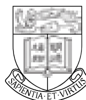
# Ruan Ling-Yu
## The Goddess of Shanghai

Richard J. Meyer


香港大學出版社
Hong Kong University Press

**Hong Kong University Press**
14/F Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

© Hong Kong University Press 2005

First published 2005
Reprinted 2006, 2012

ISBN 978-962-209-395-9

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Printed and bound by ColorPrint Production Ltd., Hong Kong, China

# Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| List of Illustrations | | vii |
| Foreword by Leo Ou-fan Lee | | xiii |
| Preface | | xv |
| Cast of Characters in the Life of Ruan Ling-yu | | xix |
| CHAPTER 1 | Suicide and the Decadent City | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2 | A Maid's Daughter | 9 |
| CHAPTER 3 | First Day on the Set: Ruan's Early Career | 13 |
| CHAPTER 4 | The Suffering Idol | 23 |
| CHAPTER 5 | "I Want to Live" | 41 |
| CHAPTER 6 | Ruan's Legacy | 59 |
| Filmography of Ruan Ling-yu (1927–1935) | | 71 |
| Sources of Ruan Ling-yu's Films | | 79 |
| Bibliography | | 81 |
| About the Author | | 93 |

# List of Illustrations


Photo 1 Ruan Ling-yu lying in state at the Wanguo Funeral Home.

Photo 2 The flowers at Ruan's funeral were reported in the press to be as high as the buildings.

Photo 3 Mourners at Ruan's funeral were larger in number than at Rudolph Valentino's in Hollywood.

Photo 4 Ruan's adopted daughter Xiaoyu was at the funeral. Her name was changed to Tang Zhenli by Tang Jishan who provided for her education.

Photo 5 Ruan's funeral procession stretched for over five kilometers.

Photo 6 Pallbearers from the Lianhua studios carry Ruan's coffin to the hearse.

Photo 7 Crowds watching the funeral procession started forming early on the morning of March 14, 1935.

Photo 8 Ruan's funeral procession was reported to be larger than an emperor's.

Photo 9 The banner at the head of the funeral procession proclaimed it was Ruan Ling-yu.

Photo 10 Throngs at the funeral procession and outside the cemetery were estimated by *Variety* to be around 300,000 people.
Photo 11 The hearse carrying Ruan's body moves slowly along Shanghai's streets.
Photo 12 It seemed that all of Shanghai waited for Ruan's funeral procession to pass.
Photo 13 Mourners cued up to view Ruan's corpse. It is estimated that 25,000 persons paid their respects at the funeral home.
Photo 14 Ruan and her dog, which was a gift to her from Tang Jishan. He later threw the animal out of the window in a fit of anger.
Photo 15 Ruan's first film *Guaming De Fuqi* (Husband and Wife in Name) was a success in 1927. Her co-star was Huang Junfu.
Photo 16 Ruan as a nun in *Xiang Xue Hai* (A Sea of Fragrant Snow), 1934. She took the vows to avoid a forced marriage.
Photo 17 Author Richard J. Meyer interviews film scenarist Shen Ji in Shanghai. Shen knew many of the Lianhua personnel who worked with Ruan.
Photo 18 Ruan wearing the fur coat that had caused so much trouble between her and Zhang Damin, seen here at a party at the home of Li Minwei. Her companions are Xu Qinfang and Li Minghui.
Photo 19 Ruan, as Wei Ming, in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman), 1934, as she is dying and gasps, "I want to live, I want to live, I want to live."
Photo 20 Ruan, as the responsible sister, says good night to her frivolous sibling, Li Lili, in *Guofeng* (National Style), 1935.

Photo 21 Ruan, as Wei Ming, in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman), 1934, accosted by a pimp as she thinks about being a prostitute for a night.
Photo 22 Ruan, as Wei Ming, confides in a journalist about her life. He later betrays her and writes a scandalous story about her in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman), 1934.
Photo 23 Ruan, as Wei Ming, with Zheng Junli, as a friend, who gets her book published in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman), 1934.
Photo 24 Ruan in *Zaihui Ba, Shanghai* (Goodbye Shanghai), 1934, plays a country lass who goes to Shanghai and is forced to become a dancehall girl. Here she discovers that the physician who raped her is the same one who treated her dying child.
Photo 25 Ruan meets a ship's officer who introduces her to Shanghai before he sails in *Zaihui Ba, Shanghai* (Goodbye Shanghai), 1934. She then is overwhelmed by the decadent city.
Photo 26 Ruan as the first wife of a Shanghai businessman, played by Gao Zhanfei, who marries a Russian woman thinking her dead in *Guilai* (Coming Back), 1934.
Photo 27 Ruan, as Ye Dasao, the village toy-maker, and her daughter, played by Li Lili, in a scene before they travel to the big city. The girl dies when the Japanese bomb Shanghai in *Xiao Wanyi* (Little Toys), 1933.
Photo 28 Ruan, as Lingu, the innocent peasant, with Jin Yan as De'en, the landowner's son in *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), 1931, in this tale about the ills of feudalism.
Photo 29 Ruan, as Lingu, leaving her home for a meeting with her lover De'en in *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), 1931.

