Poetic realism in Chinese film 1932-1937

When one talks of Chinese language literary modernism, what most eagerly springs to mind is perhaps poetry, short stories and the growing popularity of the novel. The transformation of poetry during this period was truly revolutionary, partly because, in the words of McDougall and Louie: “it offered something particularly new: fiction had commonly been written in the vernacular, but poetry for the educated had previously been written in the literary language. The literary revolution in poetry was in this way more profound than in fiction (...)”1 This whereas the novel, traditionally not held in high regard, soared in esteem to be realized as a tool for expressing political and ideological ideas. Parallel to this development were the changes that took place within the field of drama. The literary theatre already had a long history in China since its rise during the Yuan dynasty, but the modern huaju 话剧, spoken drama, was something relatively new.

The huaju not only thematically differed from the traditional and had a tendency to focus on social issues and family relations – but there was also a fundamental structural difference that is stressed by contemporary author Ba Jin’s 巴金 (1904-2005) statement concerning Cao Yu’s 曹禺 (1910-1996) 1933 drama Leiyu 雷雨 - that it is a text not merely suitable for performing, but also to be read as a literary piece with its own merits.2 My focus in the present work lies primarily on the expression of literary modernism in the modern, spoken drama, and the translation of modernist ideas into the early works of Chinese cinema. To do this it is essential to establish what is meant by “modernism” and furthermore “Chinese language modernism”. Gill Branston in Cinema and Cultural Modernity traces European modernism back to the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and “the accompanying rationalist ambitions of those intellectual movements that were known together, in all their contradictions, as ‘the Enlightenment’. Very broadly, such changes, soon embodied in the emerging mass media, looked to a democratized future instead of to the deferences and stabilities of the feudal past.”3

I find this applicable to Chinese modernism especially pertaining to the attempted break from the past and its stabilities and traditions, in social as well as literary aspects. Although China was not in the immediate shadow of the industrial revolution that took place mainly in Europe and America, Chinese society had still met with the consequences of industrialized

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warfare when invaded and occupied by European nations during the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. The threat from the outside world as well as the crumbling of the Qing Empire from within pushed the cultural sphere at the turn of the century to face the same challenges as their Western counterparts had a few years earlier – a challenge of innovation in a world that was changing more and more rapidly, within the replacing of the old universe with a new, or at least the discovering of a new universe existing parallel to the old. European modernism often carried traces of the loss suffered by rejecting the old system, and to some extent rejecting the Christian God. In China young modernists much in the same fashion rejected not only the Qing Empire but the belief in Confucianism that had been the basis of morality and social order more or less since its establishment as state philosophy in the first century B.C.

My purpose with these comparisons is not to imagine any direct parallels between European and Chinese modernism, or to draw lines of possible influences, but rather to define why it is relevant to speak of a literary modernism in China much in the same way as in Europe.

In the early stages of Chinese literary modernism there was a definite attempt to break free from the own literary tradition. Interestingly enough this break coincided with an acceptance of European tradition as inspiration for a new, modern Chinese literature. “The past, it seems, was acceptable as long as it was the Other’s past, a new past,” as Gregory B. Lee concludes in Troubadours, Trumpets and Troublemakers.4 Even as European and Russian modernists such Ibsen, Strindberg, Ostrovsky and their contemporaries were beginning to slip away into the blurry definition of “past” literature in Europe, the Chinese New Culture movement focused not only on these recently retired masters, but also translated and made use of much older literature such as Goethe, Verlaine and even Ovid.5 Cao Yu, for instance, attributed his inspiration for Leiyu from Euripides and Racine, as well as from Ibsen (though ultimately concluding that “我是我自己” “I am myself”6). This is far from an isolated phenomenon, or one limited to western influence over the east. For Chinese early twentieth century writers, this type of Occidentalism might very well have been driven by the same lust for new and exotic impressions as were European artists and craftsmen of the eighteenth century rococo period who gladly assimilated what they perceived as new and modern from the Orient – in

5 Lee, p 73.
truth traditional Chinese aesthetics. A more recent example of this could perhaps be the influence of typical Hong Kong film aesthetics on Hollywood films of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The Chinese modernists attempts to reach out and find something new in the “Other’s” past did not in fact equal a complete break from the own culture. I want to highlight the interlacing of tradition and modernity, imagining that there's a more complex reason behind the development of Chinese modernism than a simple replacing of the own traditional aesthetic and narrative forms with a Western counterpart. It is highly problematic to regard Chinese language modernism merely as a translation of a European original, just as it would be too simplistic to regard it, in Yomi Braester’s words, “as a reaction to a series of traumas.”

The transition in the field of drama was indeed revolutionary compared to the purely sung traditional theatre of the past, but did not in fact mean that all Chinese dramatists overnight started writing bourgeois family dramas set among middle class Shanghaiese dressed up in Western costumes. Artists like playwright and cinema pioneer Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩 (1889-1962) used inspiration from European modernism as a means to “update” Chinese classics, simultaneously commenting on current social situations. His play Pan Jinlian 潘金莲, for example, is a story derived from the Chinese classic Water Margins 水浒传 (attributed to Shi Nai’an 施耐庵, 1296-1372), basically told within the confines of an Ibsenist family drama. Adding to the mixture of traditional and modern was the fact that Pan Jinlian was written as a European style huaaju but premiered in the form of traditional Chinese opera when performed by The Southern Society 南国社 in 1927. In this case there was no attempt to break free from the own cultural past, only an ambition to view it in a different light. This could be compared to what Zbigniew Slupski writes concerning the literary style of Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981): “It is commonly said (…) that he was influenced by Zola and European naturalism, and it would appear that this was the source from which he took the device of the detached narrator. I am far from underestimating the influence of European naturalism on Mao Dun, but I would be inclined to believe that naturalism only enhanced and modified influences Mao Dun had drawn himself from Chinese literary tradition.”

