

The Death of Ruan Lingyu: Leftist Aesthetics and Cinematic Reality in the 1930s Shanghai

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Abstract : This topic seeks to re-examine the New Women Incident in 1935 Shanghai from the perspective of the influence of leftist cinematic aesthetics on public discourse in 1930s Shanghai. Accordingly, an original means of interpreting the death of Ruan Lingyu will be provided. On 8th March 1935, Ruan Lingyu, the queen of Chinese silent film, committed suicide through overdosing on sleeping tablets. Her last words, 'gossip is fearful thing', interlinks her destiny with the protagonist she played in the film *The New Women* (Cai Chusheng, 1935). The coincidence was constantly questioned by the masses following her suicide, constituting the enduring question: 'who killed Ruan Lingyu?' Responding to this query, previous scholars primarily analyze the characters played by women -particularly new women as part of the leftist movement or public discourse of 1930s Shanghai- as a means of approaching the truth. Nevertheless, alongside her status as a public celebrity, Ruan Lingyu also plays as a screen image of mechanical reproduction. The overlap between her screen image and personal destiny attracts limited academic focus in terms of the effect and implications of leftist aesthetics of reality in relation to her death, which itself has provided impetus to this research. With the reconfiguration of early Chinese film theory in the 1980s, early discourses on the relationship between cinematic reality and consciousness proposed by Hou Yao and Gu Kenfu in the 1920s are integrated into the category of Chinese film ontology, which constitutes a transcultural contrast with the Euro-American ontology that advocates the representation of reality. The discussion of Hou and Gu overlaps cinematic reality with effect, which emphasizes the empathy of cinema that is directly reflected in the leftist aesthetics of the 1930s. As the main purpose of leftist cinema is to encourage revolution through depicting social reality truly, Ruan Lingyu became renowned for her natural and realistic acting proficiency, playing leading roles in several esteemed leftist films. The realistic reproduction and natural acting skill together constitute the empathy of leftist films, which establishes a dialogue with the virtuous female image within the 1930s public discourse. On this basis, this research considers Chinese cinematic ontology and affect theory as the theoretical foundation for investigating the relationship between the screen image of Ruan Lingyu reproduced by the leftist film *The New Women* and the female image in the 1930s public discourse. Through contextualizing Ruan Lingyu's death within the Chinese leftist movement, the essay indicates that the empathy embodied within leftist cinematic reality limits viewers' cognition of the actress, who project their sentiments for the perfect screen image on to Ruan Lingyu's image in reality. Essentially, Ruan Lingyu is imprisoned in her own perfect replication. Consequently, this article states that alongside leftist anti-female consciousness, the leftist aesthetics of reality restricts women in a passive position within public discourse, which ultimately plays a role in facilitating the death of Ruan Lingyu.

Keywords : cinematic reality, leftist aesthetics, Ruan Lingyu, *The New Women*

Conference Title : ICCSFTH 2020 : International Conference on Cinema Studies, Film Theory and History

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : January 06-07, 2020