



SOUNDING  
THE MODERN  
WOMAN

*The Songstress in Chinese Cinema*

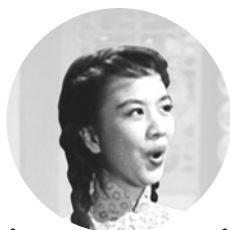
JEAN MA

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# SOUNDING THE MODERN WOMAN

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# SOUNDING THE MODERN WOMAN

The Songstress in Chinese Cinema • JEAN MA

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In the summer of 2010 I visited the Hong Kong Film Archive for the first time, with a vague notion of starting a book project about the films and songs of the postwar star Grace Chang. What I found after immersing myself in the archive led me to fundamentally rethink my understanding of Chinese film history, resulting in a different book from what I had initially conceived. The following individuals helped bring this project to fruition and shaped many of its twists and turns.

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## INTRODUCTION

The disembodied voices of bygone songstresses course through the soundscapes of many recent Chinese films that evoke the cultural past. In a mode of retrospection, these films pay tribute to a figure who, although rarely encountered today, once loomed large in the visual and acoustic spaces of popular music and cinema. The audience is invited to remember the familiar voices and tunes that circulated in these erstwhile spaces. For instance, in a film by the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai set in the 1960s, *In the Mood for Love*, a traveling businessman dedicates a song on the radio to his wife on her birthday.<sup>1</sup> Along with the wife we listen to “Hua yang de nianhua” (“The Blooming Years”), crooned by Zhou Xuan, one of China’s most beloved singers of pop music. The song was originally featured in a Hong Kong production of 1947, *All-Consuming Love*, which cast Zhou in the role of a self-sacrificing songstress.<sup>2</sup> Set in Shanghai during the years of the Japanese occupation, the story of *All-Consuming Love* centers on the plight of Zhou’s character, who is forced to obtain a job as a nightclub singer to support herself and her enfeebled mother-in-law after her husband leaves home to join the resistance. “The Blooming Years” refers to these recent political events in a tone of wistful regret, expressing the homesickness of the exile who yearns for the best years of her life: “Suddenly this orphan island is overshadowed by miseries and sorrows, miseries and sorrows; ah, my lovely country, when can I run into your arms again?”<sup>3</sup> Wong Kar-wai picks up on these sentiments of homesickness in his use of the song as a pop cultural artifact of the Shanghainese émigré community whose members sought refuge in Hong Kong during and after the tumultuous war years, a community from which he himself hails.<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of “The Blooming Years” in *In the Mood for Love* concatenates the longings of this displaced community for a lost homeland, the desires of the film’s characters for lost or unrealized loves, and perhaps too the director’s nostalgia for the disappeared milieu of his childhood. Thus Wong evokes the past through an identification with a

previous generation's wish for an unattainable lost time, a wish that is immortalized in the song of the songstress. In this regard, Zhou Xuan's voice can be described as the *punctum* of *In the Mood for Love*—the vanishing point of desire and memory, the detail that pierces the spectator-auditor and unleashes a temporal vertigo.<sup>5</sup>

Zhou Xuan is conjured up in yet another contemporary production in the vein of Shanghai nostalgia, *Lust, Caution*, from the Taiwan-born Chinese American director Ang Lee and based on the novella of the same title by the notable modern fiction writer Eileen Chang.<sup>6</sup> The film's story of espionage and political intrigue takes place during the years of the Japanese occupation and centers on Wang Jiazhi, a female college student who becomes a spy for the underground resistance. In a key scene in *Lust, Caution*, Wang sings "Tianya genü" ("The Wandering Songstress"), a tune from one of Zhou's best-known films, the 1937 leftist classic *Street Angel*.<sup>7</sup> Zhou's character is a songstress indentured to a teahouse owner, who forces her to display her vocal talent for a lascivious male clientele; the cause of her plight, the film suggests, is the recent Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Wang Jiazhi's performance of the song in *Lust, Caution* takes place in a Japanese restaurant where she dines with Mr. Yi, the security chief in Wang Jingwei's collaborationist wartime regime, whom Wang Jiazhi has taken as a lover as part of a plot to assassinate him. Commenting on the Japanese women who entertain patrons in the adjoining rooms, Wang tells Yi, "I know why you've brought me here. You want me to be your whore." "It is I who brought you here," Yi replies, "so I know better than you how to be a whore." Wang then offers to sing for him, placing herself in a position analogous to that of both the neighboring entertainers and Zhou's *Street Angel* character. Yi responds with an uncharacteristic display of emotion: he is moved to tears by her song. Here music comes to the foreground in a historically charged exchange, to convey a profound identification and mutual recognition between Wang and Yi as prostitutes, each deprived of autonomy by historical circumstances and the masters they respectively serve. In a film that has repeatedly been accused of treading on the wrong side of national politics, song performance marks an excess that is not only affective but also ideological. Politics and pathos converge in the suffering expressed by the tragic songstress, blurring the distinction between predator and prey, collaborator and resistance spy, man and woman (Yi is feminized by his description of himself as a whore working for the Japanese). The songstress reference paradoxically at once grounds the film's representation of events of the turbulent wartime era and carves out a channel of sentiment that transcends political lines.