Photo 30 Ruan Ling-yu with Jin Yan, her co-star of several Lianhua films, in *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), 1931.

Photo 31 Ruan, as Lingu, with Wang Guilin, playing her father, who protects the landlord's cattle in *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), 1931.

Photo 32 Ruan Ling-yu standing next to Jin Yan, who is holding her adopted daughter Xiaoyu, on location with the Lianhua crew shooting *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), 1931.

Photo 33 Ruan, as the aged Yang Naifan and her daughter from the love affair with Li Zhuyi, in *Lian'ai Yu Yiwu* (Love and Duty), 1931.

Photo 34 Ruan, as the young Naifan on a Shanghai lake with her first love Li Zhuyi, played by Jin Yan, in *Lian'ai Yu Yiwu* (Love and Duty), 1931.

Photo 35 Ruan contemplates becoming a Buddhist nun in order to avoid a forced marriage to a wealthy man in *Xiang Xue Hai* (A Sea of Fragrant Snow), 1934.

Photo 36 The Wei Li Da Theatre in Shanghai where many of Ruan's films were screened. Lianhua's uninterrupted production of silent films in the early 1930s continued to attract large audiences.

Photo 37 American-trained Sun Yu, who directed Ruan in *Gudu Chunmeng* (Memories of the Old Capital), *Yecao Xianhua* (Wild Flower), and *Xiao Wanyi* (Little Toys) for Lianhua.

Photo 38 Cai Chusheng, who was a close friend of Ruan, directed her in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman). He is best known for *Spring River Flows East,* made after the Second World War.

Photo 39 Wu Yonggang made his directorial debut with one of Ruan's greatest films, *Shennü* (The Goddess). He spent several years in Hollywood before entering Shanghai's film industry.

Photo 40 Bu Wancang directed Ruan in her very first film, *Guaming De Fuqi* (Husband and Wife in Name), in 1927, for Ming Xing Film Company. He later directed the actress in the Lianhua productions, *Lian'ai Yu Yiwu* (Love and Duty), *Yi Jian Mei* (A Spray of Plum Blossoms), *Taohua Qi Xue Ji* (The Peach Girl), *Xu Gudu Chunmeng* (Sequel of Memories of the Old Capital) and *Sange Modeng Nuxing* (Three Modern Women).

Photos 41 42, 43 The many faces of Ruan Ling-yu. She had the ability to feel the suffering and anxiety of the characters she played.

Photo 44 Ruan, the good prostitute, plays with her son, acted by Li Keng, in *Shennü* (The Goddess), 1934.

Photo 45 A moral prostitute with her smile of the night is immortalized by Ruan in *Shennü* (The Goddess), 1934.

Photo 46 The kindly headmaster, played by Li Junpan, visits the prostitute's apartment to investigate the rumors in *Shennü* (The Goddess), 1934.

Photo 47 Ruan is a proud mother at the school play where her son performs. She is snubbed by his classmates' parents in *Shennü* (The Goddess), 1934.

Photo 48 The gangster boss, played by Zhang Zhizhi, shares a cigarette and the evening with Ruan as she evades the police in *Shennü* (The Goddess), 1934.

Photo 49 Ruan, as Wei Ming, realizes that the male forces of

society are against her in *Xin Nuxing* (New Woman), 1934.

(All photographs courtesy of the China Film Archive except No. 17.)

*CHAPTER 1*

# Suicide and the Decadent City

On the same day in 1935 that one hundred and twenty of the most prominent women of Shanghai were celebrating International Women's Day, the most famous actress of China committed suicide. The vice-chairman of the Women's League of China, Mrs Herman Liu, did not know her words were prophetic when she told the group that they should "pay respect to great women … who had given their lives for humanitarian purposes."[1] A few hours before, the Greta Garbo of Shanghai, Ruan Ling-yu, wrote two suicide notes, put three bottles of sleeping pills into a bowl of congee and calmly ate the poisoned gruel.

Ruan, whose many screen roles represented the suffering women of China, ended her life at the age of twenty-four after making twenty-nine films. These motion pictures not only demonstrated her versatility on the screen but also showed different phases of life in Shanghai and China during the late 1920s and early 1930s. They illustrated common social themes such as poverty, class struggle, feudalism and modernity.

Five days after Ruan's suicide, tens of thousands of Shanghainese watched silently as her funeral procession passed through the crowded streets of the fifth largest city in the world.[2]

Often called the "Paris of Asia" and the "brothel of Asia,"[3] this decadent and sophisticated metropolis had an image known all over the globe. Sailors and others were said to be "shanghaied" when they were kidnapped on land and taken away to sea.

