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Tomboy: New Womanhood, Stardom, and Chinese Cinema in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

This article explores *Tomboy* (*Huashen guniang* 化身姑娘, 1936), arguably one of the most viewed films in China in the mid-1930s, and Yuan Meiyun's 袁美雲 (1917–1999) stardom in prewar Shanghai. *Tomboy*'s popularity was a testimony to the rise of female stardom and female fandom in this decade. The 1930s also saw both the final triumph of the rally for women's rights since the May Fourth period and the Nationalist Party's pro-family, anti-woman backlash. *Tomboy* catapulted Yuan Meiyun to superstardom in the context of the cacophonous debates on new femininity in China in the relatively conservative mid-1930s. This article thus argues that because Yuan Meiyun exemplified a new type of woman who was modern, attractive, and independent but exempted herself from modern life's vices and hedonism, her eclectic womanhood both on the screen and in the media narrative gained widespread acclaim and thereby contributed to her success as a film star.

Keywords: *Tomboy*, Stardom, Film, 1930s China, Womanhood, Yuan Meiyun

This article focuses on *Tomboy* (*Huashen guniang* 化身姑娘, 1936, dir. Fang Peilin 方沛霖 [1908–1948]), a Yee Hwa Film Company (*Yihua dianying gongsi* 藝華電影公司) production starring Yuan Meiyun 袁美雲 (1917–1999). The film tells the story of the visit of Li Ying 莉英 (Yuan Meiyun), a Chinese Singaporean girl who disguises herself as a young man named Shouben 壽本, to her grandfather in cosmopolitan Shanghai. Meiyun's dual gender identities create abundant misunderstandings and conflicts, making *Tomboy* a genuine light comedy. *Tomboy* came under Hollywood's influence not simply because its filmmakers gained inspiration from their American counterparts in playing the card of androgyny to entice the audience (Zhou 2004, 171). The film's name, *Huashen guniang*, was also a transplantation of the Chinese translation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931, dir. Rouben Mamoulian), *Huashen boshi* 化身博士, attesting to what Wang Yiman (2013, 1–3) calls "peripheral and subaltern remaking," that is, Shanghai filmmakers' strategies of both domesticating and foreignizing Hollywood genre films.

As a domesticated Hollywood-style comedy, *Tomboy* was arguably the most viewed film in 1930s Shanghai: it reportedly drew a staggering 800,000 viewers

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Figure 1. Zhou Xuan kisses Yuan Meiyun in *Tomboy*.

(Advertisement, *Shen bao* 申報, December 25, 1936) and thereby reinvigorated the lackluster film market in this decade. As an exemplary work of "soft film" (*ruanxing dianying* 軟性電影), it followed that genre's recipe of providing the audience with "visual pleasure and spiritual comfort" (Fan 2015, 95) by "inscrib[ing] ethical and gender issues through visual means" (Cui 2003, 12). One of the gender-related visual shocks this film brought to the audience was a homosexually suggestive kiss between two female protagonists (See Figure 1). As the climax of the androgynous gender configuration in this film, such a kiss has been variously understood as either "innocent" (Shen 2005, 4) or transgressive. Sun Shaoyi (2013, 66–68) considers such plots a manifestation of the vogue for feminine androgyny that blurred the line between the sexes in 1930s Shanghai. Sun further reminds us of a long tradition of cross-dressing women in literature and theater in China.

Similarly, Zhang Zhen (2005, 285–288) argues that such plots are "queer" by nature. Zhang interprets the heroine's straddling of two gender identities as a defining characteristic of the somewhat enigmatic modern girl. In this manner, this film vividly demonstrates the predicament faced by the modern girl: "She feels straightjacketed by prescribed old gender norms on one hand, and the impossibility to freely experiment with androgyny and female intimacy on the other" (288). *Tomboy*'s appreciative depiction of cross-dressing and female same-sex affection notwithstanding, the young woman in this film, like her counterparts in classical literature and theater in imperial China, has to return to her pre-assigned gender role in the end.

Building on Zhang Zhen's observation, this article argues that such modern, enthralling, but ultimately non-subversive womanhood, as represented on the screen and in the media narrative, was a product of the peculiar sociopolitical

environment of 1930s China, which was fraught with contradictions and dilemmas in terms of women's gender roles. Following a decade of popularizing feminist ideas and advocating for gender equality, on the one hand, women's full agency gained legal support, and women's right to choose their marital partners without parental consent was written into law in the late 1920s. On the other hand, the resounding call to restore family values and the lasting concern over women's misbehavior also resulted in the amending of various legal codes in the name of protecting women in the mid-1930s (Huang 2001, 28).