To offer a third and final example, in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, the songstress enters through a more disruptive mode of citation.<sup>8</sup> The film centers on a nameless man and woman who live in Taipei at the turn of the millennium and who are drawn into a series of encounters when a hole appears in the wall between their apartments. Most of the narrative transpires in near silence, with minimal dialogue spoken by the characters and no musical underscore. But the voice of Grace Chang—a singer and actress in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s—periodically punctuates the soundtrack as the story is interrupted by musical inserts staged in a highly theatrical fashion, at odds with its otherwise austere realism. In these interludes Chang's songs are lip-synched by Yang Kuei-mei, the actress who plays the nameless woman, as she dances in flamboyant costumes, sometimes flanked by backup dancers or accompanied by her costar Lee Kang-sheng, the nameless man. They include Latin-style dance tunes like "Calypso," the playful pop melody "Achoo Cha Cha," and a Mandarin rendition of the American blues hit "I Want You to Be My Baby." In the film's final frame, a handwritten intertitle names the vocalist as an inspiration with the epigraph: "In the year 2000, we are grateful that we still have Grace Chang's songs with us.—Tsai Ming-liang." The unabashedly nostalgic and personal tone of the epigraph is all the more striking in light of *The Hole's* futuristic atmosphere, with its story unfolding in an anxiously surreal but recognizable setting that gestures toward the far side of the impending millennial transition. Against the bleakness and anonymity of contemporary life, the film suggests, the colorful past embodied in Chang's music promises a last refuge for feeling and intensity, the triumph of fantasy over banality, and the survival of humanity in a literally dehumanizing universe (everyone in the film is turning into cockroaches).<sup>9</sup>

It is striking that these three prominent works of contemporary art cinema—works that map out the globalized circuits constituting Chinese cinema in the twenty-first century, encompassing Hollywood and Europe as well as mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; and popular genre as well as the transnational commerce of auteurism—look to the songstress as an avatar of history. The far-ranging scope of their collective historical imagination, from the war years through the postwar period to the present, attests to the long shadow cast by this figure over the first century of Chinese cinema. Indeed, from the very beginnings of sound filmmaking in Shanghai in the 1930s, singing actresses like Violet Wong, Wang Renmei, and Zhou Xuan captivated the attention of filmgoers and proved the symbiotic potency of sound motion picture technology. Their rise to stardom changed the course of Chinese cinema's evolution

as an expressive medium, with musical performance emerging as a powerful rival to storytelling. Following the upheavals of the Japanese occupation and the civil war, and in the wake of the dispersal of the Shanghai film industry, the songstress reemerged in Hong Kong, becoming a commonplace fixture of the vibrant entertainment industry established there in the postwar decades. These years witnessed a stunning proliferation of singing stars—Chung Ching, Linda Lin Dai, Grace Chang, Ivy Ling Po, Julie Yeh Feng, and Jenny Hu—concomitant with a pronounced musical turn in commercial filmmaking. Many of these stars were affiliated with Hong Kong's two biggest production studios, the Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd. (MP&GI, sometimes referred to as Cathay) and Shaw Brothers, which were the driving forces behind the arrival of what many describe as a second golden age of Mandarin cinema. In the late 1960s, the songstress retreated to the margins of popular cinema, to be occasionally resuscitated by contemporary directors like Wong, Tsai, and Lee—as well as by performers like the late Anita Mui, both an acclaimed actress and a performer extraordinaire of Cantopop, or Cantonese soft rock music. Across this historical field, the female singer comes into relief as a thematic obsession, sensory magnet, and iconic remnant of the past. Even as an anachronistic and elusive referent—a voice ventriloquized, mimetically conjured, technologically transmitted, or unattached to a visible corporeal source—she continues to haunt the screen, the light of her fading star shimmering with new meanings across the reaches of time.