Yet, in order to understand Ruan and her early death, one must examine the social and political currents that shaped her life and films. Shanghai between the two world wars was a city of intrigues, political change, corruption, social disparities, and creativity. The region was a battleground between the conflicting roles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), left-wing romantics and the reactionary forces of the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party led by Chiang Kai-shek. The latter eradicated the Shanghai communist organization and forced Mao Zedong's Red Army to embark on the Long March in 1934.[4] Within this political framework, there were really two Chinas: the modern, semi-Westernized cities of the eastern coastal provinces, inhabited by the urban elite, who had little contact with life in the countryside, and rural China, which was unchanged in its poverty, ignorance, and hardships.[5]

These tortuous conflicts were taken up by the emerging Lianhua Film Company, which in the early 1930s grew to become the most popular film production house in China. The Shanghai studio hired a number of May Fourth[6] writers and artists and produced several serious films on contemporary social problems.[7] Ruan, one of Lianhua's most loved stars, mirrored the dichotomy of her country in her various roles as a peasant, worker, social butterfly, beggar, student, teacher, nun and more. She impressed "one quintessential image after another on the public's mind in her twenty-nine film appearances."[8]

Contemporary filmmakers in China understood the underlying problems of their society: poverty and exploitation were major themes. As Betty Peh-T'i Wei writes, "cinematic heroes were poor

but virtuous, while villains were rich, cruel, and self-serving."[9] In fact, most films made in the spirit of the May Fourth Movement, which championed women's liberation among other social reforms, featured women as victims who "seemed to stand for all of the weak of China as well as for China itself, the so-called 'weak man of Asia'."[10]

Twelve years of warlord rule from 1916–1928 in the rural areas of the country heaped unprecedented hardships upon large swaths of the populace and helped to foment the intellectual revolution that preceded the KMT grip on Shanghai. Young intellectuals, influenced by the May Fourth Movement, refused to continue their traditional subservience to the family system. For it was the traditions of their floundering civilization, they felt, that had brought them to the brink of disaster. A conspicuous theme in Chinese literature in the 1920s was the contrast between the happiness of independent young persons who insisted upon freedom of choice in their marriage partners and the sadness of others who submitted themselves to their parents' choice of spouse. Another trend flowing from the May Fourth Movement was the rebelliousness of women who bobbed their hair, went to school and participated in political activities.[11]

The May Fourth Movement also led to the introduction of Western authors translated into Chinese and a new Chinese literature modeled on Western literary forms.[12] However, there was intense political repression by the KMT and extremely heavy censorship. Between 1929 and 1936, for example, 450 literary works and 700 publications in the social sciences were banned. At least 1,800 books and journals were proscribed as well as a host of newspaper items.[13] Cinema, too, was censored and censorship played a role in shaping film culture of the 1930s.[14]

Shanghai itself was really several cities. Half Western and half Chinese, it was divided into an International Settlement comprised

of the former British and American settlements and the French Concession governed directly by the French through their counsel. These European municipalities continued to grow during the late nineteenth century, wrapping themselves "around the ancient Chinese city like the flesh around the seed of a particularly succulent piece of fruit."[15]

During the First World War, Chinese industrialists made millions as they founded factories, shipyards, and cotton mills. Laborers from rural areas flooded the city to create a boomtown of enormous proportions. With the banning of opium in 1918, Shanghai became the center of large-scale organized crime, much as Chicago did during prohibition against alcohol in the United States.[16] The city was created as an economic center, not a political one, by a new breed of Chinese who were responsible for the cosmopolitan character of the metropolis.[17] As Shu-mei Shih writes, "This cosmopolitanism was instrumental in the rise of a bustling literary industry."[18]

In 1927, Chiang Kai-shek made an alliance with the Shanghai mob that gave him control over the activities of Chinese residents in the settlements. Unlike the police or tax collectors, the gangsters did not stop at the limit of the settlements. Thousands of Green Gang members became agents of the KMT and were available to kidnap rich merchants who did not pay kickbacks, abduct communist and union leaders, and threaten movie studios.[19] In fact, leaders of the Green Gang were enlisted into the police forces of the International Settlement and the French Concession in order to strengthen the cocaine trade.[20] Unlike Chicago, these gangsters were integrated into the system of state power that the KMT government developed during the 1930s.[21]

An attempt was made to suppress the source of national outrage at the Japanese bombing of Shanghai as the KMT feared that demonstrations by students and workers would bring further reprisals

from the Japanese or other foreign powers.[22] "Chiang struck," writes Jonathan Spence, "at the new generation of liberal, often Western-educated or Western-influenced students, and moved his party back in the direction of a moralistic and simplified brand of Confucian authoritarianism, which he enforced through his ever-growing political and internal – security forces."[23]

In metropolitan Shanghai there were roughly 100,000 members of the Greens.[24] This gang, with their monopoly of the city, became, not outlaws, but the law. A restaurant, hotel or bank paid a protection fee or its owner joined the organization. There was no recourse to the authorities: Chiang Kai-shek was a member of the mob.[25] Yet, the Westerner who resided there looked the other way. "The majority of the foreign population lives for pleasure and excitement," wrote a journalist of the day.[26] An invisible wall separated them from the four hundred million Chinese peasants, undernourished, sickly, ill-bred, in poverty, "waiting for the next flood, the next crop failure, the next war, to come and squeeze them out of existence." However, there were one million Chinese who lived in the International Settlement. Some were wealthy men who owned factories, department stores, banks, motion picture houses and film studios.[27]