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8 Braester, p 59.
Chinese literary tradition and history was also used to cloak analysis and critique of one’s own time, as is often the case of historical dramas of any period and national origin.

Another dramatic new light was provided by the opportunities of a new medium: the cinema. The modern *huaaju* suited well for translation into film, and it was in China just like in Europe playwrights who stood for a good part of the early film scripts. In France, prominent authors and dramatists that also left their mark on the early film industry included Jacques Prévert, Marcel Pagnol and Sacha Guitry. In China this group was represented not only by Ouyang Yuqian, but by Tian Han 田汉, Xia Yan 夏衍 and Shen Xiling 沈西苓 to mention a few.

The first Chinese full length feature film, Ren Pengnian’s 任彭年 Yan Ruisheng 喻瑞生, became a box-office success following its release on the first of July 1921, consequently gaining more investors to the film industry and initiating its growth over the next two decades. This was an industry much inspired by the modernist development in literature and drama in particular, but also one that contributed considerably to the ideas of modernism and the modern subjectivities. One aspect of this is expressed by Zhang Zhen in *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*:

> The cinematic vernacular in the Chinese context reveals the content of modern life and, more importantly, determines specific forms of expressibility that defy any rigid boundaries – between the verbal and the visual, the secular and the nonsecular, the material and the imaginary, the high and the low, the political and the aesthetic, and finally, China and the world. This conception has affinity with Jonathan Friedman’s notion of modernity as a field of identifications resulting from the cyclical historical commercialization and dissemination of cultural products in the global arena and promising transcultural and intersubjective exchanges. Modernism is traditionally and institutionally associated with the high-brow culture of the West (including its self-reflexive critique), which, as a symptom of globalization, also infected the Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the century. Vernacular modernism, however, is open to and dependent on a mass media-based authorship and spectorship.

In regards to expressions of modernism in the early movie industry, my ambition in the present work is to outline a tendency in Chinese film that roughly corresponds to the so named “Poetic realism”, a phenomena in French film of the nineteen thirties represented primarily by directors like Marcel Carné and Jean Renoir and writers such as aforementioned Prevert, Pagnol and Guitry. Their works, including titles such as *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Les Regles du Jeu* (1939) and *La Chienne* (1931) often centered on life at the margins of society and the life of poor working class or even criminal characters. The basic plot of films corresponding to the tendency is described in *Film History: An Introduction* as follows: "After a life of disappointments, these shabby figures find a last chance at intense, ideal love. After a

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brief period they are disappointed again, and the films end with the disillusionment or deaths of the central characters. The overall tone is one of nostalgia and bitterness."¹²

Poetic realism is recreated realism, which is to say not the realism of the documentary, or for that matter the similarly created but nonetheless different Socialist realism that would later hold its own stand on the Chinese stage.

My ambition in this work is to outline a tendency of Poetic realism in Chinese film, occurring a few years ahead of its European counterpart. To attempt this I will look closer at a selection of Chinese films that could be said to fall into this category: Sun Yu's 孙瑜 Wild Rose 野玫瑰 (1932), Daybreak (1933) and The Big Road 大路 (1934); Ying Yunwei’s 应云卫 The Plunder of Peach and Plum 桃李劫 (1934); Wu Yonggang’s 吴永刚 The Goddess 神女 (1934); Cai Chusheng's 蔡楚生 Song of the Fishermen 光鱼曲 (1934); Wang Cilong’s 王次龙 A Heroic Girl 孤城烈女 (1936); Shi Dongshan’s 史东山 Youth on the March 青年进行 (1937); Yuan Muzhi’s 袁牧之 Street Angels 马路天使 (1937). I have sorted these films after three themes that I suggest are the main underlying currents in what could be called Chinese Poetic realism.

These nine films were all produced during what has been labeled the "golden age" of Chinese film, that is to say the historical period from the bombings of Shanghai in January 1932 to the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. In Zhang's words: "Its inauguration has habitually been linked to the ascendance of the left-wing cinema that emerged early in the decade, culminating in the so-called National defense cinema (guofang dianying) launched in 1936. Aptly couched in an urban terminology, this paradigmic shift was called ‘the left turn’ (xiangzuo zhuan)."¹³

THE INDIVIDUAL

*Wild Rose, Song of the Fishermen* and *Youth on the March*

The concept of individualism was pursued in modern Chinese literature by writers like Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) and, perhaps above all, Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962), often intimately associated with the development of women's role in society. The question of women's rights and liberation was certainly a jour but often secondary to the general concept of the emancipation of the individual. As perceived by Elisabeth Eide: “A specific feature of the

¹³ Zhang, p 246.
Chinese movement for the liberation of women was that the liberation was felt to be a problem that concerned both men and women. Both sexes felt tied down by family regulations and the strict claims made on their obedience. Consequently a high proportion of the advocates of female liberation were men. (…) One reason for this may be that female emancipation was used as a weapon directed as much toward destroying the existing society as for creating real independence for women.”