It was in this context that Yuan Meiyun, who starred in *Tomboy* and many other of Yee Hwa's productions, quickly rose to superstardom. Yuan Meiyun's exceptional popularity was undoubtedly a decisive factor behind *Tomboy*'s phenomenal market success. I call attention to Yuan's stardom because without an awareness of it, a film researcher who only reads a synopsis of *Tomboy* or watches the film in the twentieth-first century would find it difficult to grasp the "emotional force of reception" and recognize the film viewers' "immediate cultural experience," to borrow Stephanie Hemelryk Donald's term (2000, 2). Without a recognition of her stardom, Yuan Meiyun would just be understood as a name rather than "a phenomenon" of the day. The star—Yuan included—is both a private individual and "a sign within the host culture" (King 1991, 131), and her identity as "real people," as Richard Dyer (1979, 20) notes, bolsters her "screen/'fiction' appearances."

This article thus constitutes an attempt to read Yuan Meiyun intertextually as both a fictive figure in *Tomboy* and a "real person"—essentially a produced image in the media of the 1930s. This article argues that Yuan's unmatched popularity, namely, her superstardom, was intimately tied to both her on-screen image as a somewhat mysterious modern girl and her unique womanhood in real life. This well-publicized womanhood, as recognized by the viewing and reading public of the day, was constructed by the conciliation and negotiation among differing and even conflicting discourses on womanhood in this period. The popularization of Yuan Meiyun-style womanhood was hence a response to the cacophonous debates on women's issues amid the conservative backlash during the New Life Movement (starting in 1934) launched by the Guomindang (GMD) regime.

Tomboy

The film's story begins with Zhang Juweng's 張菊翁 eagerness to have a grandson as his successor. Mr. Zhang, an elderly overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia, falls ill at the beginning of the movie, only to be cured by the false report that his grandson Shouben has been born in Singapore. But Shouben turns out to be a girl named Liying. Eighteen years later, Mr. Zhang summons his grandchild from Singapore. Liying thus has to disguise herself as a young gentleman, Shouben, to stay with Mr. Zhang in Shanghai. Through the rest of the film, Liying / Shouben keeps resorting to two gender stereotypes to play out her dual gender identities. As a "man," Yuan has her hair cut short, identifies "himself" as a soccer fan, and refuses to shed tears of sorrow. As a young lady, she wears a long-haired wig, appears awkward when learning to shave off her "beard," and reads a book about women's physiological

hygiene. Shouben/Liying is soon courted by a pretty girl, Zhu Naifang 朱耐芳 (Zhou Xuan 周璇, 1920–1957) but she also endears herself to Lin Songpo 林松坡 (Wang Yin 王引, 1911–1988). A series of misunderstandings and conflicts created by Yuan Meiyun's ambivalent gender identities thus ensues. By the end of the movie, Mr. Zhang not only learns the truth but also accepts the fact that Liying is, after all, an adorable young lady. Liying and Songpo consummate their free-choice love in a "traditional" way: The man hires a matchmaker so that the couple can win approval from their parents and grandparents. The film ends with the resolution of all tensions and clashes: the birth of a boy by Liying's parents.

Tomboy achieved immense popularity instantly after it premiered in the summer of 1936. Shen Ji 沈寂 (1924–2016), a longtime screenplay writer in Shanghai, recognized that the film was able to appeal to him and his likeminded film fans in prewar China because it provided them with genuine entertainment, and its success reconfirmed the centrality of women in Chinese film. In his words, film in China was uniquely "women's motion pictures" (*nüxing de dianying* 女性的電影), as opposed to men's film in the United States. By "women's motion pictures," Shen meant that Chinese film had centered on female stars from day one and consequently served female viewers (Zhou et al. 2011, 55). As will be shown later, *Tomboy* was purported to cater to the preferences of female audiences, especially schoolgirls.

