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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Love and duty (1931): Chinese melodrama and the "contradictions of modernity"

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ABSTRACT

In 1930s Shanghai *Love and Duty* (Bu Wancang, Lianhua Co., 1931) resonated with Chinese viewers, launching the career of actress Ruan Lingyu. Today, in contemporary film venue screenings, this epic continues to *move* international viewers. Here I ask how this silent picture has effected its profound *affective alignments* as it crosses cultures and periods of time. Approaching *Love and Duty* as *moving picture melodrama* engages the critical tradition of film melodrama theory such as to see formal convention melded with the affective charge of Chinese society in tumultuous transition. Melodrama, with its revolutionary associations, meets the historical conditions of Chinese society undergoing massive upheaval at the time of the film's release, coincident with the New Culture Movement in the years following the 1911 Republican Revolution. The politics informing the Neo-Marxist European tradition of mass culture analysis meets the leftist political legacy associated with Shanghai's emergent film industry.

KEYWORDS

Melodrama; affect; revolution; realism; contradiction; silent moving picture

Introduction

We already know that American films dominated the Chinese film market in the 1921–1937 period. If it follows that Chinese makers took "from" that cinema we must now also ask what they returned "to" world film culture in the first decades. So rather than considering the *influence* of one over another, I posit a *confluence* of traditions. By traditions we also mean social life since radical cultural change in this same period meant that modernity was a uniquely contradictory lived experience for Chinese women. What was exported has been named melodrama, a mode that crosses popular genres and subgenres, from western and gangster films to family dramas. Powerfully persuasive, American genre films with underlying melodrama structure held worldwide audiences in thrall.[1] But what of the films produced in Shanghai during the time of American box office dominance?

To study these films as "melodrama" doesn't mean that there was then or is now an easy agreement among scholars about either the sources of the mode or its aesthetic manifestations.[2] Emilie Yeh cites Qin Xiqing on Chinese filmmakers' use of the "melodramatic mode" as in D.W. Griffith and Ernst Lubitsch and concludes that melodrama should not be seen

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as only Western because Chinese literature, theatre, and opera used polarization, coincidences, and last-minute rescues (Yeh 2013, 230–231). Later, 1990s studies used Western melodrama theories to analyze Chinese family melodrama (Ning 1994, Kaplan 1992).[3] However, at least one of the first Western critics to view silent era Chinese fiction films was critical of filmmakers for their recourse to the American melodrama tradition, echoing Shanghai intellectuals' condemnation of Chinese film melodrama as not complex enough to carry ideas about the need for social reform (Pickowicz 1993, 308).[4]

Thus there are significant implications if Lianhua Company films such as *Love and Duty* (1931) as well *The Great Road* (1934), *New Women* (1934), and *The Goddess* (1934) are considered as in any way attempts to "mimic" this Hollywood mode (Hulme 2015, 26). Yet we also learn that in his 1936 history of Chinese Cinema, Zheng Junli describes how in 1922 *Way Down East* (1920) initiated a "Griffith fever" that gripped Shanghai (Huang 2014, 181–86; Zhang, 2018, 92–93). How, then, do we explain the appeal to the Shanghai audience at that moment of political turmoil? First, let's not forget the Leftist condemnation of capitalist Hollywood in the West, most pronounced from the Frankfurt School mass culture critics. Second, let's also recall the 1970s shift away from outright condemnation of Hollywood to finding a doubleness in some Hollywood films.[5] Here we should further acknowledge Victor Fan's insight that 1970s European Neo-Marxist film theory's critique of Hollywood echoes Shanghai Leftist film criticism of the 1930s (2015, 55).[6] Coincidentally in the 1970s, British Leftist reconsideration of Hollywood found that 1950s melodrama films staged social contradictions, providing, as it were, an "outlet" for "inconsistencies" in the ideology of family love (Mulvey 1987, 75). However, something else should be noted, which is this: While 1970s film theory reached an impasse in the 1990s, film melodrama theory has survived as one way around that dead end.

What is at stake? As melodrama, *Love and Duty* is situated in a tradition now thought to be considerably longer in time as well as broader, crossing entire continents, and deeper, probing social vulnerabilities, thus as much more than "good" in conflict with "evil". For the problem with dismissing Hollywood-style Chinese films as "imitative" and therefore inauthentic is that these films *did* take up pressing social issues such as women's independence, prostitution, and arranged marriages. Yet in cultures worldwide, one of the bases of melodrama's bad reputation was its purported abandonment of so-called "realism". Still, we have reason to be skeptical of this because Chinese as well as EuroAmerican critics have been inconsistent, dismissing melodrama as *both* realistically "too true" (salacious) and unrealistically "too too much" (excessive).

It seems likely that that this "too much" stems from melodrama's close association with sentimental feeling as well as bodily displays of emotional states, to remind us that the attribute "sentimental" downgraded fiction in China as well as in the West. Affect theory, however, now argues that relegating an entire domain of expression to that of "mere" feeling is a highly ideological move. We discredit the "affective register" at our peril as that is where crucial ideological shifts are felt (Massumi 2015, 85). Thus my term *affective alignment* which is designed to avoid behavioral "effects" and easy theories of identification as well as 1970s subject positioning. Clearly there is a great deal riding on the case that melodrama, however disreputable, was the dominant mode in Chinese as well as American cinema, beginning in the first decades.[7] And the final dilemma that follows from this, the question as to whether an ending is happy or sad, may come down to the way the future is figured, a crucial issue for Chinese society in revolutionary transition in the 1921–1937 period.