The most "reliable" secret organization was Chiang's Blue Shirts who were carefully picked from the Green Gang.[28] This band of thugs tried to impose New Life standards upon public culture in Shanghai.[29] They raided film studios and issued warnings that they would "cleanse the cultural world" of makers of leftist films. The tactics of the Green Gang, together with the work of the KMT censors, resulted in the rejection of eighty-three film scripts and closure of fourteen film studios between 1934 and 1935.[30]

The Lianhua Film Company founded by Luo Mingyou, had close ties to the KMT, but left-wing employees who criticized social conditions were able to influence their productions. To curry favor

with the Nationalists, Luo produced Ruan's last film, "National Customs," which featured the New Life Movement. A competitor, Yi Hua studios, was less fortunate. The Blue Shirts destroyed their facilities in 1933.[31]

It was in this incredible metropolis that the Lianhua studio and their talented directors and actors created a film microcosm of all the disparities, pain and struggle that was descending upon Shanghai and China at that time. To understand the city is to understand the films that reflected the collapsing system around them.

Frederick Wakeman Jr. wrote that: "Shanghai's identity was both a foreign city with its movie theaters, street lights and civilized creature comforts such as running water and heat, and the native city inhabited by shed people with the homeless sleeping in coffins or begging on the streets."[32] It was in this decadent city of her birth that Ruan Ling-yu took her own life at the height of her career.

***Notes***

1. *The North-China Daily News*, Saturday, March 9, 1935.
2. Ibid., Friday, March 15, 1935.
3. Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6.
4. Stella Dong, *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), pp. 248–9.
5. James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912–1949* (New York: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1975), p. 22.
6. Urban protests on May 4, 1919, against the Treaty of Versailles's award to Japan of former German-held territory gave rise to the movement known as "The May Fourth Movement."
7. Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 10.
8. Frederick Wakeman Jr., *Policing Shanghai 1927–1937* (Berkeley, Los

Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 11.

9. Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Old Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. viii–ix.
10. Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd, 1999), p. 157.
11. Ibid., pp. 122–3.
12. Ibid., pp. 123–34.
13. Ibid., pp. 210–1.
14. Yingjin Zhang, "Introduction: Cinema and Urban Culture in Republican Shanghai," in Yingjin Zhang (ed.), *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 17.
15. Dong, *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City*, p. 18.
16. Ibid., p. 115.
17. Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 234.
18. Ibid., p. 238.
19. Marie-Claire Bergère, "'The Other China': Shanghai from 1919 to 1949," in Christopher Howe (ed.), *Shanghai: Revolution and Development in an Asian Metropolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 16.
20. Brian G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919–1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 216.
21. Ibid., p. 224.
22. The Japanese were united in the idea that expansion of their country was necessary — some advocated territorial expansion, and some economic expansion. Harumi Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai 1925–1931* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1995), p. 151.
23. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895–1980* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 244.
24. Ernest O. Hauser, *Shanghai: City for Sale* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 252.
25. Ibid., pp. 250–1.

26. G. E. Miller, *Shanghai, The Paradise of Adventures* (Shanghai: Wong Wei, 1937), p. 252.
27. Hauser, *Shanghai: City for Sale*, pp. 247–8.
28. Ibid., p. 295.
29. The New Life Movement was created by Chiang Kai-shek in 1934 to build character and was based on Confucian, YMCA and European fascist ideas. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration*, p. 218.
30. Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai 1927–1937*, pp. 238–9.
31. Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949*, pp. 11–2.
32. Frederic Wakeman Jr., and Wen-Hsin Yeh (eds.), *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), p. 13.

*CHAPTER* 6

# Ruan's Legacy

Before dawn on International Women's Day, a woman who symbolized the suffering of Chinese women lay dying. Ruan Ling-yu, who had agreed to speak to a girl's school to commemorate the day, was in a coma.[1] Her lover, Tang, awakened by the actress' heavy breathing, realized that she had poisoned herself. He screamed for Ah Ying to help him get the limp Ruan to an emergency room. The tea merchant decided to take her to Fumin hospital in North Shanghai, run by the Japanese. He chose this clinic because he believed that the Japanese doctors would not recognize Ruan and he, as usual, was worried about his reputation. There were two hospitals much closer to their home and Ah Ying would have chosen them.

Ruan's death, unlike the screen personas she portrayed, was due to negligence that could easily have been avoided. At 4 a.m., there were no doctors on duty at Fumin. Tang decided to return home to the consternation of Ah Ying, who suggested they stop at the other hospitals. When they arrived back at the house, Tang called a few European doctors to come over at once. In the meantime, he hid Ruan's two suicide notes. The attending physicians made arrangements to send Ruan to Zhongxi Convalescent Hospital. By

this time it was 10 a.m. Ah Ying and Xiaoyu heard her moan on the way to the facility. The medical staff tried to revive her fading life using methods known at the time, including oxygen, artificial respiration, and hot baths. Ruan never recovered from the coma. She died at 6.30 p.m. on March 8, 1935.

The tragedy could have been prevented. If Ruan had received immediate help after she was discovered by Tang, it is most likely she would have been saved as she had been after her first attempt at suicide. Instead, it had been almost half a day since Ruan had taken the overdose of sleeping pills.