Arguably the most influential spokesperson for individualism in early twentieth century China, Hu Shi drew heavily on what he perceived as the core values found primarily in the dramas of Henrik Ibsen. Each individual needed to realize their own personal potential and make themselves tools to better be of use for society. When the individual had settled his or her own issues they needed to acknowledge the problems of society and take actions to improve upon them. A society that does not allow the individual to develop is thus doomed to stagnation and corruption. I will look closer at the concept of the individual in three films that deal with a recurring character: the young idealistic man from a good family who sides with the masses and chooses a poor life to be of use to society.

The main conflict in Sun Yu’s 1932 silent feature *Wild Rose* is one between the morals and simple life of the rural countryside and the corrupted modernity and decadent imperialism of the big city. Caught between these two worlds is Jiang Bo, a young artist from a wealthy family who is forced to choose between his ideals and his family after he falls in love with country girl Xiao Feng. Xiao Feng’s idyllic life is interrupted by the arrival of the artist of whom she is first suspicious but eventually falls for when he confesses to her his eternal love for his country. He professes passionately "I love China eternally" (我永远爱中国); his nationalistic loyalty is obviously a requirement for her affections. Jiang Bo falls, not only for Xiao Feng’s beauty and courage, but for the simplicity and righteousness of country life. Xiao Feng’s destiny, on the other hand, is founded on misconceptions – she leaves her hometown because she believes her father has died – it is otherwise unlikely that she would have considered pursuing a life in the morally corrupted city.

Jiang Bo’s initial hopes that Xiao Feng would be accepted by his family are, however, stunted, and the couple is forced to live with Jiang’s friends in the slums of the city. Getting by on scrap jobs, they experience a period of uncomplicated bliss similar to their life in the country, doing honest work and taking comfort in camaraderie and love. Their happiness is

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short-lived, when winter comes Jiang falls ill and jobs are hard to come by. Faced with eviction and Jiang’s worsening state, Xiao Feng picks up a wallet dropped by a rich drunkard, bringing it to Jiang who immediately tells her that they need to return it. Xiao Feng agrees but is nevertheless accused of theft. Jiang and his friend Li end up taking the blame and are imprisoned. When he is released Jiang Bo first returns to his old bourgeois life before realizing his error. He learns that Xiao Feng has returned to the country. She hides when he comes to look for her, presumably because she does not want him to suffer poverty because of his love for her. Had Jiang been driven solely by love it might have ended differently, but it is obviously not the personal affections of Xiao Feng that inspires him but rather what she represents and a desire to free China from imperialistic oppression and capitalism.

In a collage wrapping up Jiang’s inner turmoil, scenes from the war are mixed with those of the bourgeoisie dancing, the people of his world caring more for their ballroom pleasures than the plight of their nation. When a group of protestors march past his father’s house, barely interrupting the party crowd, Jiang finally makes a decision and joins them, even dragging a few of his socialite friends with him. In the crowd he’s reunited with his friends and eventually also with Xiao Feng. There is no romantic closure, as Jiang Bo and Xiao Feng are not reunited as lovers but as soldiers of the resistance, and the film ends with a reminder that they still have far to go. It is seemingly a hopeful conclusion, Jiang remaining unbothered by the sacrifice of his wealth, family and safety. After the attempted introduction of Xiao Feng into his circle, and the consequent rejection of her by his family, his mind is set on revolution. Fact of the matter is, however easily Jiang Bo appears to accept his sacrifice it is still presented as necessary for him to sever all ties to his bourgeois life.

Cai Chusheng’s *Song of the Fishermen* premiered in Shanghai in 1934 and ran for a record breaking eighty-four days straight. The main narrative focuses on the twins Xiao Hou and Xiao Mao and their upbringing in a poor fishing village. The young He Ziying, son of a wealthy business man, befriends them and they grow up together, defying social distances. However, as the children reach adulthood the class differences soon become all too clear. The twin’s are forced to Shanghai in search for work. They meet by chance He Ziying, now a young man returned from studies overseas and currently employed in his father’s fishery company. Ziying, portrayed as good hearted and fair, tries to help his childhood friends by giving them a large sum of money. His good intentions backfire when the twins are mistaken for thieves. Xiao Mao and Xiao Hou end up working with their uncle, singing and performing on the streets of Shanghai, until more misery befall them – their uncle and mother are killed in
a fire that also burn their house to the ground. Homeless and out of work, they once again join forces with He Ziyi, whose father has committed suicide after the bankruptcy of his company. The three of them go to work on a fishing boat, where work is harsh and physically demanding. In the end the weak Xiao Hou succumbs and dies in the arms of his sister.

Although the film’s main narrative centers on the two siblings, it is He Ziyi who goes through the most revealing character arc. He learns to question, like Jiang Bo before him, his own privileges and is able to clearly see what society should be like rather than being blinded by the comforts of his present life. The road to awakening is in many cases much longer for He than for Wild Rose’s Jiang, as he is not nearly as active a participant as Jiang was in the making of his own future. However they are both ultimately pushed towards realizing their individualism by external factors; Jiang by his family’s rejection of Xiao Feng and He by the suicide of his father.

Shi Dongshan’s Youth on the March, scripted by Tian Han, premiered in 1937. As in Wild Rose the main plot centers on a young man from a wealthy family who falls for a working class girl. Like Wild Rose’s Jiang Bo, Bolin is an artist, an amateur actor whose father owns of the factory where his love interest Jindi works. The affection is mutual but met with suspicion and disdain from their respective families. Jindi’s younger sister is suspicious of rich people in general and Bolin’s family makes it clear that the class barrier is impossible to overcome. His father’s description of Jindi as “a modern woman” (he uses the word modeng 摩登, typical of the period and not seldom with derogatory connotations) suggests that she is capable and independent but it is clearly not intended as a compliment. The movie focuses on the constant struggle in a society that’s both corrupted and unfair.