A charge of imitation or inauthenticity is serious, especially because Chinese cinema, beginning in the Shanghai silent era, has historically been claimed as a cinema of realism. However, we come to a sticking point– the relation between melodrama and the realism I refer to above as "so-called", a move that might have the effect of dismissing terminological variants—that is, so many realisms–too quickly. What is required is the kind of historical mapping that Jason McGrath begins to undertake in the Chinese cinema case (2022). In the following I build on one of the first attempts to acknowledge *both* melodrama and realism in Chinese cinema as in Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar who see realism "(with its melodramatic core)" as "a dominant mode" of the Chinese cinema, significantly tied to national aspirations for a new China. Their solution is to treat "melodramatic realism" as a mixed mode used by reformers because of its legacy of taking sides on behalf of the oppressed (2006, 76, 82).[8] They move on to the more avowedly Leftist "critical realism" exemplified by *Street Angel* (1937). But *Street Angel*, as they also acknowledge, is shot in Hollywood "realist" classical narrative style and can also be analyzed as having the structural features of melodrama (2006, 82).[9] How is this possible?

Melodrama's need for cultural Verisimilitude: The "realism of the recognizable"

Of all of the issues that arise in locating *Love and Duty* (1931) within the tradition of film melodrama, one of the most difficult is the tension between realism and melodrama.[10] For in Western melodrama film and literary theory, realism, is *not* in opposition to melodrama but *is requisite to it*. How can this be? And which "realism" or "realisms" do we mean? In the history of world cinema there have been so many realisms, some politically suspect and others politically astute– Hollywood classical narrative realism, realism synonymous with "authentic" or "unvarnished", "true to life" realistic portrayal, and the "realism" of detail that produces "the realistic effect" (Barthes 1986). In the Chinese case, the distinction between the "social realism" of the Shanghai "golden age" and the later "socialist reali.sm", while historically important, can be mystifying (McGrath 2022, 118).[11] And what do we do with the tendency to approach the Chinese case from the vantage of nineteenth century European novelistic realism with the critique that aligns *social realism* with *critical realism*? (McGrath 2022, 17). Then, there are historical shifts. At the historical moment of the production of *Love and Duty,* revolutionary literary realism articulated by Communist reformer Chen Duxiu was as much about opposition to "stale and pompous" classical literature as it was about the need for descriptive detail (1996 [1917], 668). And yet Chen Duxiu held in high esteem Charles Dickens as well as Victor Hugo and Emile Zola–all notable melodramatists (1996 [1917], 671).

Some confusion stems from the fact that both Chinese and American films in this period were shot in the style described as classical narrative realism, although the term "vernacular modernism" later challenged this terminology.[12] But here I want to add two "realisms" not on the above list, "realisms" of particular importance for Chinese melodrama– the "realism" of *contradictory raw material* that is to-be-dramatized and to which I will momentarily turn, and the "realism" of *cultural verisimilitude.* The term *cultural verisimilitude* applies to that which is circulated in local belief systems, sometimes understood as "the familiar" or conventionalized wisdom, but also what's "probable" or "likely" to happen (Neale 2000, 158–159). Verisimilitude is underwritten by the cultural tenets of the "already known", or status quo, seen in the "likelihood" of outcomes as well as the typicality of, for instance,

who's always on top and who's on the bottom, who wins and who loses. Melodrama "needs" this conventional realism of what Carolyn Williams calls the "recognizable", as seen in character types as well as dramatic confrontations, that is, in clashes of familiar forces at odds (C. Williams 2018, 216, Gledhill 1987, 31). So, we might say, if melodrama "needs" realism, the realism it most needs is the verisimilitudinous "realism of the recognizable", one test of which is a "felt" reality of social conditions. Yet the "felt to be" also requires deeper analysis of such underlying social conditions, my second "realism" or the *raw material of contradiction* to which I will shortly turn.

Let's here also take a moment to acknowledge the translation quandry the term "melodrama" presents. Although there is the Japanese word *bungei*, there is no term for "melodrama" in either Mandarin or Cantonese.[13] The issues with using *wenyi* as synonymous with melodrama are well known (Yeh 2009, 2013).[14] Yiman Wang sees *The Goddess* (1934) as genealogically connected with Hollywood counterpart *Stella Dallas* (1925). For her, the *family ethics melodrama/jiating luni ju*, developed by the Star Film Studio/*Minxing Dianying Gongsi* exemplifies an "allegorization" of historical and political circumstances (Wang 2013, 20). Then, Zhen Zhang's coinage of "domestic *wenyi* melodrama" combines two languages, the Chinese term helping to historically place key films in a context of social turmoil in Shanghai after the 1911 Republican Revolution followed by the 1919 May Fourth "New Culture Movement" for reform. It was, Zhang writes of that moment, "contradiction-ridden" (2018, 93). Crucial here, she joins traditions destined to meet—feminist reform traditions, one Chinese and one Euro-American that share roots in Marxism, as we will see. Zhang reminds us that film critics have continued to see the "fallen woman" as well as the newly "modern girl" as exemplifying what Euro-American Marxist Feminist film theorists have referred to as the "contradictions of modernity" (Zhang 2018, 85). Frankfurt School expert Miriam Hansen, writing after the 1990s Chinese silent film screenings at the Giornante del Cinema Muto in Italy, says that the "contradictions of modernity" place conflicting demands on a female character who, after trying but failing to live according to competing expectations may end up dead (2000, 15).[15] Zhang follows up with our pressing question: "… how is the notion that melodrama is quintessentially 'Western' or 'American' to be reconciled with the claim that melodrama is fundamentally a cultural form of modernity?" (2018, 87). Anticipating Zhang's question, British Marxist Stuart Hall, interviewed by Kuan-Hsing Chen on cultural studies in Asia, cautions against reading globalization as "cultural homogenization" given "differential times, histories, trajectories". And yet there are West-East commonalities he argues, since "we are all being globalized. The West is being globalized too". Acknowledging that the West has dominated globalization, he yet cautions us to always consider the "unevenness" in processes of historical adjustment to change (1998, 407).