News of her death spread instantaneously. After the coroner's report on March 9 that the actress's death was caused by ingesting sleeping pills, police were sent to her house and found empty bottles in the bedroom. They did not discover any notes but ruled it a suicide. Newspapers all over China put the story on their front pages.[2] Zhang Damin rushed to the Wanguo Funeral Home but was prevented from seeing Ruan's body by security guards hired by Lianhua. He told the press that it was not his fault that she had died.[3]

Even in death, Ruan could not escape the tragedy of her sordid past. The court case initiated by Damin, scheduled for the same day, proceeded as usual. The plaintiff, feigning illness, was represented by his lawyer. Tang, Ah Ying, and their attorney sat together. As the tea merchant rose to present his testimony, Ah Ying sobbed in the background. He whispered to the old woman not to worry, as he would take care of her and Xiaoyu.

The judge was told about Ruan's suicide notes, which blamed Damin for her death. As Tang testified, tears flooded his eyes. Ah Ying shouted, "I demand a life for a life from Zhang Damin!"[4] The packed gallery exploded with noise. Damin's lawyer, realizing the hopelessness of his suit, asked the judge to withdraw the charges. The case was closed.

When the trial ended, Ah Ying went to the funeral home and spied Damin leaving the premises. Tang placed obituaries in several newspapers stating that "Mrs Tang Jishan"[5] died on March 8 and the memorial service would be held March 11. Most of the Lianhua staff was furious with the announcement as well as devastated by Ruan's death. They knew that the tea merchant and the actress never married so the reference to "Mrs Tang" was gratuitous. Some blamed Tang for the delay in obtaining medical help on the night of her demise.

Ruan's adoring public was equally distraught. Thousands of fans blocked the streets around the funeral home hoping to get inside to glimpse her body. The police constantly had to disperse the crowd.[6] All of Ruan's directors and fellow actors took turns sitting at her bier. Just before the memorial service on March 11, Tang released the first of the two suicide notes. It was addressed "To Society."

> My death now will have people certainly think that I'm escaping punishment. But actually I'm guilty of what? I've never been unfair to Zhang Damin. Not to mention other things, I give him $100 every month even though we're no longer living together. This is not merely a verbal statement without proof for I've evidence and receipts. However, he replaces kindness with enmity and returns evil for good. Besides, people outside do not understand the situation and think that I've been unfair to him. Ah! What can I do? I've been thinking over and over. The only way to solve the problem is to kill myself. Ah! My death is not a pity but it's dreadful that gossip is a fearful thing.
>
> I can't clarify that I've been treated unjustly if I don't kill myself. Now I'm dead and he can fulfill his wish at last. Even if you don't kill somebody, somebody dies because of you. Zhang Damin, we'll see how you can escape public opinion. At last you can no longer make a false charge against Tang Jishan because you've already killed me.
>
> Last words written by Ruan Ling-yu, night of 7 March 1935[7]

Thousands from the public attempted to attend the memorial service on March 11, but only film people, family members and the press could gain access to Wanguo Funeral Home. Several Lianhua colleagues spoke at the eulogy. Fei Mu blamed the feudal ideology which he said was still in society for her death. Li Minwei said Ruan "had seen all the brutalities of social injustice, particularly those related to the inferiority of women … Protesting with her dead body, she demands justice from us all."[8] Luo Mingyou insinuated that the actress "did not die of suicide; she sacrificed herself to society and all women."[9]

But Ruan's death did not lend itself so easily to symbolism. The next evening Tang told Ah Ying, Xiaoyu, and a few Lianhua directors that there was a second suicide note addressed to him. Seeking to exonerate himself, he shared the contents:

> Never have I dreamt of leaving you forever so soon. Please don't be sad because there is no long-lasting banquet in the world. It's important for you to restrain your grief. I feel so sorry to let you suffer … because of me. Now he uses all means to make a false charge against you and me, but one day the whole thing will come to light …When a bird is about to die, its cry will be sad. When a person is about to die, her words will be good. … If I've a soul after my death, I'll protect you forever. After my death, please use my money to take care of my mother and daughter. If it's not enough, would you please contribute your efforts … If you love me, please be sure to fulfill my expectations. All right, if we're lucky, we may meet again in the next life. Besides, the company owes me salary. Please collect the money from the company and use it to support my mother and daughter. The total is $2,050. This is very important, very important.
>
> Besides, here's a letter. If the outside world knows that I've committed suicide, the letter should be published immediately. If not, please keep it.
>
> Last words written by Ruan Ling-yu, midnight, 7 March 1935[10]

She was buried like royalty. After her body had lain in state for five days and had been viewed by over 25,000 individuals, Ruan's funeral was held on March 14. Over 100,000 people were estimated to have lined the ten-mile route from the funeral home to Luen Yee Sayzoong Cemetery. *Variety* used the figure of over 300,000 in its obituary and observed that this outpouring of sentiment outdid Rudolf Valentino's Hollywood ceremony.[11]