Tomboy's spectacular box-office success well exceeded the expectations of Yee Hwa's management, who had sold the film's rights at the bargain price of 5,100 *yuan* in advance, equivalent to the profit reaped from one Shanghai-based cinema in merely ten days (Miao 1936, 18). Yee Hwa's initial lack of confidence in this film's profitability was symptomatic of a deep economic crisis across Shanghai (Coble 1986, 140) that plagued all film companies in this period. While some studios went bankrupt or underwent changes of ownership, more film companies altered their agendas to keep their books balanced. In this sense, the mid-1930s prefigured the world of cinema in wartime Shanghai characterized by "the conflicting demands of economic survival and nationalist interests" (Fu 2003, 2). It is under these circumstances that Yee Hwa, which had suffered enormous financial losses by producing a number of much-admired left-wing movies in the early and mid-1930s, decided to produce more entertaining movies by 1936. In 1937, Yan Chuntang 嚴春棠 (1885?–1949), Yee Hwa's owner, ascribed the film studio's success in stemming further losses to his staff's timely decision to make films in line with audience preferences, although he continued to heap praise on the "lofty consciousness" that had characterized Yee Hwa's earlier productions (Yan 1937, 7).

It is no surprise that Yee Hwa's change of mind met with scathing criticism from left-wing filmmakers ("Jinggao Yihua gongsi" 1936, 20) because Yan Chuntang's remark addressed a central issue of the Marxist film debate in the 1930s, namely, the dichotomy of consciousness (*yishi* 意識) vs. entertainment. Victor Fan (2015, 48) notes that *yishi* signified "a liminal space between awareness and consciousness in one's process of political awakening." In the midst of the bitter soft film/hard film dispute in the mid-1930s, Huang Jiamo 黃嘉謨 (1916–2004), the screenplay writer of *Tomboy* and a theorist of soft film, dismissed Marxist film

theory as nothing but "a set of revolutionary slogans" (75). Huang's accusation thus reduced the lively soft film/hard film debate, essentially a verbal war between hard film theorists' penchant for critiquing "a film's narrative and representation" and their soft film foes' emphasis on "the delicate distance between the cinematographic image and reality" (55), to the consciousness (or ideology)/entertainment antithesis.

As Huang Jiamo pitted entertainment against ideology, his *Tomboy* stood out as a prime example of the entertaining production. Its reviewers hailed the movie as "ice cream" in midsummer (Bai 1936), reminding the prospective audience of Huang's well-known soft film theory—that is, film's capacity to offer its viewers refreshing experiences (Jiamo 1933, 3). Reviewers tended to cite the film's storyline, the protagonists' acting, and some supporting roles' knockabout performances—but not its cinematography, as boasted of by Huang's fellow soft film theorists—as the reason for *Tomboy*'s popularity (Gu 1936). Among all highly amusing elements—including the Laurel-Hardy type comic duo of Han Langen 韓蘭根 (1909–1982) and Guan Hongda 關宏達 (1914–1967) and Yuan Meiyun's Beijing Opera performance—that constituted the "ice cream" that Huang had vowed to deliver, Yuan's dual gender identities figured prominently as the most intriguing and amusing. Misunderstandings, confusions, and tensions fostered by Yuan's two genders were repeatedly highlighted on screen and frequently found mention in the press. On one occasion, Yuan is panicked to find that she is refused access to both men's and women's restrooms in a department store. A news report covered this plot line as early as March 1936, making it the first episode from *Tomboy* disclosed to the general public (Songzi 1936). On another occasion, a doctor grows confused by the women-only symptoms he discovers in Shouben. This episode was foregrounded in the film's advertisement in *Shen bao* on June 5, 1936.

The protagonist's two gender identities, meanwhile, enable her to cavort with both Zhou Xuan and Wang Yin. Zhou Xuan's diligent courting of Yuan Meiyun, a plot line Zhang Zhen (2005, 284) has interpreted as "queer," gained wide recognition from both filmmakers and filmgoers as the most innovative and spectacular portion of the film. The "queerest" episode takes place in the second half of the film, in which Han Langen's glimpse of a tryst between the two protagonists in men's wear (Wang Yin and Yuan Meiyun) in the backyard garden deepened the shock and confusion he felt upon his discovery of the photo of Zhou Xuan kissing Yuan Meiyun. It is thus no surprise that this photo is emphatically presented in the film's advertisement in *Shen bao* on June 1, 1936 with the sensation-mongering caption: "Men are warmly hugging and kissing; Women behave affectionately cheek-to-cheek" (See Figure 2). In the process of making and exhibiting *Tomboy*, Yuan Meiyun took pride in and benefited from her newfound gender identity, albeit only temporarily. Yuan's pictures as a short-haired woman in cross-dressing attire were mass-produced to fascinate her female fans (Yi 2013, 57). Yee Hwa had anticipated that Yuan's ambivalent gender identities and the film's "queer" storyline would appeal to the female audience. As early as January 1936, for example, the company invited representatives from an all-girls middle school to observe the shooting of *Tomboy* and familiarize them with the film's plot, allowing them to spread the word about the film after they returned to school ("Yang xiaojie

Figure 2. Advertisement for *Tomboy* in *Shen bao*, June 1, 1936.

jiang *Huashen guniang*" 1936).