Melodrama's use of the raw material of contradiction

If "we are all being globalized", but at different rates, have East Asian women lived the "contradictions of modernity" differently from Western women? The answer is "yes" if we follow feminist studies of Chinese family life (Ko 2005, Hershatter 2007). To find a society "contradiction-ridden" in Zhen Zhang's terms (2018, 93), is to identify competing expectations exactly where Chinese social conditions come into historical relief. *Love and Duty,* with its high production values "look" and the continuity-style editing of Hollywood narrative realism, "moves" or *affectively aligns* audiences because of the familiar pain and

anguish of Chinese family relations, melodramatized by new technological means, as we will see. Here is the point: *Love and Duty* was especially moving in its New Culture reform moment *because of the intolerability of social conditions* that played out in the home.[16] So we must go beyond the "contradictions of modernity" as a catchphrase to ask how melodrama uses this second of our special social "realisms"—*contradictory raw material,* or the "material of the world melodrama seeks to melodramatize…", material shared with social issue literature as those underlying conditions of injustice that literary realism also seeks to expose. For, as Christine Gledhill goes on, "What realism uncovers becomes new material for the melodramatic project" (1987, 31). Cinematic realism may unflinchingly depict cruel conditions, "raw" as in social injustice yet to-be-dramatized, but also "raw" as emotional expressivity–the paroxysms of grief expressed by the mother who cannot "be a mother" to her children.

Why contradiction? The Marxist-Leninist theory of materialist dialectics holds that change arises from internal contradictions. In our case, Chinese variations on this theory help to underwrite a *melodrama theory of contradiction*, starting in 1907–1908 with the first translation of *The Communist Manifesto* into Chinese, an effort associated with a group that included little known Chinese feminist Hi-Yin Zhen. Unlike 1960s British Marxist Feminists who imperfectly mapped sexual difference onto class difference and labor relations, Hi-Yin Zhen circumvents Marx to analyze traditional Chinese family relations as one of property relations, those relations to be replaced by communal arrangements. Family property relations in her theory are the origin of inequality *in all society* (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013, 22–25).[17] Hi-Yin Zhen's analysis of social inequality begins not with the Labor vs. Capital contradiction located in the workplace but *begins* with the family–that is, *in the home*. And in her "On the Revenge of Women" from 1907 she goes further, finding in ancient literature "women and children" made synonymous with "treasure" or "stored wealth". "Women", she finds, were not only "bound and burdened with tasks", but "exchanged as gifts" and enslaved in ways analogous to how female slaves were treated in the American South (Zhen 2013 [1907], 115). That is, she finds a contradiction between people and property.

But there is another fundamental clash to which Mao Tse-tung gave special attention, for he diagnosed not only the contradiction within the commodity form as class antagonism but, endemic to modern Chinese society, the contradiction between the new and the old ([1937] 3, 18). Lydia Liu adds that the pressure to modernize was not only dichotomized but also hierarchized by means of four terms—Old/New and East/West: "In the context of the New Culture Movement, the loaded terms of old and new set up a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, which typically intersects with the cultural antimony of East and West that assigns superiority to the latter" (Liu 1995, 90). Here is both the problem of deference to things Western and the antagonism between "old" and "new" that defined the New Culture Movement reform.[18]

So how is this contradiction between the traditional and the modernizing as well as between people and property effectively melodramatized? Melodramatization starts with the nineteenth century stage basic—the narrative *situation* (Thompson 1998, 230). Now translate this into the Chinese historical *situation*: the woman cannot leave home. Recall Lu Xun's response to the popularity of Ibsen's "A Doll's House" which he titled "What Happens after Nora Walks Out?" ([1923] 256–262). Here local wisdom circulates a "realism of the recognizable" melodramatized in *Love and Duty* as the premise that if the Chinese woman leaves home, "There is *no* going back".

East Lynne (1861) to Love and Duty (1931): The situation in which the woman leaves home

Xuelei Huang has traced Mrs. Henry Wood's 1861 novel *East Lynne* through its European and American literary and theatrical iterations to Japan and on to China *via A Woman's Error*, a bowdlerized version of *East Lynne*.[19] Huang includes *Love and Duty* in her overview, pointing to the scene requisite to every version that I call the *misrecognition/recognition* scene (2012, 71–72). My concern, given the cross-continental linkages, is that we use the convergence of these scenarios in *Love and Duty* (1931) as a test case for studying melodrama structure as pulled "from" and returned "to" the social world that it registers (as our two special social "realisms"), all the better to *affectively align* audiences. Jason McGrath adds the resonance between *Love and Duty* and the silent film adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the Greta Garbo vehicle *Love* (Edmund Goulding, 1927) with its heroine who has abandoned her children (2022, 88). Remarkably, there is a long cross-cultural legacy of readers and viewers aligned in sympathy with the heroine who leaves her husband and small children. (Figure 1) (Figure 2) (Figure 3)

Figure 1. Book cover. *Love and Duty* written by (Hua) Luo Chen. 1934. Revised edition. The Commercial Press (商务印书馆).