The final confrontation between Jindi and Bolin’s father drastically underlines all of the present conflicts. He tries to buy her off, offering her money to stay away from his son. The scene is pivotal due to the positions of the two characters. Bolin’s father does not simply have the financial advantage, but catches Jindi when she’s physically unwell – from working in his poorly maintained factory – and even tries to crush her spirit by showing her pictures of Bolin and the socialite Miss Liang. This bullying of the working class is useless, as Jindi is devastated by the possibility of Bolin’s betrayal but does not yield to her oppressor. She is eventually forced, however, to succumb to her illness and she dies in Bolin’s arms. Bolin himself is by now completely disillusioned by high society. At this point he is able to perceive with perfect clarity the incompetence and moral degeneration of his younger brother as well as the incurable capitalistic spirit of his oppressing father, and he realizes that he has no future
with them. He confronts his father and kills his scheming partner, cutting himself off from them irrevocably and joins the army. Of all the characters presented, Bolin's struggle to free himself is by far the hardest and it is he who clings the longest to the hope that his family (traditional life) and his love (his newfound individual consciousness) will resolve their conflicts. This makes his awakening the most difficult, in the process losing his family and his love but gaining individual freedom and social consciousness.

The bottom line in all three films seems to be that hope is placed not on individual happiness but on happiness obtained through service of one’s country and people. This while individuality in itself is not shunned but presented as an honorable means to an end. First one must reach and cultivate one’s own individuality (preferably by breaking with the oppression given by hierarchal family ties and/or class based poverty), before one can become a useful instrument in the struggle for national freedom and glory, following the idea of individualism as presented by Hu Shi. The underlying idea is that all good and socially conscious people will ultimately come to the same conclusion in the search for individualism. The question of the individual is thus always present but preferably molded in the shape of nationalistic consciousness.

THE PROSTITUTE

Daybreak, The Goddess and A Heroic Girl

Sun Yu’s 1933 silent film Daybreak was one of the first Chinese films to make distinctive use of a specially written musical score, provided by Japanese composer Toshiyuki Hiraoka. The film starts off with interlacing images of people from the countryside pouring into the big city of opportunities: Shanghai. An old man relates to a young boy the reasons for their immigration being the heavy taxes placed on small villages, as well as a never further “oppression”. The two protagonists Ling and Zhang arrive at the busy harbor and are greeted by Ling’s cousin and her husband. They move in together in a crowded apartment building, a common setting of drama at the time. In a scene foreshadowing their tragic future, the four characters pass through a shady neighborhood where Ling and Zhang get their first view of women who earn their living by lining up at street corners by night. Ling comments naively that these women must all have very little self respect to humiliate themselves like this.

Ling and Zhang work at a yarn factory where they are treated like slaves by the ruthless supervisor and the playboy owner. In a confrontation with the supervisor Zhang is threatened and forced to look for employment elsewhere. He takes a job at sea, well paid but hard labor
that will keep him away from Ling for a year. Left on her own, Ling catches the eye of the factory owner who invited her to one of his so called conferences consisting only of young female employees. He gets her drunk and takes advantage of her. The next day, in her own apartment, she is assaulted again – this time by the factory supervisor. She overpowers him but drops her necklace, one of the few remains of her country life. She runs to the harbor looking for Zhang at the horizon, or perhaps looking to jump. Before she has the opportunity to further contemplate her fate she is assaulted for the third time by two young men. An older man comes to her rescue, but ends up kidnapping her to a brothel. Before long we see her standing lined up with the girls she scorned in the beginning, smiling through tears at the command of the matron. The girls are pushed around and humiliated, treated and inspected like cattle. One night, by a stroke of luck, she and the other girls are caught up in a demonstration and Ling manages to escape. She manages her way back to her cousin’s house, where she finds her deathly ill, and we learn that Ling has been gone for a year. The cousin dies shortly after Ling’s return, her last words: "The sky… It’s still so dark!" (天… 还是这样的黑) Ling stands at her deathbed, lifts her fist towards the dark skies and swears that the revolution will prevail.

In the meantime, Zhang has joined the revolutionary headquarters in Guangdong. A patchwork of interlacing images show soldiers fighting and clueless people enjoying themselves in the dancehalls of Shanghai, much like the scene previously seen in Sun Yu's *Wild Rose*. Ling is with the latter crowd; she has realized the power of seduction and uses it to earn money that she uses to help her poor friends. When Ling and Zhang finally meet again, she takes him to the large, modern apartment she can now afford at the cost of selling her body. As they sit together they think back to the innocent time in the country. Ling declares that that was a past dream, now they are awake and this is the real world.

Ling’s awakening corresponds well to a common discussion of the time, partly based on Lu Xun’s earlier prediction of society’s reaction to the changing role for women. It is painful to open one's eyes and clearly see the real world. Hu Shi argued that it was necessary to realize the individual; Lu Xun agrees but points out the dangers in doing so. If a woman decides to break free from the constraints of tradition she would always be dependent on charity from others to survive, this would only make it more difficult for society to accept them. A change needed to happen, according to Lu Xun, that made it possible for women to
become independent providers (presumably outside the field of prostitution) before any revolutionary shift could be possible.\textsuperscript{15}

Ling and Zhang’s flashbacks of their previous life are presented to the viewer from the subjective point of view of the characters, showing Ling as it is presumed that Zhang sees her and vice versa. Their past life is offered, no longer as an alternative to the present, but as a bitter reminder of who they used to be.