Responding to this call from the past, this book follows the trail of the songstress, a figure who has received little scrutiny despite her enduring and far-reaching presence throughout Chinese films of various periods, regions, dialects, genres, and styles. The singing woman appears in many incarnations: teahouse entertainer, opera actress, nightclub chanteuse, street singer, show-girl, ancient beauty, modern teenager, country lass, and revolutionary. These diverse types offer insights into the various cultural and historical contexts in which they are rooted, and an investigation of this trope must account for the meanings the songstress carries in these specific contexts. But she also challenges us to pay attention to those large-scale temporal connections and cross-regional transactions that transcend the boundaries of any individual milieu. The sheer variety of her guises reveals her to be a figure of remarkable endurance, capable of adapting to changing circumstances, multiple locations, and shifting ideological orientations. The songstress signals latent connections that weave throughout the polycentric topography of Chinese cinema, connections that cut across and complicate the divides of war, dislocation, and politics. In tracing her repetitions and recirculations, we begin to discern a web of

interrelated motifs and discursive patterns stretching across this terrain and centering on the gendered spectacle of vocal performance. The persistence of this figure throughout the first four decades of Chinese sound cinema speaks to the thematic fascination exercised by female singers on the imagination of filmmakers and audiences, as well as the sensory attractions contained in her songs. As the songstress became a ubiquitous feature of cinema, so her performances underpinned and stabilized a musical idiom that exceeded the boundaries of any single genre.

### *Vocal Performers and Singing Pictures*

My use of the term *songstress* contains two different yet interrelated inflections, referring both to a type of performer and to a codified diegetic construct invested with particular discursive functions. Viewed from the first of these angles, the term calls attention to a phenomenon of crossover stardom fed by the intertwined economies of the motion picture and music recording industries. In *Yellow Music*, Andrew Jones reconstructs the complex media matrix that surrounds the birth of the songstress. The rise to stardom of singing actresses like Zhou Xuan in the 1930s, he shows, hinged on a symbiosis in her time between commercial cinema and popular music as mass media industries built on new technologies for the reproduction and dissemination of sounds and images—phonography, radio, and sound motion pictures.<sup>10</sup> The tunes of modern popular music (*shidai gequ*), such as those crooned by Zhou, composed the soundtrack of leisure time in metropolitan Shanghai, linking the spaces of the musical stage, movie theater, record store, dance hall, and nightclub. Likewise, many of the other singing actresses discussed in this study also moved fluidly between these realms to simultaneously pursue careers as screen stars and recording artists, leveraging their success in one realm as additional publicity for the other. As much as their fortunes are framed by the conjunction of these industries, they also attest to cinema's embedded place in this larger, interconnected media matrix. The professional trajectories of these performers map out a circuit from the screen to the recording studio to the stage; their songs were detachable commodities that were transmitted as both signal and script, broadcast in public and domestic spaces and circulated in print form in song sheets and fan magazines. In the heyday of these performers, the mechanical echoes of their voices, as much as their reproduced images, sustained a lucrative, multichannel star system. Positioned at the center of this system, the songstress opens up a valuable intermedia perspective on cinema.