Historically, female same-sex desire was hardly deemed threatening in China because, according to Roland Altenburger (2005, 171), "the temporary transgression of the borderline of gender would finally be corrected and did not entail any continuous usurpation of male power." Deborah Sang (2003, 6–25) similarly finds that intimacy among young women was considered "negligible and insignificant" in imperial China but became problematic with the "emergence in the May Fourth era of psychobiological discourse." Despite this, male scholars in Republican China continued to recognize that young women would "change their minds" and "follow the path of heterosexual marriage and family life." It is thus no wonder that the solution to all the tensions caused by Yuan's ambivalent gender identities is a return to "heterosexual marriage and family life." Not only does Yuan rediscover her "true" self (as a pretty young woman), she also gives an approving nod towards an arranged marriage: She seeks endorsement for her love with Wang Yin from the entire family as the man hires a matchmaker, subsuming their pursuit of freedom of love to the prevalent rhetoric of family values. This arrangement thus attests to an effort to compromise between the contested conceptions of new womanhood and family in 1930s China.

New Womanhood in 1930s China

Yuan Meiyun's image in *Tomboy* was constructed and circulated in the context of the intellectual, social, and legal discourses on new womanhood in the 1930s. The filmic representations of women in this decade have long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. Zhang Yingjin (1994, 619–620), for example, categorizes modern women in 1930s cinema into a "traditional role" of being "settled in an 'ideal' marriage," women who "indulge in sentimentality, sensuality, or fantasy," professional women, and revolutionary women. The four (stereo)types on the screen were clearly a manifestation of a pervasive concern over women's fates in a precarious modern milieu. Such a filmic construction of new womanhood paralleled the collusion between liberal writers and GMD ideologues to call for policing women's behaviors and restoring family values during the Nanjing Decade (He 2018, 24; Glosser 2003,

94). Hence, Paul Pickowicz (1993, 299) contends that "the May Fourth themes of radical antitraditionalism"—including radical feminism and individualism—gradually vanished in the 1930s.

If women's issues represented on the screen were merely an embodiment of male filmmakers' anxieties, can we uncritically accept the argument that the "male authorial voice" overpowered and silenced "a woman's voice" (Shen 2005, 78), and that women functioned as nothing but visual tropes of male-dominated nationalistic discourses in the cinematic space (Zhang 2005, 83)? Miriam Hansen (1991, 268–269) has called attention to the gap between "traditional patriarchal ideology on the one hand and the recognition of female experience, needs, fantasies on the other" in the American context. In other words, to reach a female audience, filmmakers displayed a "considerable degree of public visibility" of women and were willing to recognize women's "social and economic significance."

In 1930s China, likewise, the "golden age" of female stardom coincided with the rise of female spectatorship principally because of "countless employment opportunities for women," especially in cities (Reynaud 2014, 94). Laikwan Pang (2002, 116) similarly finds that serving "the large female market" was the motive behind making woman's films in 1930s China. Voluminous evidence reveals the birth of female film fans in major cities in this decade. A survey conducted in Beiping in 1935, for example, indicated that women constituted about forty percent of all spectators in the cinema (Shuaizhen 1935, 13). Meanwhile, female college students were the main filmgoers in Nanjing (Zhong 1933, 22). In a guidebook published in 1932, *Gateway to Shanghai* (*Shanghai menjing* 上海門徑), the author stated with much certainty that the new-generation women in Shanghai were familiar with film. Not only schoolgirls but also elderly women frequently watched movies in theaters (Wang Dingjiu 1932, 14).

