

Book Review: *Wang Renmei: The Wildcat of Shanghai*

Meyer, Richard, *Wang Renmei: The Wildcat of Shanghai*, Hong Kong University Press, 2013, 204 pp, \$30 (pbk with DVD), ISBN 978-988-8139-96-5.

Once again, Richard Meyer translates his expertise on Chinese cinema and familiarity with modern Chinese history into an account that is accessible to a general audience and versatile in classroom use. Following his work on Ruan Lingyu and Jin Yan, Meyer opens another new door to the world of Chinese silent films for English-speaking readers. Compared with Ruan Lingyu, who died at age 24, Wang Renmei (1914-1987) lived through and experienced many pivotal moments and broader changes in modern China. The story that Meyer presents the readers, therefore, is that of a modern woman whose life was brightened and confined by Chinese national cinema, and entangled with other historical figures and events.

This book and the accompanying DVD of Wang Renmei's most famous work, *Wild Rose* (1932), illustrate the accomplishments and characteristics of Chinese silent films, and thus can serve as excellent materials in courses on Chinese cinema. The history and main themes of Chinese cinema are punctuated by China's attempts at and frustrations with modernization. As Meyer demonstrates, Wang Renmei's rise to fame in the early 1930s resulted largely from new techniques, components, themes, and aesthetic values that early Chinese filmmakers ventured in their works. Readers also hear the voices of film critics and audiences, who, though not always sympathetic, actively contributed to and shaped the development of the early film industry.

This biography of Wang Renmei sheds light on opportunities and predicaments for Chinese women as the nation went through fundamental transformations at different stages of history. Wang Renmei, as Meyer portrays her, was a modern woman who embodied and represented new ideals, such as athleticism, vitality, and independence. As "the first Chinese actress to show bare legs on the screen" (photo 1.10), Wang was a daring actress and talented singer who took initiatives and embraced challenges in her professional development. As a female artist, however, Wang's marriage to Jin Yan impeded her career, which was largely based on her sexual appeal on the screen. Meyer demonstrates how Wang's prospects were further limited by her age and the more rigid, defeminized gender roles for women under the Communist rule.

Meyer weaves the personal vicissitudes of Wang Renmei into the national struggle and transformation of China. Nation and nationalism loom large in Chinese cinema, and Wang had been a politically conscious actress. Raised in a professor's family (Wang's father was Mao Zedong's teacher), and influenced by progressive intellectuals and artists in Shanghai, Wang Renmei had been patriotic and concerned with social issues since her cinematic debut. Such inclinations were behind the important career and life choices she made, including her marriage, relocation during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), starring in left-wing films in the 1930s and 40s, and her affinity with the Chinese Commu-

nist Party. Readers will appreciate, in particular, Meyer's efforts at relating Wang Renmei's life to that of Mao Zedong. Mao's various decisions, political and personal, had a vital impact on Wang's life.

Meyer presents Wang Renmei as a dynamic actress who kept revisiting and revising her understanding of performance as an art as she encountered new people, ideologies, and experiences. Having participated in land reform, for instance, she used class theory to analyze her characters, and "moved on from acting as intuition to understanding it as an art" (72). Meyer discusses this change in a nuanced way, pointing out how the class analysis method deprived characters of their humanity while praising Wang's efforts.

By placing Wang in the center of the changing Shanghai film industry milieu and larger strands of history, Meyer produces an account that is much broader in scope than his title suggests. Wang Renmei's life "symbolized what thousands of artists of her time experienced" during the Republican period and after 1949 (99), though she was among the more fortunate ones. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, Wang's connection to Mao Zedong saved her when numerous filmmakers in Shanghai were under attack (131). Meyer also maps out the network of individuals and forces that determined the direction of Chinese cinema as well as the fate of the individual actor or actress. The length and nature of this book, however, limit the depth of such an analysis. Meyer touches on certain historical figures whose significance cannot be fully unpacked in this booklet. Zhang Shankun, movie producer and owner of Xinhua Company who cast Wang in several films, for instance, was one of the most fascinatingly complicated and controversial figures in Chinese cinema. He appears in his account as merely a "flamboyant" and profit-driven "impresario" (43, 52). The real Zhang, as some scholars have pointed out, might have been more multifaceted: resourceful, entrepreneurial, cunning, and more loyal to the Nationalist party and nation than he appeared (e.g. Zhang, 2004; Fu, 2003).

In addition to the nicely restored 1932 production of *Wild Rose*, the set contains other interesting and precious materials, including dozens of photos of Wang Renmei, her acquaintances and other figures who matter to her life, as well as interview transcripts. Meyer interviewed a number of individuals who are important in their own right and in their relations to the subject of this book. Particularly fascinating is the interview with Qin Yi, the second wife of Jin Yan and a much celebrated "people's artist" in the PRC. Readers will appreciate the candid comments by Qin on "the wild cat of Shanghai" and the ex-wife of her husband. This interview becomes the most important source for Meyer's interpretation of Wang's emotional state in the early 1950s and her relationship with her second husband, Ye Qianyu. Interested readers may be inspired to explore other materials to further decipher this part of Wang's life.

This set will work well in courses on modern China, Chinese cinema, and gender, among other topics. Instructors can spark student interest and discussion using the combination of the DVD and biography of Wang. This wonderful set may also inspire promising students to pursue research on related topics. I highly recommend this book for college-level courses and for a general audience.

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REFERENCES

- Fu, Poshek. *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinema*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Zhang, Yingjin. *Chinese National Cinema*. Routledge, 2004.