline this, a display of light bulbs forming the Chinese characters for Lantern Festival, 元宵, are prominently displayed at the entrance to the venue for the crucial party attended by Wang Xiuzhen. As Changcheng's own publicity note breathlessly announced: "Shanghai is a prosperous and flourishing part of China and, at the same time, a den of iniquity. The city's population are accustomed to indulging themselves in lives of wild decadence and extravagance, but it is the young women, above all, who are unrestrained in their pursuit of empty glory."

The first public screening of *A String of Pearls* (一串珍珠) took place at the Palace Theatre in Shanghai on October 1st 1926. However, like so many of the film companies that operated in Shanghai over the course of the 1920s and 30s, Changcheng's star burned only briefly before the company went bankrupt in 1930.

By Dr Julian Ward, Senior Lecturer in Chinese at the Department of Asian Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh. Dr Ward is co-editor of The Chinese Cinema Book (2011). A second edition of The Chinese Cinema Book will be published in 2020.

Dir. Li Zeyuan | Adapted for Screen by. Hou Yao | China | 1926 | N/C U | 1h 46m + short accompanied by **John Sweeny**

With: Lei Xiadian, Liu Hanjun, Liu Jiqun, Zhai Qiqi, Xing Shaomei Huang Zhihui



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Screening materials courtesy of the China Film Archive

To learn more, view our online talk by Dr Victor Fan: *A String of Pearls: Mandarin Ducks, Butterflies and Modern Shanghai in the 1920s*, supported by The Confucius Institute for Scotland in the University of Edinburgh. This talk can be viewed on the [HippFest Facebook page](#), the [FCT YouTube channel](#) or you can visit the [Q&As and Playlists](#) page on [our website](#).”

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