As they reminisce, a group of soldiers who have been following Zhang burst into the apartment. Zhang manages to escape, but Ling is caught with a piece of intelligence that he left behind and is charged with espionage. She is calmed and dignified during the arrest, dressing slowly and putting on her old necklace, the symbol of her country life. The last thing she does before leaving is releasing her pet bird. While she brings the necklace as a reminder of who she is, the bird gets left behind as assign of acceptance that she will never return. This acceptance stays with her during the trial, where she yawns and smiles, giving no indication of being upset at the death sentence she receives. Her only wish before the end is that she is given country clothes to wear at the execution, and that the young soldier in charge, Luo, will shoot her when she smiles at him. Luo, on the other hand, is nervous and starts doubting his orders. He realizes when he sees Ling the absurdity in her sentence, and the fact that ordinary people are fighting each other at the command of warlords instead of fighting together for the revolution. In the eleventh hour he turns his rifle on the officers instead of on Ling, encouraging his fellow soldiers to do the same. He gets shot down almost immediately, and dies in Ling’s arms. Before she too is taken down, she consoles the dying Luo, convinced that their sacrifices will lead to the victorious end of the revolution.

The use of objects as symbols in Daybreak seems to have the primary goal of reconnecting the past to the present, a comparison of Ling and Zhang’s lives pre and post their painful social awakening. To make use of a term formulated by Maureen Turim in her discussion of Marcel Carné’s Le Jour se lève (1939), Daybreak makes use of double temporal organizations and object associations: “These object associations are both an application of associative memory and a particular inscription of the object symbolism typical of Poetic Realism.”\textsuperscript{16} Much like the teddy bear used by Jean Gabin’s character Francois in Le Jour se lève in his initial wooing of the heroine Francoise, the necklace worn by Ling in Daybreak (also a romantic memento of Zhang’s early wooing) symbolizes a simpler time and the notion

\textsuperscript{16} Turim, Maureen. French Film: Texts and Context, p 65.
of idealized love, and is eventually used to mirror scenes and link the flashbacks to the present. In Turim’s words, “objects are charged with meaning by the film and their recurrence is a key to the structure of the narrative.”^17 Ling’s necklace is also, as previously mentioned, used in a pivotal scene showing the loss of her innocence and initiating the downwards spiral that will eventually lead to her death.

Wu Yonggang’s *The Goddess* from 1934, starring Ruan Lingyu as a nameless prostitute, is only available in restored condition; fortunately enough of it has been saved to make a full length feature. It differs in many aspects from otherwise similar movies of the time such as *Daybreak*, which also deal with prostitution. The Woman in *The Goddess* does not go through the same typical character arc as does Ling in *Daybreak*, one from innocent and naïve country girl to hardened prostitute and eventually revolutionary. When we first encounter the protagonist in *The Goddess*, she’s already a professional and nothing is further said about her past or her social or political background. The film starts off with showing the Woman with a child in a small apartment. She puts her son to bed, applies a little makeup before taking to the streets beneath the flashing neon lights of Shanghai. She stands smoking on a street corner, much like the women observed by Ling and Zhang in *Daybreak*. She is confident in her bearing, coy and seductive. She walks up to potential customers, not waiting to be approached, while careful to stay clear of the police, knowing well that she’s sharing the streets with other of society’s lowlife, bums and thieves. One evening there’s turmoil in the street and she is forced to flee from the police. She runs into a fat man, obviously a criminal, who takes her in to hide her but demands that she stay the night to show her gratitude. The fat man quickly becomes obsessed with her and decides to follow her during the day, bringing with him two of his thugs. She is forced to wait on them in their own home, the fat man’s thugs calling it their Boss’s “wedding”. He says that she needs a man like him to take care of her out there on the streets. We are told that “From then on, the Boss considered her his property” (从今以后，她被章老大视为占有品). She has not regarded herself as a commodity and certainly not as a victim before he started to treat her like one – calling her “his little goldmine” and taking her hard earned money to gamble with. Eventually she tries to move away to get rid of him, but he follows her and threatens to sell her son if she leaves again.

A few years pass and the Woman has started hiding money from the boss in a hole in the wall, saving up to pay the boy's education. She’s proud when he finally enrolls, picking him up at the end of each school day with a bright smile on her face. This is the movie’s, albeit

^17 Turim, p 66.
brief, happy interlude. She still has to suffer the Boss waiting for her at home, eating her food and taunting her for believing that education makes a difference, but she takes pride in what she’s accomplished for her son and retorts confidently that he has no say in her son’s future. This period of relative harmony is quick to pass. The school’s principal receives a letter from the other parents saying that they think the presence of the boy will “harm the moral atmosphere of the school”. He visits them at home and explains the complaints to her, making clear that if the accusations are true he must for the sake of the school expel her son. She implores him to understand that she did it all for her son, and asks what gives anyone the right to deny him a good education just because she’s done “shameful” things. The Principal realizes the absurdity and admires her dedication to her son, concluding that he cannot possibly expel the boy with such a devoted mother. But troubles keep coming. The Boss, frustrated by not getting enough money from his little gold mine, searches the room and finds her hidden savings. Meanwhile, the Principal tries to argue with the school board that the woman and her son have rights just as any other human beings, and that the son certainly does not deserve to be judged for his mother’s actions. When he is voted down by the board he decides to resign and the boy is ultimately expelled. The Woman decides to leave again and start over somewhere no one knows them, but finds that all her savings have been stolen by the Boss. When she confronts him he admits to already having spent it all. They fight and she hits him with a bottle, killing him, after which she’s trialed and sent to prison for life. The Principal visits her and promises to take care of her son. The film ends with her imagining her son’s bright future. Hope here lies not in the option of accepting the political struggle that is the revolution, but in the idea that one’s individual sacrifice might make life better for one’s children.