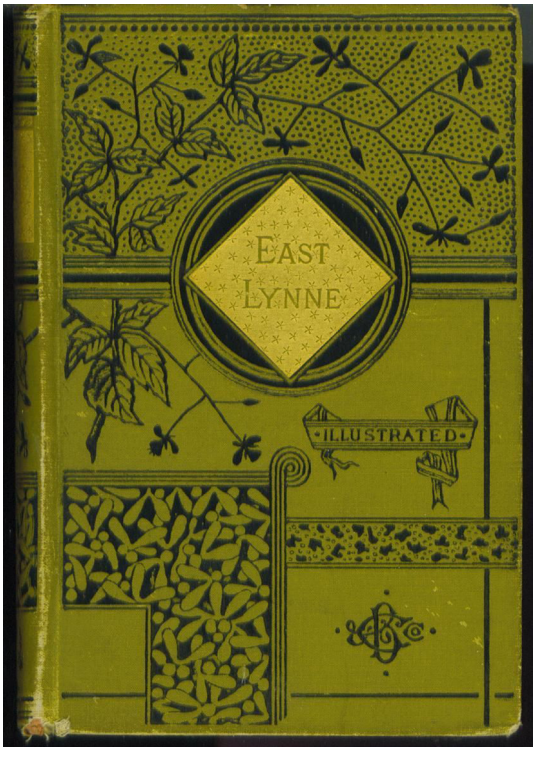

Figure 2. Book cover. *East Lynne* by Mrs. Henry Wood (1861). Private collection.

Figure 3. Advertisement. "East Lynne" (1894) theatre performance starring Ada Grau as Isabel Vane.

East Lynne story variants between 1861 and 1931 circulated widely, with English language theatrical adaptations in the first decades before 1900 numbering over 250 (Armstrong 2015, 752; Mitchell [1861] 1984, xiii). It may be that no other European story crossed continents to circulate so widely in Japan and China. But we want to know what it was about this womans' story that appealed worldwide without claiming "universality". Instead of "universality", we turn to a genre theory of conventionalization to see how a story re-arranged so many times was finally reconfigured out of Chinese family crises far from Victorian England. Here consider the composite narrative:

> *A wealthy and well-positioned woman with young children is miserable in her marriage.*
>
> *There is distance between her and her husband. Another man convinces her to leave him, although she is reluctant to leave her young children. In secret, she leaves her home after which, consequence of a series of disasters and loss of loved ones, she is alone without means of support. Her former family believes her to be dead either because of identity confusion or, to preserve family honor, she is declared dead. She has been transformed beyond recognition, either by accident or age. We are led to believe that she is sorry that she left and her remorse is focused on her children (although in East Lynne this regret includes her husband). Under these sad circumstances of estrangement and in a much reduced condition she returns to work in her former home, whether by her own volition or as consequence of circumstances over which she has no control. She always returns in disguise as a woman in a position socially below that of her former standing.*

The requisite scene to which I earlier referred, crucial in all of the variations featuring the *misrecognition/recognition* hinge, plays on discrepant points of view: one knows, others don't. What is worse, the exposure of the woman-in-disguise—*the returning mother*–threatens the entire family order. In most silent film versions the *misrecognition/recognition* scene conflates the two death bed scenes of the original novel—the one scene in which Lady Isabel returns as governess to the deathbed of her favorite son and the other scene in which, sickened from the exhaustion of caring for her consumptive child, she herself is dying.[20] In various film versions the confrontation between Lady Isabel–disguised with blue glasses–and her husband Archibald Carlisle, takes place over the body of the sick child, her son William. She may be recognized and forgiven by the good husband who she has finally come to appreciate and she either lives and is reunited with her family or dies right there. In the original novel her death is obligatory, not only because it helps the cautionary tale but because the good husband has married Lady Isabel's rival and he suddenly realizes that since his first wife is alive, not dead, this makes him a bigamist.

The five "R's" of film melodrama theory

Often the *misrecognition/recognition* scene is the *narrative climax* of events by which is meant the narrowing of outcomes just before positions at odds are reconciled and perplexing enigmas resolved such as: Can things ever be the same again? Can such betrayal be forgiven? Consider now what I term the first four R's of melodrama narrative structure: *recognition*, *return*, *reconciliation*, and *resolution*, countered, of course, by complicating *actions* such as leaving home and misrecognizing the loved one with whom there was once an intimate connection. But after we "check off" these four, there is one final "R" to add to make five.[21]

So what is the last "R", the one that explains why melodrama goes to such extremes, even to the point of risking the overstatement of its case? The last "R" is *rhetoric* (Brooks 1976, 36). Melodrama is a rhetoric that takes sides, often reversing power structures to reward the powerless against cruel and unjust exercise of power. Using polarization in conjunction with narrative ordering, melodrama stages a struggle between forces at odds *in the name of justice* (Gledhill and Williams 2018, 5).[22] In the name of justice, power imbalance must be rectified; characters must struggle on behalf of the powerless who endure excruciating hardship and prolonged misfortune. The wayward wife is made to suffer too much, to suffer out of proportion to her transgression and, what is worse, to suffer to the degree that melodrama's critics find overblown and exaggerated. Hence the problematic association of melodrama with aesthetic as well as emotional "excess".[23] We should not wonder, however, that Chinese audiences were historically drawn to melodramatic rhetoric, such rhetoric engaged on behalf of the downtrodden in an attempt to overthrow an old order and replace it with the new. Melodrama's rhetoric is furthermore emotional recruitment—solicitation to causes and evocation of feelings on behalf of nation or home or whoever and whatever is ours. Or felt just as vehemently *against* the nations and homes of others, feeding animosities and feelings of bitterness (Gaines 2022, 114) The viewer is *affectively aligned* "for" and "against" by means of cinematic melodramatization—the use of shot composition and point of view alternation, enhanced by editing rhythms and musical harmony or discord. To evoke pathos is to stir compassion or sympathy for those suffering from injustice. Crucially, here is what predates contemporary affect theory and is often missing from it: in melodrama's rhetorical move, pity is solicited *on behalf of* a suffering character shown to have been unjustly treated (Massumi 2015, 84–85). And so we should ask of melodrama's critics: how could the case against injustice ever be excessively overstated?