Yuan Meiyun-style Womanhood

The rise of female spectatorship led leftist film star Chen Bo'er 陳波兒 (1907–1951) (1936, 62–65) to assert that female filmgoers were keen on identifying themselves with their beloved actresses, both as stars in film and as ordinary people in their day-to-day lives. Although Jackie Stacey (1991, 149–151) maintains that identifying with female stars is key to "the construction of feminine identities more generally," such identifications are checkered with contradictions. On the one hand, they tend to reproduce existing norms; on the other hand, they provide women with "fantasies of resistance." The image of Yuan Meiyun embraced such contradictions. Although Zhang Zhen (2005, 285) argues that the cross-dressing female protagonist in *Tomboy* represented a modernist "fascination with the chameleon-like modern girl," Yuan's image in the film differed fundamentally from the discourse of the mysterious, pleasure-seeking "modern girl" popularized by New Sensationalists—namely, a femme fatale personifying "the urban materiality" who emasculated men in the modern city (Shih 2001, 352). To rephrase Poshek Fu (2003, 13), she embodied the modern life's "glamour and excitement" but freed herself from "its vices and hedonism." This new womanhood fit well with the very femininity promoted during the New Life Movement: "modern, sexually attractive, but

morally pure" (Fan 2015, 47). In the media, Yuan's womanhood was portrayed as both modern—as a film star/popular singer, a strong-willed practitioner of freedom of love, and a breadwinner—and "traditional"—as a Beijing Opera performer, a helpless victim of human trafficking, a loyal daughter, and a virtuous wife—irreducible to any categories, whether leftist, modernist, or traditionalist. Her polymorphous identity as a private person was thus consistent with the fickle character she played in *Tomboy*.

Yuan as a Crossover Superstar

Yuan Meiyun's superstardom was widely forecast as early as 1934. A reviewer foresaw that Yuan was poised to dethrone Hu Die 胡蝶 (1908–1989) and take over the latter's title of "Queen of Chinese film" within two years ("Weilai de huanghou Yuan Meiyun xiaojie" 1934, no page number). From the film fans' standpoint, no one was indispensable to Yee Hwa except Yuan Meiyun (Jia 1937, 1). In other words, Yuan was running a solo show at Yee Hwa, making it essentially a one-star film studio. For many contemporary observers, Yuan's swift rise to fame resulted from her matchless "talent" ("Yuan Meiyun yinxiang" 1942, 3). She, for example, was one of only two film stars in Shanghai who could speak perfect standard Mandarin Chinese. As the age of the talkie film dawned, Yuan certainly outshone her competitors, including Hu Die, in this respect.

Yuan Meiyun's ability to speak Mandarin Chinese, according to a commentator, was an outgrowth of her longtime training as a Beijing Opera performer ("Pingshu yingren de guoyu Chengdu" 1939, 54). In a short autobiography, Yuan admitted that she began to engage in stage performance when she was only nine or ten. Over the following four years, she relished the chance to share the spotlight with Beijing Opera stars across the Yangzi Delta, including Zhou Xinfang 周信芳 (1895–1975; Yindi 1939, 10). Yuan proved to be such a genius in Beijing Opera that her exceptional but effortless performance in *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan jingtang* 斬經堂, 1937, dir. Fei Mu 費穆), a Beijing Opera-transformed film starring Yuan and Zhou Xinfang, reportedly surprised both opera fans and filmgoers (Jia 1937, 1). Shortly after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Yuan briefly returned to the stage and worked with Zhou Xinfang's Beijing Opera troupe for two weeks in late 1937. Later, Yuan boasted, with ample justification, that she could still thrive without a film industry in Shanghai because of her high reputation as a Beijing Opera star (Chunguang 1938, 30).

Yuan as Victim

Yuan Meiyun had initially received training in Beijing Opera from her foster father Yuan Shude 袁樹德 (?–1948) and his family ("Yuan Meiyun zhi changpian hetong" 1936, 493). Yuan Shude's name riveted media attention in 1935 when Yuan Meiyun's plan to break with him was disclosed. Readers of various periodicals, such as the highly reputed women's journal, *Linglong* 玲瓏, learned that Yuan Meiyun was pawned to Yuan Shude for 500 *yuan* at the age of ten. A recently signed agreement ruled that her mother and Yuan Shude were entitled to split Meiyun's earnings until she was married. Unexpectedly, Meiyun's mother hired a lawyer in November 1935

to press a claim that her agreement with Yuan Shude had expired, and Meiyun thereby severed ties with her foster father. *Linglong*'s reporter thus commented that Meiyun had been dehumanized and commodified according to this agreement ("Yuan Meiyun fengbo chongqi" 1935, 3931).