The narrative of The Goddess differs from previously discussed movies in that the Woman's struggle is not a search for individualism but one to keep it. She is already her own - she might sell her body but she's not tied down by any conventions of class or family. The issue presented is not primarily prostitution as such, but society's failure to accept women trying to make a living by themselves. Even when they are separated from the traditional structure they still find themselves dependent on patriarchal figures, in this case the Boss and even the Principal. Society must reform its fundamental ideas of morality and individualism, or women like the protagonist of The Goddess are doomed to become the burdens that Lu Xun warned about.
Wang Cilong’s *Gu cheng lie nü*, alternately translated as “A Girl in an Isolated City” or “A Heroic Girl” deals with other aspects of the woman question in its emphasize on the difficult role of women in the revolution, and its accentuation of the backwardness of the bourgeoisie in comparison with the progressive spirit of the working class. The opening shot lingers on an idyllic country tableau and an old man watching riders enter the village, attacking the wedding banquet of the two protagonists Chen and Zhang. The two are forced to spend their wedding nights as refugees, during which Zhang gives Chen a jade amulet that belonged to his mother – an object that will represent their love and devotion for each other when they are later separated. Zhang manages to join a resistance group but Chen is taken captive by a military general who has been smitten by her since they were young and now sees an opportunity to use his authority to win her over. Chen refuses at first to prostitute herself to the general, succumbing only when he threatens to kill the other prisoner. She keeps fighting even after she is forced to give in to the abuse and even uses the guise of physical contact in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate him. In the end it is Zhang who manages to kill his wife’s assaulter after his military band storms the fortress where the prisoners are held. But he arrives too late; Chen is already wounded and dies in his arms.

The main theme of the film is sacrificing oneself for a greater purpose, and the circumstances that lead ordinary people to make these sacrifices. It also accentuates the differences between the classes, especially the tardiness and moral corruption of the bourgeoisie. When the refugees are huddled together on a boat, it is made clear to the viewer how ill equipped the upper classes are to survive in any circumstances outside their protected world, as they are forced to rely on the charity of the poor. Their lacking morals are also counter positioned against Chen's moral righteousness. There’s no judgment against her when she yields to the general, only gratitude from the released prisoners. She only judges herself, fearing that she has betrayed her husband by her actions. Scenes of Zhang’s determined face as he goes into battle mixed with those of Chen’s predicament illustrate how they are both suffering through the same struggle only by different means. They are both willing to sacrifice their lives and personal happiness for a greater cause. They are fundamentally conscious, as working class heroes on screen tend to be, of the importance of their sacrifice, and when Chen in her dying moment sees the flags of Zhang's company enter the occupied city she is comforted that it was not in vain.

**THE WORKING CLASS**

*Street Angels, The Big Road and The Plunder of Peach and Plum*
A film that corresponds perfectly to the ideals of poetic realism is *Street Angels*. The 1937 film stars Zhao Dan and Zhou Xuan as ill-fated lovers who transform over the film's two hours from naively happy to disillusioned and miserable. There's no hopeful patriotic twist in the end, only a reflection on the hopelessness and cruelty of modern society and the conclusion that something needs to change. The film plays with an abundance of archetypes and mirror images. Dance halls, fireworks, and a rapidly spinning collage of electric lights usher the viewer into the first scene, explained as taking place in autumn 1935 “in the slums of Shanghai”. It starts off as a screwball comedy, showing Zhao Dan’s character Chen as a trumpeter in a western style marching band celebrating a high society wedding. The luxury and splendor surrounding the ceremony is belittled by the appearance of the young bride, prettily made up but squinting horribly with skewed eyes, an image of the degeneration of the upper classes. Watching the parade is the young Xiao Hong, who winks and smiles at Chen and his friends. But the happy scene is soon turned on its head as Xiao Hong turns back inside from her balcony. An older man tells her to stop acting around and start serving the costumers. She sings at a tea house, a working place where women are treated like prostitutes.

Soon troubles start coming. Chen is upset with Xiao Hong and breaks with her when he finds out that the rich Mister Gu has been courting her with gifts. In a key scene in the middle of the film Chen uses Xiao Hong’s position at the tea house to humiliate her, forcing her to sing for him and thus treating her like any other customer would. It is a turning point of sorts, accentuating Xiao Hong’s vulnerable position and the cruelty of a society that turn even lovers against each other. When Xiao Hong explains her plight to Chen they make up quickly and join forces to protect her from Gu. They run away together and move in with Chen and Wang’s friends. Xiao Hong cuts her long braids and gets a modern hairstyle- short cropped with curled locks. They take in Xiao Yun as well, and she strikes up a relationship with Wang. He persuades her not to continue with prostitution. She is sick, presumably from something she’s contracted through her work. Xiao Yun remains quiet, speaking almost exclusively to Xiao Hong and then mostly by whispering in her ear. They are eventually found out and the boss comes for Xiao Hong, still intent on selling her to Gu. Xiao Yun refuses to tell him where she is and gets stabbed in the chest. When the others find out Wang wants to go to her but Chen questions him for fear of being found out. He asks Wang if Xiao Yun is really the sort of woman worth sacrificing oneself for, causing Wang to hit him in outrage. Chen uses Xiao Yun’s position as a prostitute to argue that she is perhaps not worth saving, much as he previously used Xiao Hong's work to punish her. He does however realize the error of his ways but they are too late to save her life. Wang goes to find a doctor and is
not by her side as she dies. When he returns it is only to proclaim that it was all in vain - no doctor was willing to come for the amount he could pay. Chen begs for Xiao Yun’s forgiveness for his earlier disrespect. As she dies, Xiao Hong cries out in pain and Chen covers her mouth so that they will not be discovered by the police. The movie ends with Wang saying that the doctor will not come, and a quick change of scene from the misery of the heroes in a dirty crowded room huddled over Xiao Yun’s body, to the clean façade of a modern skyscraper, emphasizing the prize that is paid by poor people as the city grows and people are left behind as the economy changes.