Misrecognition stages the contradiction

To grasp melodrama politically I begin with a Marxist theory of contradiction for which I am drawing on early Chinese feminist Hi-Yin Zhen, source of a historically specific Chinese theory of the fundamental contradiction between people and property with its origin in the home, and crossed by conflict between the old and the new, as discussed above (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013, 22–25). We have seen how melodramatizing the structural contradiction begins with the narrative situation in which the modern wife, no longer confined to the home, cannot return to "her" home–except as a servant. Viewers do not need to have the absurd inconsistency of this situation spelled out for them because, familiarly, the wife and mother "belongs in the home". Note, as well, how the *melodrama theory of contradiction* challenges the old Manichean polarization of opposites. Consider instead the dramatization, really the melodramatization, in which contradiction is synonymous with incongruity, disjuncture, or situations in which characters are at odds, face competing expectations, or are caught between incompatible ideals. Next we must demonstrate how the translation of these "contradictions of modernity" that structure Chinese society are concentrated in the *recognition/misrecognition* scene derived from *East Lynne*. Two cinematic devices work in tandem as a means to *affective alignment* for which we also need a theory of how it is that audiences may be "brought to tears", as we say in English. But if in *Love and Duty* because there is *no recognition*, only *misrecognition*, how exactly does the film work to encourage such viewer alignment?

While the established theory of melodrama and tears starts with cinematic point of view alternation, I would argue that camera shot/reverse shot is intensified when underwritten by a knowledge gap between past and present, or the temporal discrepancy of "two times that can never meet" (Gaines 2018, 329–332). Not so surprisingly, this "never together" structure works to melodramatize the *East Lynne misrecognition/recognition* scene in case after case. Here, then, is exemplification of Steve Neale's theory of melodrama and tears since the features of the scene involve the knowledge that the viewer shares with the mother to the exclusion of husband and children who do not know that she is in disguise, unrecognizable to them. It is exactly such "discrepancies of knowledge" (one knows, others don't know) that establish the precondition for tears (1986, 7, 10, 11). Effect of the melodrama device of cinematic point of view alternation, the viewer who shares the mother's vantage also shares her secret. But the classic *East Lynne misrecognition/recognition* scene positions the viewer to want Lady Isabel to be recognized on the assumption that her recognition will save the dying child as well as reconcile her with her estranged husband.[24] In *East Lynne* (Fox, 1916) starring Theda Bara as Lady Isabel, however, there is no point of view alternation and the death bed scene is framed in medium shot with the dying William in the middle of the frame with his mother on the left and who he recognizes when she removes her wig. Her husband then recognizes Isabel just as the child dies. In a tableaux, Lady Isabel reaches across the bed for Carlisle's hand, but then she is immediately stricken. The couple's reunion is timed to her end as the husband she abandoned acknowledges that she is the child's mother, but *only because she is dying*. Reconciliation is on condition that she die. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. One-sheet. Theda Bara in *East Lynne* (dir. Bertram Bracken. William Fox Co., 1916) adaptation: Mary Murrillo.

Now consider the melodramatization of the *Love and Duty misrecognition* scene in which Naifan enters her former home as a seamstress to measure her children for the pageant costumes their father has ordered for them. It is not only that the scene is framed in "close" close-up, all the better to draw the viewer into Naifan's point of view. In this tight close-up, as Naifan measures her daughter she secretly places her cheek on the child's back to hold the tape measure. Think how unbearable to be so close in proximity but so far from knowing. The children don't know what *she* knows (and that we know as well)—*she is their mother*. And worse, they *will never know*. The past in which Naifan left them asleep to elope with Tsu Yi could not know the future of her return, given that the future has no access to the past where their mother is hidden from them. And if it is not intolerable enough that appearance and reality are so far apart. In that moment, Naifan is not hidden from her children but only disguised, or disguised as we say, "beyond recognition". She is disguised as consequence of her poverty in horrible combination with her aging, her smile revealing missing teeth, her glasses indicating failing sight. Here "discrepancy of knowledge" is exacerbated by disguise but also by what the viewer sees as the daughter's perfect likeness with the mother, a likeness that the characters cannot see. *Neither* mother nor daughter can recognize, can therefore know, that the *one is the other* given that actress Ruan Lingyu is playing *both mother and daughter parts*. The two generations "never together" can "*never* meet" even though they are represented by the same actress's body!

Why, then, is this scene so "moving" as to bring tears to viewers? We can analyze this crucial scene with the theory of "knowledge discrepancy"–the painful gap between what the viewer knows and what Naifan's children cannot know. But tear-including pathos works on an extra level in *Love and Duty*. The old as opposed to the new, as two times that can "never meet", becomes the two generations separated by Naifan's having left home and her family's refusal to take her back, unbending Confucian generation set in opposition to New Culture youth. In addition to "knowledge discrepancy"–who knows and who cannot know–in the traditional Chinese home there is neither meeting nor knowing given the finality of "*never* return home". Further, *Love and Duty* enacts the "contradictions of modernity" in which a woman *cannot* but *must be* both traditional and modern. If "the old must win out over new", Naifan is sacrificed as victim of the vilified patriarchial system as challenged by the ideals of the new Chinese republic, qualified by the suspect equation "modernization = Westernization" and the West – East hierarchy. Or, Chinese nationalism takes up the modernization ideology of "the old must give way to the new", taking over from "the old will not yield to the new".