Yuan Shude's acquisition of the guardianship—or ownership—of Yuan Meiyun from her impoverished natal family and her wife's cultivation of Meiyun into a child star of Beijing Opera typified a longstanding apprenticeship system. Beneath the glittery veneer of the system that had produced generations of Beijing Opera masters, stories about the selling, buying, and enslavement of boys and girls were disregarded. When her mother petitioned to re-secure her guardianship over Yuan Meiyun in 1935, this system came under renewed scrutiny. A contributor to *Linglong* opined that driving women to prostitution constituted an example of the universal abuse of women in a male-dominated society. From the author's standpoint, the relationship between Meiyun and Yuan Shude's family was not dissimilar to that between a prostitute and her madam. Hence, the writer cried for immediate action to bring this system to an end and thereby liberate women ("Cong Yuan Meiyun jiuchan shuoqi" 1935, 3891–3892). In Republican China, as Gail Hershatter (1997, 203) finds, the "image of women and children torn from their families and dehumanized by the human flesh market" symbolized a weakened Chinese nation. Liberating those victims thus carried nationalistic and feminist ramifications.

While *Linglong* might not have been interested in whipping up nationalistic feeling, the rhetoric of women's emancipation in the discussion of the Yuan Meiyun issue testifies to the journal's staunch feminist stance. Founded in 1931, *Linglong* had garnered a reputation as a "new world of the modern woman" (Lee 1999, 82) or a "female space" (Wang 2011, 246). In this space, *Linglong* adopted an innovative approach—one oscillating "between sober didacticism and evocative playfulness" (246)—to promote a type of "new woman" who embodied "new, 'real', 'intelligent', 'responsible' and 'truthful' gentility" (Mittler 2007, 229). To popularize such modern womanhood, the editors of *Linglong* tended to cite female film stars as the "embodiment of modernity" (Lee 1999, 82). The editors' predilection for cinema led to the establishment of a new film magazine, *Diansheng* 電聲 (*Movietone*), in 1932. A recent study indicates that *Linglong* and *Diansheng* were actually two periodicals under the same ownership, and their views on society and women were usually similar (Sun Liying 2014, 129–132; 154–155).

It is thus no wonder that *Diansheng*, like *Linglong*, continued to pay attention to Yuan Meiyun and her termination of the relationship with her foster father. *Linglong* was inclined to explore this incident's implication for women's liberation, whereas *Diansheng* elected to furnish its readers with details of Yuan Meiyun's personal life. The two journals, hence, complemented each other well. When the abovementioned essay in *Linglong* called for saving women from men's oppression, a report in *Diansheng* in early 1935 reminded readers of the bleak fates of girl apprentices who received training in their masters' houses (Jiangnan 1935, 138). As such, the two periodicals made a concerted effort to expose the hidden evils of this apprentice system and portray Yuan Meiyun as its hapless victim to win

public sympathy, while her action to void the contract with her foster father was interpreted as her relentless pursuit of personal freedom ("Yuan Meiyun tuoli yifu qiu ziyou" 1935, 998–999).

Yuan Meiyun as a Loyal Daughter and Responsible Spouse
After Yuan Meiyun parted ways with her foster father, her personal life was still in the spotlight of *Linglong* and *Diansheng*. The two journals reported Yuan's endeavor not only to feed her entire family (eight people in total, "Yuan Meiyun jingji konghuang" 1937, 163), but also to repair her relationship with her foster family by paying regular visits to Yuan Shude ("Yuan Meiyun yu Yuan Shude yi huifu haogan" 1936, 28). Yuan Meiyun thereby retained her image as a loyal and grateful daughter until Yuan Shude's death in 1948, despite the unpleasant dispute over her guardianship. During Yuan Shude's funeral, Yuan Meiyun dressed like a bereaved daughter and cried her heart out ("Chen Yanyan huan xinzang bing, Yuan Meiyun yifu bingshi" 1948, 1).