Sun Yu's *The Big Road* (1934) begins with an upbeat musical number performed by workers in a quarry, directly followed by a flashback to a man and a woman walking a desolate road with a baby. The woman is obviously too sick to carry on and she urges the man to leave her and save their child. He protests but she dies in his arms. Years pass and eventually the man perish along the road, leaving the boy on his own. Twenty years pass and the boy, Jin, is working along the same road with three friends. They're laughing and smiling despite the harsh nature of their work. Much like in *Daybreak* a justified brawl with a work leader end in the dismissal of the four young men. Jin keeps his spirits high, always trying to encourage his friends. They decide to travel south together and work at the construction of a new modern highway. At the site, Jin immediately draws attention to himself because of his natural leadership abilities.

When their boss tries to bribe them into leaving the construction - he's being paid in turn by people who for strategic reasons do not want the road finished - Jin and his friends refuse and are imprisoned and tortured. The two sisters Moli and Dingxiang, who have befriended Jin and his friends, manage to engage the other workers to form a mob and storm the mansion. Moli presents herself by her actions in every sense as natural a leader and revolutionary as Jin, the tentative object of her affections in a romance that is never fulfilled. The mob rescues the men and captures the boss, finding evidence of his collaboration with the country enemies. They continue building the highway, thus enabling China’s armies to pass through easily. Despite the victory of the workers over the traitors the movie ends in tragedy as enemy planes bomb the site, killing all but Dingxian and her father. Dingxiang remains, proclaiming that her friends will live on – the strength of her sister apparent in her bearing as she immediately shoulders the role as revolutionary leader in her place. In a fantastic end scene ghosts rise from the corpses of the workers, carrying on their work even in death. In the last frame we see Dingxiang's transparent face watching the spirits of workers. The transparency of her face
interlaced with the ghosts suggests that she is as much of a ghost as they. They have completed their sacrifice whereas she has only now fully understood her purpose and the gravity of their situation.

Ying Yunwei's *The Plunder of Peach and Plum* (1934) was the first film released by the left wing film studio Diantong and the first Chinese language film shot entirely as a “talkie”. The theme of young, educated people who are left unemployed in a corrupt and unfair society is revisited many times during the period, another example being Shen Xiling’s commercial success *Crossroads* (1937). However, whereas *Crossroads* is a ultimately humorous take on the subject that attempts a uplifting patriotic twist at the end, Ying's film is a ruthless downward spiral into despair that offers very little release from the cruel fate of it’s protagonists. The title refers to the surnames of the two main characters, Tao (peach) and Li (plum), and their unjust fate. The aging principal Liu learns through the morning paper that one of his former students, Tao Jianping, has been arrested. He remembers the young man as a person of strong principle and visits him in prison to find out the truth behind his demise. Jianping's story from therein is told in flashbacks from the day he graduated and his mother died. He married his adopted sister Li Lin who graduated with him and share his high hopes for the future. Jianping soon finds work at a logistics company, where he excels at his duties. When his boss asks him to sign an agreement to pack a steam loader with more than it can carry, at the risk of passengers and crew, he refuses and is forced to resign. He proclaims proudly to his wife that he can stand poverty but never injustice. Finding new employment turns out to be more difficult than he imagined and money starts running low. Eventually they are forced to move. When Jianping goes to answer an ad for a job, the company building is filled to the brim with young men like him, all aspiring for the same position. Even as Jianping is being interviewed, he’s interrupted by the news that the job has been given to the nephew of the company president. Lin sadly proclaims that this life is much different from the one they imaged when they were at school. they are not prepared for reality after their education.

Lin keeps her spirits high even as Jianping starts to despair. She suggests that she will start looking for a job instead and soon finds employment as a secretary for a man whose requirements seems to be youth and a pretty face. Jianping however is not happy, rather ashamed to be a kept man. He also gets a new job, but once again refuses to agree with the corruption of a management that has no problems with risking the safety of its workers. He resigns once more and is again forced to manage the household while Lin is at work, where
her boss continues to make passes at her. One night he tricks her into going with him to a hotel under the pretext of a business conference. Jianping goes to her office and finds out where she is, immediately understanding the boss’ scheme. He is unable to locate her during a fast paced chase inside the hotel, but when the boss eventually makes his move Lin runs out and they meet outside. Both unemployed, they move to an even smaller place and Lin is shown hanging their fancy diplomas on increasingly dirty walls. The framed evidence of their education work as the movies material reminder of a previous life; or in this case the life imagined by Jianping and Lin as students that is never achieved. Jianping can’t stand seeing them in the end and smashes the frames, saying that their education was useless anyway.