Although the procession began at 1.30 p.m., police were kept busy clearing the roads of large crowds which had formed earlier in the morning. The front of the cortege bore an enormous enlargement of Ruan's photograph. An elegantly carved Chinese hearse carrying the actress' body lying in a silverette coffin was followed by a bus laden with a universe of flowers. Sixty cars followed the mourners' vehicles, which included Tang, Ah Ying, Xiaoyu and Lianhua personnel. Two Chinese bands furnished music along the way. Waiting masses of ordinary Shanghainese lined every available lane at the cemetery. Thousands paused quietly outside looking, "pressed against the gates which were barred against them."[12]

The ceremony inspired plenty of drama. After the Buddhist rites were performed at the gravesite, Tang asked to have the coffin opened before it was interred so he could have "a final farewell." Then six pallbearers from Lianhua bore her coffin to the grave while the musicians played "Nearer My God to Thee".[13] The enormous crowds were amazingly silent. Ruan's funeral made the front pages of all Shanghai newspapers. The English-language *North-China Daily News* carried three-column-wide photographs of her cortege.[14] Several female fans reportedly killed themselves in sympathy.[15] In fact, one suicide note read: "If Ruan Ling-yu is dead, what else is there to live for?"[16]

Ruan became even more symbolic after her death than she had been during her life. Left-wing writers used the reaction to Ruan's

death and the outpouring of sentiment by the general population for her short life span as an excuse to attack the status quo. Nie Gannu, a cultural critic, wrote an essay that Ruan did not kill herself, but her murderer was "the residual feudal morality that still infatuates our minds."[17] Film critic Chen Wu agreed that feudalism was the cause of her death and stated that its representatives were Zhang Damin, Tang Jishan, reckless newspapermen and Ruan herself.[18] The tabloids still scandalized the dead actress with lurid stories about her sex life. Some even linked her suicide with her role in "New Woman."

*The Central Chinese Daily News* speculated that she killed herself because she was affected by all the negative roles she had played.[19] Its editors kept asking in a series of articles who killed Ruan Ling-yu.[20] A far-fetched theory is that she was murdered to hurt Lianhua because of its progressive films and/or its debts. Such conspiracy theories apparently drew on the lingering memory of what happened to the Yi Hua studios wrecked by the Blue Shirts two years earlier.

A simple explanation for her demise was written by He Keren, who blamed the working environment. He explained that the pressures at the newly emerging film industry on a young star were sufficient to drive her to despair, exhaustion and ultimately breakdown. "For a male or female star, apart from working in the evening, they also needed to spread their luminescence in ballrooms until all hours of the night."[21]

Lu Xun, China's most famous modern writer, indicted the press with his essay, "Gossip Is a Fearful Thing," published two months later. He wrote, "Newspapers are not what they should be," yet the press still had power to damage individuals:

> Weak in the face of the strong, it seems strong enough to those weaker than itself; so although sometimes it has

> to suffer in silence, at others it still shows its might. And those like Ruan Ling-yu make good copy for the display of power, because, although a celebrity, she was helpless. Your small townsfolk love to listen to scandals, especially scandals about someone they know. … Since everyone knew Ruan Ling-yu from the films, she was good copy for papers wanting sensational news and could at least increase their sales. Readers seeing items about her would think: "Though I am not so beautiful as Ruan Ling-yu, I have higher standards." Or, "Though I am not so able as Ruan Ling-yu, I come from a more respectable family." Even after her suicide, people might think: "Though I am not so talented, I am braver – I have not committed suicide." It is certainly worth spending a few coppers to discover your own superiority. But once the public has these opinions of a professional artist, that is the end for her. So if instead of talking loftily about social systems or strength of character which we hardly understand ourselves, we put ourselves in her place, we can see that Ruan Ling-yu was telling the truth when she said, "Gossip is a fearful thing." And those who thought the newspaper reports had something to do with her suicide were telling the truth, too.[22]

It is ironic that Lu Xun only screened four Chinese films during those years because he favored Hollywood productions, since he said he was disappointed in Shanghai movies he had seen in the 1920s.[23] The author mentioned in his essay that the opera staged by Zhang Damin, *Death of a Film Star*, would "sink into utter oblivion."[24]

But the drama was not over. At the end of April, a second set of suicide notes were allegedly disclosed. Published in a privately circulated newsletter, *Siming Business Journal*, Ruan's supposedly real statements were quoted:

> Damin: I've been driven to death by you, but who can believe that? Why don't you think about my monthly subsidy of $100

> to you even after we've departed? You're really heartless. Now, I'm dead and you'll probably be satisfied! People will certainly think I'm dreadful and being punished for my crime. But actually I'm guilty of what? I'm only regretting that I should not become the trophy between the two of you. But it's too late!

This first note to Damin was not too different from the initial suicide note, but her second letter to Tang was a complete turn-around:

> Jishan: If you're not infatuated with "xx," if you didn't beat me that night and beat me again tonight, I might not have done such a thing! After my death, in future people will certainly call you a devil who dallies with women. They will even say that I'm a woman without a soul. But, at that time, I won't be alive and you go and bear the accusations! Yesterday was Zhiyun, today is me, and who will be the one for tomorrow? I think you'll know the answer. I'm dead, but I dare not hate you, hoping that you'll take good care of my mother and daughter. Besides, Lianhua owes me salary of $2,050. Please use the money to take care of my mother and daughter. Please take great care of them for they can only rely on you. Without me, you can do whatever you like and I'm happy.
>
> Last words written by Ling-yu[25]

These later notes were said to be "authentic," according to scholar Michael G. Chang.[26] Shen Ji, author and screenwriter who worked with Ruan's circle, maintains that Tang had the first suicide letters forged by Liang Saishan who later out of guilt released the true ones. This has been corroborated by scholar Liu Guo-jun.[27] Whether the first set was written by Ruan, as claimed by Tang throughout his life, or Liang, they add to the legend of the actress.