In the media narrative, Yuan Meiyun was also depicted as a responsible spouse in spite of her superstardom. Her on- and off-screen sweetheart and future husband, Wang Yin, rarely won over the audience. Some overzealous fans even openly called for Yuan's termination of her cooperation with Wang Yin, considering the latter's plummeting popularity among filmgoers ("Women buyao zaikan Yuan Meiyun Wang Yin heyan de xi" 1936, 772). Meanwhile, most observers took a dim view of their marriage prospects as soon as the two stars began to date. A contributor to *Diansheng* described the incongruity as "a beautiful phoenix being matched with a crow" (*caifeng suiya* 彩鳳隨鴉; Yuan Meiyun shi gushuang xiang 1935, 816). Despite a pervasively pessimistic attitude towards Yuan's pursuit of freedom of love, not only did Yuan and Wang marry—just like the ending of *Tomboy*—they also won a reputation as an affectionate and devoted couple. By the late 1930s, a *Diansheng* reporter could not help but sing the praise of Yuan's "faith to her husband unto death" (*congyi erzhong* 從一而終) and "indomitable fortitude" (*baizhe buhui* 百折不回) in loving Wang ("Yuan Meiyun shouding guilü" 1939, 1024).

The image produced of Yuan Meiyun in the media as a loyal daughter and a caring wife constituted merely one example of her "morally pure" womanhood that accorded with the very femininity promoted during the New Life Movement (Fan 2015, 47). The reading public was left with the impression that Yuan was a modern woman because of her decidedly modern hobbies—reading, knitting, writing, photography, and tourism (Chen Jiazhen 1935, 20)—but remained uncontaminated by the precarious environment of Shanghai. One writer commented that Yuan had never had the "pernicious habit" of endless quests for romantic relationships with men ("Yuan Meiyun nüshi zhi zheng mianmu" 1939).

Yuan Meiyun's Stardom

The media and Yuan Meiyun herself collaborated to build up a unique womanhood encompassing a wide range of identities. She was simultaneously cast as a film star, a stellar Beijing Opera performer, a victim of China's apprenticeship/

slavery system, a professional woman, a practitioner of free love and marriage, a pursuer of individual freedom, and a filial daughter. She was chameleon-like, but in a universally acceptable way and not only because she was cross-dressing. More importantly, although Yuan typifies a generation of modern women who "struggled mightily against patriarchy" in the movie (Bai 1936), she is more than willing to submit herself to marriage with parental consent. Just as Yuan poses no threat to gender norms in the movie, her womanhood as portrayed in the media outlets was viewed as not only nonthreatening but desirable. Yuan's multifaceted womanhood attests to the coexistence and contestation of competing agendas in the relatively conservative 1930s. It was thus an outgrowth of negotiation and compromise among diverse values and norms. Indeed, the malleability of Yuan's eclectic identity fit well with the new femininity that *Linglong* was propagating. Louise Edwards (2012, 568) notes that a new woman à la *Linglong* was a product of cultural compromise: she "could plot [her] behavior along an imagined continuum stretching between American depravity (glamorous and oh-so-romantic) and the dull prison of Confucian morality." It is thus understandable that *Linglong* and its sister journal, *Diansheng*, both attempted to shape her in accordance with a specific model of womanhood by sternly cautioning her against degenerating into the "perverted" male audiences' plaything and object of voyeurism, and appreciatively promoted Yuan's stardom ("Yuan Meiyun xiaoshi" 1935, 947).

A full presentation of Yuan Meiyun's personal life in the media prior to the exhibition of *Tomboy* exemplifies an intertextual approach of star-making that constitutes the "actor as a private individual" as well as "a sign within the host culture, insofar as his or her behavioural and physical attributes have been read and will be read as cues to personality" (King 1991, 131). As Huang Jiamo (1936) acknowledged, Yuan fit perfectly the persona in *Tomboy* in his mind when he was authoring the screenplay. In other words, Huang had already realized that Yuan's fluid identity as a private individual could resonate well with her image as a "chameleon-like" modern woman in the virtual cinematic space. Indeed, the representations of Yuan in cinema and in the media narrative were a combination of the "spectacular with the everyday" and "the special with the ordinary" (Dyer 1979, 35). In this sense, the screening of *Tomboy* constituted a process of "completion"—to borrow John Ellis's (1991, 304) term—of her stardom.

Conversely, a female star's image also helped to echo and develop "a fundamental aspect of cinema itself." As film and stardom are mutually constitutive, the audience also contributes to lending the meaning of a star in and outside the film via identification. Such identification entails both the reconfirmation of existing norms and values and a defection from them (Stacey 1991, 151). The left-wing critics could fault the film for being a clumsy imitation of Hollywood comedies that peddled "obscenity, nonsense, homosexuality, and low taste" (*yinhui*, *wuliao*, *tongxing ai*, *diji quwei* 淫穢、無聊、同性愛、低級趣味; Linghe 1936, 267). They, however, fell short of properly understanding the dual dimensions of identification for film fans. As one of its contemporary viewers admitted, *Tomboy* did address weighty social issues. Such issues could be disseminated easily to the general population precisely because the movie was relaxing and facetious (Zhou

Figure 3. Yuan Meiyun in men's clothing.
Source: *Honglü* 紅綠 1, no. 6 (1936): 3.

et al. 2011, 55). To be more specific, what left-wing film reviewers had completely overlooked was the film's subversion of the gender line, wittingly or not, amid an anti-woman backlash during the Nanjing Decade.