Kristine Harris has analyzed the relevance of the pageant scene to the Chinese nationalist effort, helping us to see how the future is inserted into the *Love and Duty* narrative (2013, 54–55). The Chinese nationalist project involves the unbinding of centuries constrained by tradition, intensifying the hopes for the future. But the future cannot be a vague patriotic act concretized in a youth pageant on behalf of the poor. Further, the pageant scene in a crowded auditorium is also a significant shift in tone, contrasting starkly with the excruciating pathos of the *misrecognition* scene. Nationalist propaganda enters the family melodrama, illustrating how propaganda fiction also uses the modality of melodrama. The tone of hope and possibility is set when in the first scenes of the film two young students, Naifan and Zuyi, separated in alternating tracking shots, break a taboo against meeting when a motor car accident brings them together in the street outside their family mansion enclaves. (Figure 5) (Figure 6)

Figure 5. *Love and Duty* (1931) Ruan Lingyu as Yang Naifan. Courtesy Taiwan Film Archive.

Figure 6. *Love and Duty* (1931) Ruan Lingyu as the married Yang Naifan. Courtesy Taiwan Film Archive.

The couple's feelings for each other are interrupted by Naifan's arranged marriage, endangered when Zuyi convinces her to leave her husband and children, and doomed by his premature illness and death. Naifan is condemned to poverty after the family rejects her plea to take her back, and she struggles to survive outside the family structure. Her later life as a seamstress seen in a squalid room bent over her sewing machine contrasts with the earlier scenes of family wealth evidenced in the décor of the parlor. Condemnation of that decadent world takes the form of the villainous servant whose narrative function is to identify the couple and to cause Tsu Yi to lose the respectable job for which he wears a smart Western style suit and hat.

While in American melodrama the operative ideology of modernization as "the old must give way to the new" privileges youth and freely chosen marriage, the Chinese counterpart follows another narrative trajectory. For as enacted in *Love and Duty*, it may appear that, contra the ideology of modernization, in which the old gives way to the new, here "the old *does not* give way to the new". In 1930s Shanghai the family still served as a gilded prison that contradictorily protected and oppressed women by treating them as property. As Dorothy Ko describes the hold over from centuries of female footbinding: "These incongruities bring to the fore the contradictions that a woman had to embody as remnant of the old order and bearer of the new" (2005, 14). Naifan can no longer function as mother to

the boy and girl, yet she *is* and will always *be* their mother. There can be no recognition. It can *never be known* that the seamstress who measured the children for the costumes they will wear in the celebration of a new China is their own mother. For the scene to "tug at the heartstrings" of viewers, Naifan must be as contradictorily alive to us as she is dead to her children.

Of all of the *East Lynne* variations, *Love and Duty* inflicts the most suffering on the heroine. In Mrs. Henry Wood's novel, Archibald Carlisle, the husband Lady Isabel leaves, is unbelievably good to her, all the better to castigate her infidelity. Naifan's husband Tajen is typical of the authoritarian father and husband but atypical in his reversal, since after she leaves he steps into a new Western-style fathering to care for his two small children, playing ball with them in the park. In this, *Love and Duty* is more cruel even than any of the *East Lynne* versions in which Isabel is replaced by her rival, the faultless Barbara Vane. Neifan has not only been replaced as parent by her former husband but the love that should have gone to her is to be directed toward her daughter Ping'er as Tajen instructs his children in a final intertitle: "Here is your sister. Love her as you would love your mother".

To return to our melodrama check list: There is no *return* to the home, no *recognition* and consequently no *reconciliation*, even as decadent concubinage (Naifan's father's ugly mistresses) is contrasted with enlightened free choice love, embodied by the radiant Ruan Lingyu playing Naifan in her youth. Yet in the war between new and old, "love" is not weighed equally against "duty", for this is a contest that "love" cannot win in the battle between women's new freedom and the strictures of the feudal familial Confucian code. And so, given the impossibility of *reconciliation* there is no narrative *resolution* if by this we mean nagging questions answered by the narrative closure associated with an ending—happy or sad. Thus in conclusion my question as to whether *Love and Duty* has a happy-sad or sad-happy ending is in line with Jason McGrath's analysis of Shanghai Leftist films as refusing the Hollywood tendency to narrative closure by leaving conflicts "unresolved" (2022, 74–75, 101–102).

Conclusion: The happy-sad or sad-happy ending

Two Hollywood films that stand out in U.S. film history for the bleakness of their endings were among the most popular in 1930s Shanghai– *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and *Queen Christina* (1934).[25] Here the prison film subgenre and historical epic genre appear to have little else in common beyond the starkness of their endings. In *Queen Christina*, the Greta Garbo character's freeze frame ending stands for the Swedish queen's relinquishment of her crown; in the story of a wrongly-accused chain gang escapee's life as a fugitive, the final shot is Paul Muni's character disappearing into the dark and his answer to his fiancee's question: "How will you live?" In his whisper, "I steal", is the horrible irony that corrupted justice had turned him into a criminal. Thus the commonality in these two films, if nothing else, is the bleak refusal of happiness.

Chinese literary critic Lu Xun disapproved of Hollywood "happy endings" which he found to be too "unrealistic" (As quoted in Xiao 2009, 66–67). But critic Li Suyuan saw happiness in Chinese silent era films effecting "*Datuanyuan* closures, an aesthetic representation of the ideology of 'fullness' [expressed in *tuan* and *yuan*], reflecting Chinese hope and desire for happiness. Therefore these closures romanticize real life, painting it with light. They also bring a pleasurable warmth that consoles and satisfies audience emotions".[26] I cite Li Suyan not only

to place the happy end within Chinese culture, but pair him with Lu Xun's disapproval, all the better to question the finality of the happy over the sad or the sad over the happy. For the happy may be too hard won and the sad too tinged with relief, and besides, melodrama often stirs up the kind of discord that defies neat resolution (Mulvey 1987, 76).