Fascinating still is Christian Henriot's study of prostitution in Shanghai which noted that suicide was common among high-class

courtesans who could either find nor refuse a husband. The author writes that sometimes suicide "provided postmortem proof" of a courtesan's honesty. In a curious way, Ruan's identification with her many roles as courtesans and prostitutes may have contributed more to her myth and her death.[28]

The fates of both Zhang Damin and Tang Jishan were "very Chinese," states cinema scholar Yingjin Zhang.[29] The tea merchant moved out of the house, but continued to support Ah Ying until her death at the age of 82. He changed Ruan Xiaoyu's name to Tang Zhenli and provided for her education until her marriage to a Chinese bank manager in Thailand. After the Second World War, Tang remarried and moved to Taiwan. His business went bankrupt and the aging man was forced to sell tea bags on the streets of Taipei. He died on the sidewalk sick and alone. Damin had a similar experience. After his opera closed, he made public appearances as Ruan's ex-husband, recounting her career. His death as a young man was said to be from overdosing on gambling and drugs.

Harriet Sergeant, a noted writer and longtime resident of Shanghai, links the destiny of Ruan Ling-yu to the fate of her decadent city in the late 1930s:

> Like her, its success proved as flimsy as one of Nanking Road's neon signs. Political, financial, cultural or even social innovation is not enough when lights can be switched off and electrical supplies disconnected. In 1949, traditional China under a new name did just that. The Shanghainese proved powerless to stop it. They had in fact lost the fight twelve years before.[30]

Shanghai writer Zhang Kebiao's article, "Come Let Us Soundly Sleep by the Crater of the Volcano and Rejoice in Our Dreams," painted "decadence as the unfettered eruption of passion that one experiences at the moment of death." The author noted that sleeping

by a volcano's crater and perishing in its eruption will cause the filth and ugliness of the world to disappear.[31] Zhang's piece could be said to be a metaphor for Ruan's suicide. Only her death, she felt, could erase the cruelty of her lovers, the harshness of the press, and the corrupt nature of the city.

Much has been written about Ruan as an example of a nascent feminist movement. Miriam Hansen contends that the heroines of silent films in Shanghai "struggle against an oppressive patriarchal economy."[32] Ruan's conflict with Damin and Tang and their bullying ways reflected the lives of Shanghainese women coping with the feudal society and its rampant sexism.

The public image of Ruan was connected in large measure with the various roles she played on the screen. She was perforce corrupted by the city of Shanghai, which swallowed her up as it had so many women who struggled for survival. Used by those who wanted changes in society and even revolution, Ruan's death provided them with a convenient martyr. Others saw her as an embodiment of male fantasies.

Just as Marilyn Monroe's turbulent past and suicide gave rise to a Hollywood legend, Ruan's private life and its lurid details, as reported in the tabloids, provided Shanghai with a dramatic episode in its history. Both actresses to this day continue to be used as sources of gossip, speculation and revelations of lurid personal anecdotes.

Hong Kong film critic Shu Kei has been fascinated with the many myths and legends of Ruan. He researched several, which included one that the actress was not really dead. Instead, she was hiding in Canton (Guangzhou) and the body in the funeral home was composed of wax. In another city, a man, devastated by the movie star's death, committed suicide in the same way Ruan did, by taking sleeping pills. Still another legend told the story about a high school student, who had seen every one of Ruan's films, and

saw her ghost in his room on All Souls' Day. His mother allegedly gave birth to a baby who looked exactly like Ruan.[33]

Ruan's short life was a story of an individual rising to prominence against all odds. She struggled to get an education, worked diligently to learn the craft of acting, supported her family and remained loyal to her professional colleagues. Ruan showed warmth with other actresses and had a strong work ethic at the studio. Directors and actors at Lianhua knew how talented she was but also realized that, outside of her professional life, she had no one to help her. She was naïve in dealing with those who took advantage of her childlike innocence.

What is known are her surviving films. They demonstrate to those who have the opportunity to screen them that she was one of the greatest actresses of the silent cinema. Her melancholy and her relationship with the camera dominate each scene where her character is humiliated or beaten down by the feudal society, only to rise up again and struggle on. Even today, audiences who view her films are moved to tears. Ruan Ling-yu's life and career provide a legacy to the Golden Age of Chinese Cinema in the 1930s.