Jianping loses his temper on three occasions in three defining scenes. The first time he takes it out on Lin and hits her, reacting to the suspicion that she has been unfaithful to him and taking the opportunity to vent his frustration of not being able to care for her financially.\(^{18}\) The second time he takes it out on their diplomas, a bitter reminder of how far they have fallen and the film's most obvious object association. The third time he takes it out on the police, an attack on the authorities and presumably the government that is continuously absent during their struggle for a better life. Shortly after his last outburst he's forced to start working at a construction site. Lin gives birth to a son but falls ill. They have no money for a doctor so Jianping asks to lend money taken from his wages at his workplace. When he’s refused he steals a few coins in desperation. The doctor he pays for with stolen money says that there’s nothing he can do, better for Jianping to stay with her while she dies. Jianping lies to Lin and says that he will get medicine. He tells her that they need to work even harder in the future, for the sake of their child, so that he too can be educated. Lin dies and Jianping is left to care alone for their child. Eventually two men come for him in his apartment to charge him for the theft. He accidently kills one of them while trying to escape. Back in the prison cell he tells the principal that he’s been sentenced to death. Just as he’s finished his story the guard comes to tell him that his time is up.

Among the movies discussed here, The Plunder of Peach and Plum is perhaps the most outspoken in its criticism of society’s failure to provide for its youth, while also commenting on the poor conditions of the working class that Jianping is forced to become a part of.

While we have seen representations of the working class who seem content with their toil as long as they are treated fairly and have a sense of purpose (The Big Road), or drifters

\(^{18}\) A theme that is touched upon in several films including the highly ambitious The Women's Classic 女儿经, a 1934 project involving eight of the most prominent filmmakers of the time, that deals with a number of issues concerning women’s changing role in society.
happily getting by on scrap jobs (*Street Angels*), there's a distinctly different agenda in *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*. Much like in the previously mentioned *Crossroads* the narrative is constructed around the premise that modern society is unable to provide for educated young men and women. Even though it is possible in theory to rise from the bottom layers of society through education, the system is so corrupted and backwards that it becomes practically impossible.

The recurring themes and associations in above mentioned films make out what I perceive as a similar thematic tendency as the one that in France during the late nineteen thirties was labeled "Poetic realism". The three main themes that I have outlined here - individualism, prostitution and the working class - are recurring in the sense that they exists within a large portion of films of the time. Within these main themes exist a number of typical characters, scenes and object associations. The definition of Poetic realism films formulated by Thompson and Bordwell in *Film History*, quoted in the introduction, seems to correspond well to the films that I have presented in this work pertaining to the main framework and construction of the narrative. The introduction of one or more characters at the bottom or outskirts of society who are given a short period of uncomplicated bliss in form of an idealized love or a chance for economic stability, before all is taken from them and they end up even more miserable than they were. There are variations of this tendency, as seen for instance in *Wild Rose* and *Daybreak*, wherein the protagonists have different starting points but the main character arc ties up in much the same fashion. What's ultimately described is a quest for personal freedom, a concept of individualism that could be applied to one single human being, a country or a cultural sphere with the same general effect and message. We have also seen how these films correspond to a popular discussion at the time concerning a changing idea of individualism.

The concept of personal freedom is also very much present in the films mentioned that focus on the vulnerable position of women as their role in society changes. The portrait of the Woman in *The Goddess* can be read as much as a commentary on the emerging role of women as independent providers and society's failure to accept them, as a literal critique of a system that forces women into prostitution only to condemn them. The former interpretation is supported by the apparent ease with which the protagonist conducts her trade. Focus is not put on any moral complication she might herself experience, only on the victimization of her by the Boss and eventual condemnation of her by society - represented by the school board in a scene played out much like a jury settling a court case with the Principal acting as the
defense. The same conclusion cannot be made for the female protagonists in *Daybreak* or *A Heroic Girl*, where the narrative structure focus on the events that force the female protagonists to prostitute themselves. Ling and Chen are both quite literarily pushed into it by their respective kidnappers, but they are also both faced with a choice. Ling escapes the brothel but continues the work on her own, successfully if the apartment she takes Zhang to upon his return is any indication. Chen in the end chooses to give herself to the general in exchange for the other prisoners’ lives. In both cases it is made clear that these are capable individuals forced into a trade that most resembles slavery, and they both end up dead at the hands of authority figures. They are accomplished in the sense that they are given a chance to sacrifice themselves for a greater cause, dying with the hope that it is not all in vain. In this aspect the narrative differs from films like *Street Angels* and *The Plunder of Peach and Plum*, in which the harsh critique against a corrupted system offers no solution, however difficult.

It is not my intention in this work to imagine direct associations between Poetic realism in the history of French film and any corresponding tendency that could be found in China, nor to suggest that one would have influenced the other. I do however propose that it is significant to speak of parallel tendencys occurring more or less simultaneously, answering perhaps to similar historical situations. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) argued that European cinemas of different nationalities became modern at different times, each responding to new situations that called for new cinematic images. With this in mind it is easy to imagine Chinese cinema growing into modernity in the mid nineteen thirties, responding to a new historical situation as well as a new concept of literary aesthetics as seen first with the emerging of the *huaju*, easily translatable to a recently matured cinematic medium. One could argue that what I in this work call Chinese Poetic realism films are fundamentally modern, either in their effort to portray a new social reality or as a tendency created by natural response to a historical situation.

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