For the cultural explanation as to why *Love and Duty* ends in the heroine's suicide I must defer to experts on Chinese culture as well as on the scandal of Ruan Lingyu's suicide in 1934 (Harris 1997). Mystified as I am by the ending of *Love and Duty*, melodramatic rhetoric (that cries out) requires that the consequences of family heartlessness must be played out. Western audiences may wonder how to interpret Naifan's final suicide, the second of her attempts, the first interrupted by her baby's cry as she stands on the verge of jumping off a bridge. It could be argued that the "woman's error" or admitted sin must be rectified with a symmetrical sacrifice – the mother dying so that illegitimate daughter Ping'er can marry into the right social class, as the intertitle here suggests. But the resurrection of Ryan Lingyu in the body of her daughter complicates the act of suicide that rescues Ping'er for the marriage that can now be arranged by Naifan's former husband. The last shot in *Love and Duty* is the three siblings looking up at the photographic portrait of their dead mother, their backs to the camera as if facing an ancestral shrine. But since the portrait is of the young Naifan, she lives on, just as Ruan Lingyu the actress yet lives in the daughter whose face we do not see. Still it is Ruan Lingyu's face in the portrait, suggesting that in this scene *she is both the mother and the daughter*. Except that she isn't. The mother is dead. So sad-happy as much as happy-sad. (Figure 7)

Melodrama, crossing-continents in a two-way flow, exhibited a *confluence* of conventions, ones perfected after so much trial and error over decades, staging root antagonisms for anxious audiences in East Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Here were audiences experiencing social distresses associated with modernization, albeit at different rates– in the West, young women entering into public life and the work force as their mothers and grandmothers never could; in China, young women both newly unbound but still tightly constrained by tradition from which there was still no escape. The cinematic devices that so "moved" Shanghai audiences were then and still are *inextricable from* the specific social antagonisms so provocatively melodramatized in the first two decades of the Chinese film industry.

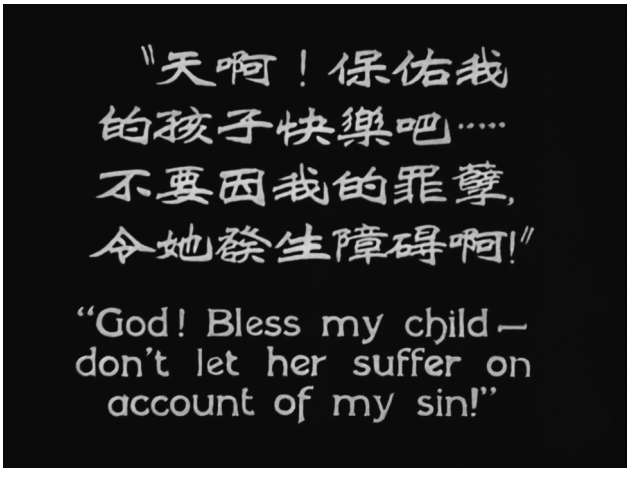

Figure 7. Frame enlargement. *Love and Duty* (1931) intertitle.

Notes

1. Essays in Gledhill and Williams (2018) on China (Zhang 2018) (Yang 2018), Japan (Airriess 2018) reconsider melodrama relative to a "global modernity." Buckley (2018, 20, 28) argues that rather than locating the origins of melodrama in the French Revolution we might better see the form as having a *long durée*, product of "incremental, convergent processes of change" marked by "intensification of lived experience in an emerging modern world." (28).
2. In Gaines (2022, 111, 118, 123) I compare the three main critical terms for what was "exported"–classical Hollywood narrative, vernacular modernism, and popular melodrama.
3. Recent PhD dissertation research conducted in the West takes up melodrama to describe silent era Shanghai films. See Q. Zhang (2009) and Shen (2005).
4. Pickowicz explains the difference between filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s relative to the ideas of the May Fourth reform movement but characterizes 1930s leftist directors as "captives of melodrama" (1993, 301). He further explains the success of melodrama in China as having to do with how most Chinese experienced upheavals of this moment as a "family crisis" (308), and yet see Y. Zhang (2002, 61–63).
5. See Gaines (2000) for explanation of the doubleness in popular culture traced back to Frankfurt-affiliated theorist Ernst Bloch as well as to British Marxist Stuart Hall who posits a "double movement" of the popular. For 1970s film theory, another Leftist approach can be found in Comolli and Narboni's category (E) which accounts for the Hollywood film that "*acts against*" its own ideological framework ([1971] 2015, 257).
6. The theory of the cinematic apparatus or *dispositif* to which Fan refers (2015, 55) is most fully critiqued in a special issue of *Semiotic Inquiry* "Cinema and Technology" edited by Gaudreault and Lefebvre (2011, 9–14).
7. On melodrama considered a low and disreputable form see Williams (2001, 13) on the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly tradition. Link (1981), the authority on this school, does not use the term melodrama.
8. Berry and Farquhar (2006, 77) say that "Despite the melodrama of much cinematic realism, realism was nevertheless the hegemonic mode of Chinese cinema", or the "approved as the mode of modernity." Linked as it was to the "making of a modern Chinese nation", it is important to sort out this terminology, given the "realism/modernity/nationhood" equation effective until the late twentieth century at which point, they say, we need to think of a "globalized modernity." .
9. The terminology is difficult to negotiate across cultures, especially if Hollywood classical narrative "realism" as produced by continuity style has been critiqued as a purveyor of an "ideology of realism" that denies the technological conventions of its production.
10. Berry and Farquhar (2006, 80), argue that this opposition is strongest in the West where "authenticity and truth" is contrasted with "theatricality, exaggeration, and sentimentality." .
11. See McGrath (2023, 118) on how *socialist realism* was also known as "proletarian realism" and "revolutionary realism." In Ch. 4 he proposes consideration of later Mao-era cinema as "*prescriptive realism*" analogized with prescriptive grammar, that is, how we "*should*" speak (162). X.
12. See Gaines where I note the success of "vernacular modernism" in its challenge to the terminology of the "classical" but also the drawbacks to using the term "modernism" in relation to popular forms. Given its associations with the "vernacularization" of the Chinese language, the resonance of the term is understandable and on this see Bao (2015, 19–20).
13. Berry and Farquhar (2006, 81) list *qingjieju*, *tongsuju*, *shangyinpian*, *wenyipian* and explain that the reference is usually to melodrama as genre rather than a mode.
14. In Zheng Zhang's earlier formulation, *wenyi* was a "native" genre like melodrama but not exactly it (2012, 29, 35). Later she compares *wenyi* with melodrama in terms of its elasticity (2018, 89). In the same essy, referencing the impetus of the 1911 Republican Revolution and the May Fourth "new culture movement", Zhang cites these "energies" as well as a felt "despair" as coming together with new Euro-American-Japanese forms in a combination "domestic wenyi melodrama" innovated by Shanghai film producers (93).