### *Notes*

1. Kwan, *Actress/Center Stage/Ruan Ling-yu*.
2. *Wah Tsz Yat Po* (Hong Kong), March 9, 1935; *Shun Pao* (Shanghai), March 9, 1935; *Ta Kung Pao* (Tientsin), March 9, 1935; *Peiping Morning Post*, March 10, 1935.
3. *Shun Pao* (Shanghai), March 10, 1935.
4. Shen Ji, *Ruan Ling-yu: Yi Dai Ying Xing* (Ruan Ling-yu: Movie star of a generation) (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 1999), pp. 228–33.
5. Chang, "The Good, The Bad, and the Beautiful," p. 155.
6. Sergeant, *Shanghai*, p. 290.
7. Shen Ji, *Ruan Ling-yu: Yi Dai Ying Xing* (Ruan Ling-yu: Movie star of a generation) (Shanghai: Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1985), p. 177.

8. Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, p. 124.
9. Ibid., p. 125.
10. Shen Ji, *Ruan Ling-yu: Yi Dai Ying Xing* (1985), p. 178.
11. *Variety*, April 24, 1935.
12. *North-China Herald*, March 20, 1935.
13. *The North-China Daily News*, Friday, March 15, 1935.
14. Ibid.
15. Sergeant, *Shanghai*, p. 290.
16. Ling Pan, *In Search of Old Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company, 1983), p. 133.
17. Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, p. 124.
18. Ibid.
19. *The Central China Daily News*, March 16, 1935.
20. Ibid., March 15, 1935; March 20, 1935.
21. He Keren, "Ruan Ling-yu's Pitiful History," in Jin Jujing (ed.), *The Death of Ruan Lingyu* (Changsa, Hunan: Qui Li Publishing House, 1986), p. 21.
22. "Gossip Is a Fearful Thing," in *Selected Works of Lu Xun*, Vol. 4, translated by Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1960), pp. 186–8.
23. Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, pp. 154–5.
24. Lu Xun, "Gossip Is a Fearful Thing," in *Selected Works of Lu Xun*, Vol. 4.
25. Shen Ji, *Ruan Ling-yu: Yi Dai Ying Xing* (1999), p. 229.
26. Chang, "The Good, The Bad, and the Beautiful," p. 156.
27. Liu Guo-jun, *Cong Xiao Ya tou Dao Ming Xing: Ruan Ling-yu Zhuan* (From servant to star: The biography of Ruan Ling-yu) (Chengdu: Si Chuan Wen Yi Press, 1986), pp. 116–22.
28. Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp. 61–2.
29. Yingjin Zhang, telephone interview, September 11, 2003.
30. Sergeant, *Shanghai*, p. 291.
31. Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 254.
32. Miriam B. Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Starts, New Horizons," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Fall 2000, p. 16.
33. Shu Kei, "The Legend of Ruan Ling-yu," translated by Magoli Reclus and Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, in Marie-Claire Quiquemelle and Jean-Louie Passek, *Le Cinema Chinois* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), pp. 149–54.

# About the Author

Richard J. Meyer is Distinguished Fulbright Chair in Twentieth-Century History of Communications at L'Università del Piemonte Orientale Amedeo Avogadro in Italy, Edmund F. and Virginia B. Ball Professor of Telecommunications Emeritus at Ball State University, and Visiting Professor at the Center for Journalism and Media Studies at the University of Hong Kong. In 2001, he was a Fellow of the Asian Cultural Council in Hong Kong. Prior to his appointment to the endowed chair in Indiana, he was Fulbright Scholar at National Chengchi University in Taiwan, where he studied Chinese Silent Films at the Beijing, Taipei, and Hong Kong Film Archives.

Dr Meyer received his BA and MA degrees from Stanford University and his PhD from New York University. His post-doctoral fellowships were at Columbia University and the East-West Center in Honolulu. While pursuing a career in public broadcasting as a producer and executive with WNET, New York and CEO at KCTS Seattle and KERA/KDTN Dallas, he maintained a passion for film by experimenting with the medium, as noted by *TV Guide* in April of 1969.

He has been published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Journal of Broadcasting*, *Educational Broadcasting Review*, *Film Comment*, *NEA Journal*, *Time (Asia)* and other periodicals and books. His chapter, "Blacks and Broadcasting," appears in the book *Broadcasting and Bargaining,* published by the University of Wisconsin Press. His section on "The Films of David Wark Griffith" is featured in *Focus on D. W. Griff th*, published by Prentice-Hall. His piece "Reaction to the 'Blue Book' " is presented in *American Broadcasting,* published by Hastings House. He has written about the Pordenone International Silent Film Festival for *American Way Magazine*, the *Dallas Morning News* and other publications.

In addition to the DVD of *The Goddess*, he has produced two CDs: *Piano Themes from the Silent Screen* and *Piano Portraits of The Goddess*. His film, *The Garden of Eden,* was responsible, in part, for saving the Garden of Eden (a major work of folk art) in Lucas, Kansas.

He has been a speaker at the Buster Keaton Celebration, the Taiwan International Symposium on Public Media, the International Film Studies Conference, the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) Congress, and numerous venues about film and broadcasting.

Dr Meyer is President Emeritus of The San Francisco Silent Film Festival. He produces and introduces restored silent films accompanied by music at various "LIVE CINEMA" presentations including the Seattle International Film Festival, the Port Townsend Film Festival, the San Francisco Silent Film Festival and many others. As an avid scuba diver, his underwater photographs have appeared in numerous publications.