An arresting example of *Tomboy*'s transgression of the existing gender mores and its conduciveness to making the woman a modern desiring subject was the abovementioned scene of Zhou Xuan kissing Yuan Meiyun (Shouben). The kiss was certainly path-breaking in the film history of China. Very rarely had a close-up shot of kissing been presented to a massive audience in a cinema.[1] A contemporary reviewer wondered aloud why Chinese filmmakers and viewers alike deemed kissing more indecent than women's half-naked bodies on the screen ("Jiaru guochan dianying youle jiewen" 1939, 7). The taboo of kissing on the screen in 1930s China was comparable with "invisible and unspeakable" homosexuality in Hollywood films in the same decade. Andrea Weiss (1991, 286–288) argues that the flirtation of androgynous actresses, such as Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992) in *Morocco* (1930, dir. Josef von Sternberg), with other female roles was "a flirtation with the lesbian spectator as well" and thereby helped lesbian spectators "define their sexual identities." Quite the opposite, Yuan Meiyun's cross-dressing images and Zhou Xuan's sexually suggestive action were not intended to evoke a lesbian sensibility—as some leftist critics had claimed—but to give the Chinese female audience's repressed desire for openly courting men an explicit expression. Yee Hwa sold this desire so well that a legion of schoolgirls reportedly "trooped into" (*jiedui* 結隊) the film studio for the express purposes of witnessing Yuan Meiyun as a good-looking young man when *Tomboy* was being shot (Baizi 1936, 13, see Figure 3). A brief excursion into the forbidden zone of women's sexual desire and female intimacy, however, was not expected to fundamentally violate social mores, for everyone in the theater knew that Zhou Xuan was, in reality, kissing a woman in Yuan Meiyun. After all, as Deborah Sang (2003, 25) notes, young women's exercising of "sentimental" and "sexual faculties" was viewed in Republican China as nothing but a rehearsal for their future heterosexual marital life.

[1] The first close-up shot of a kiss on the screen in China is believed to have appeared in *Children of Troubled Times* (*Fengyun ernü* 風雲兒女, 1935, dir. Xu Xingzhi 許幸之). We thank Dr. Lu Jiajia for providing us with the information about on-screen kisses in 1930s China.

Conclusion

The 1930s witnessed what Matthew Johnson (2008, 1–5), referring to filmmaking, calls a "communications revolution" whereby propaganda became "the *raison d'être* of the entire industry." As a consequence, intellectuals of diverse political persuasions, particularly the left-leaning ones, self-consciously took part in filmmaking activities to advance their ideological and aesthetic agendas. Topics with sociopolitical significance, including women's issues, struck a chord among filmmakers and filmgoers. At the same time, however, economic woes during this decade gradually impelled filmmakers to focus their attention on entertaining productions. In this sense, the mid-1930s foreshadowed wartime Shanghai where the deepening economic crisis led film studios to produce almost exclusively apolitical and escapist movies (Fu 2003, 93–132).

Yuan Meiyun stood out in the early age of talkie movies not merely as a successful actress, but as a phenomenon. The very womanhood she displayed both on and off the screen was a testimony to the simmering tension between the decades-long campaign of advocating women's rights in intellectual, media, and legal discourses and the ongoing conservative, anti-individualistic maelstrom. Therefore, Yuan was cast as a new type of modern woman who was able to reconcile competing trends and negotiate with various gender and behavioral norms, allowing female viewers of differing socioeconomic backgrounds to identify with her. Such womanhood was given full expression in *Tomboy*, in which the female protagonist's relentless pursuit of romantic love sat comfortably with a pervasive recognition of traditional ways of matchmaking and marriage. Thus, the film's success resides in its filmmakers' endeavor to address and ease the contradiction between a call for women's emancipation and lingering concern over their lack of ability to exercise their agency in a modernized society, by highlighting Yuan Meiyun's compromised and synthesized womanhood both in cinema and in her actual life.

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