15. Hansen (2000) refers to Mulvey (1987) as well as Gledhill (1987), referencing the British Marxist feminist film tradition but doesn't demonstrate a melodrama approach.
16. Hershatter (2007, 21), summarizes the research on the "extended or joint" family as remaining an ideal until the People's Republic of China was established. Her overview also points to an inconsistency: While reform required the abandonment of these ideals, educated male reformers in the 1930s saw that "women's domestic roles were written into modernity" such that the home was where women made their contribution to the new nation.
17. Liu, Karl, and Ko (2013) undertook a recent translation of these writings, bringing the work forward in both Chinese and English for the first time, and locating Hi-Yin Zhen as part of the Society for the Restoration of Women's Rights. That organization published the short-lived journal *Natural Justice* in Tokyo and undertook the earliest Chinese translation of chapter one of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1908 (4–6).
18. Peter Brooks thus answers the criticism of polarization by explaining that the "world according to melodrama" eschews ambivalence and sets out its oppositions as "not subject to compromise" (1976, 36). Taking this a step further he says melodrama has historically "exploited" the family structure which it uses to foster "excruciation" where "the most basic loyalties and relationships become a source of torture" (35).
19. Charlotte Mary Brame's *A Woman's Error* is source of the Japanese serialization of that novel as *No no hana/Flowers in a Wild Field* and the Chinese serial *Konggu Ian* appearing in 1910 followed by the book translated by Bao Tianxiao, followed by the 1914 theatrical production and the first film version *Konggu Ian* (1925) followed by *Konggu Ian* (1937), half of which survives (Huang 2012, 51–56; 2014, 157–166).
20. Extant 35mm prints are held in 3 Federation of International Film Archives (FIAF): Museum of Modern Art: *East Lynne* (dir. Emmett J. Flynn, Fox Film Corp., US, 1925) screenplay: Lenore J. Coffee; UCLA: *East Lynne* (dir. Frank Lloyd, Fox Film Corp., US, 1931); US Library of Congress: *East Lynne* (dir. Hugo Ballin, Hugo Ballin Productions, US, 1921).
21. In the Western melodrama tradition, the innocence of a beleaguered character must be recognized by the characters who refuse to see that she is blameless; characters are returned to the space of the home, antagonistic positions are reconciled. Williams (2001) takes the "recognition of innocence" as well as a "return to the home" narrative from Brooks (1985). I add "resolution" as a term from the analysis of narrative film. In film melodrama, "reconciliation" of polarized positions is requisite to "resolution" and often to narrative closure.
22. Moving picture melodrama takes up what Thomas Elsaesser calls the unfinished business of the French Revolution–the undelivered promise of Liberté, Equalité, Fraternité (Elsaesser 2014, 32–33).
23. But see Williams on how the association of melodrama with "excess" leads us to consider the mode as an exception, as "in excess of" the aesthetic norm when melodrama *is* the norm (2001, 16–17). Brooks (1976, 36) refers to melodrama's overstatement as "rhetorical excess", but "excess" has been associated with aesthetic as well as emotional expressivity which may have led to the critical perception that melodrama goes "too far." .
24. See Gaines (2018, 325) for an analysis of the *misrecognition* scene at the end of *Madame X* (1966).
25. Cambon (1993, 107) describes how even after *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* was banned by the Municipal Council it continued to draw crowds at the Isis theatre on the city's border outside municipal jurisdiction. See Fu (2019, 127) for his 1934 Top Ten titles which lists *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* at # 4 and *Queen Christina* at # 10. Clearly Greta Garbo was popular in China. Fu's box office research leads to his conclusion that the Warner Brothers prison film about the U.S. Depression staring Paul Muni may have run longer than any other foreign film distributed in China (Fu 2019, 115). See also Bao (2015, 227).
26. As quoted in Berry and Farquhar (2006, 243) note # 29 who cite Suyuan and Jubin (1997). They also refer to the "family-home as site where complex changes take place" where "family-home" = *jia* is linked to "nation" (*guojia*) via melodramatic conventions including happy endings (which project different visions of China's future) (2006, 76). Their note is to Brooks (621976, 56–80), the chapter on "The Text of Muteness."

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