Furthermore, the conventions of sound filmmaking evolved in tandem with commercial imperatives, so that the presence of these singing actresses also gave rise to a distinctive set of representational tropes and formal patterns. Typically the identity of these vocal performers finds an echo in the fiction of their films. They are cast as characters who themselves are defined by a superior vocal talent, a strategy that facilitates the display of the singing voice in musical interludes that periodically interrupt the narrative. More often than not, the singing characters in these films eventually become professional entertainers, featuring in stories that transpire in the world of opera, theater, stage revues, teahouses, nightclubs, movies, and the music recording industry. The discursive construction of the songstress therefore serves to justify and naturalize the inclusion of song, granting a diegetic pretext for scenes of lyrical performance. The songstress anchors a representational system in which speech must periodically give way to song, allowing the female voice to come to the fore as a locus of dramatic and affective intensity. In these song scenes, the act of performance doubles back on itself—an audience inside the film reduplicates the position of the spectator-auditor, and the performer herself is doubly inscribed as both star and fictional character when she ceases to act and marshals the lyrical powers of her voice. Beyond its existence as a soundtrack element, the song effects a break in the flow of the story's action and prompts a shift into a different narrative register and mode of address. Sound and image concentrate around the body of the singer, in such a way that the direct physicality and identificatory pull of her performance effect a fissure in the fictive world; in short, we perceive and affectively relate to the songstress in a qualitatively different way during the song numbers. Often that difference is recuperated by the film, invested with a narrative significance. But at the same time, recuperation can go only so far, and the unsettling effects of her performance can infiltrate the entirety of the film. In the transformative interval of song, the distinction between the songstress as star and the songstress as trope, between the performer and the codified character type, becomes blurred.

Insofar as she confronts us with the operations of voice and music, the songstress offers a point of entry into the soundscape of Chinese cinema. The topic of sound has been largely overlooked in critical writings in this area, which collude with film studies' long-standing analytic bias toward the image and questions of visibility. With its focus on musical expression and audiovisual dynamics, this study joins and engages a growing body of scholarship on Chinese film history—and film scholarship as a whole—that seeks to redress the imbalance between image and sound.<sup>11</sup> As many have observed, this history encompasses an extraordinarily wide and varied musical field—including

Western jazz and pentatonic folk melodies, which come together in the forging of the modern idiom of Mandarin pop (*shidai qu*); Western classical music; traditional regional and operatic forms; revolutionary anthems; rock and pop genres, increasingly throughout the twentieth century; and various combinations of these categories. This breadth of musical styles is matched by the plural forms of their encounter with the cinematic medium, with song numbers appearing across a far-ranging constellation of genres, including backstage musicals and revues, romantic and family melodramas, comedies, historical costume dramas, and fantastic ghost stories. Another major strand, one unique to the Chinese context, arises at the juncture of cinema and the Chinese operatic tradition of *xiqu*. In opera films we see the musical field of Chinese filmmaking further differentiated on the basis of diverse regional styles and modes of performance rooted in the musical stage.<sup>12</sup> Opera films can be distinguished from singing films (*gechang pian*) for their fluid alternations between singing and speaking within an integral musical structure, as opposed to the incorporation of discrete musical numbers. At the same time, the use of songs or arias as a means of expressive punctuation is common to both of these types of films. Across this broad constellation of genres, sound and image intersect in surprising ways, and mutating modes of musical signification call into question easy distinctions between background and foreground, diegetic and nondiegetic elements. The heterogeneity of this landscape necessarily inflects the individual film, as it forms a horizon of possibilities within which particular ways of mobilizing music in a narrative context can make sense and carry meaning for an audience.

It is somewhat ironic, then, to find that the interpretive frameworks brought to bear on these works often tend to flatten out this diversity. Much writing on song performance in Chinese cinema looks to the American film musical as a point of critical reference. Because the films in which the songstress features contain musical sequences and alternate between narrative exposition and song numbers, they are seen as synonymous with—or aspiring toward—the film musical à la Hollywood. Yet, as Yeh Yueh-yu astutely notes, “Hollywood-style musicals never existed in China as a major film genre.”<sup>13</sup> To assume that they did is to use a set of tools for analyzing the cinematic functions of music derived from a different body of work and cut to the measure of its conventions. The cultural specificity of genres is nowhere more apparent than in this instance, and the impossibility of transposing a genre category derived from one regional context into another is registered in the language of film criticism. Chinese film criticism lacks an exact equivalent for the term *film musical*, instead referring to films containing discrete scenes of musical performance

as either *gechang pian*, singing films in which the musical spectacle is limited to vocalization, or *gewu pian*, song-and-dance films in which dance choreography plays a greater role. Inscribed in the terminology of film criticism is a fundamental distinction between the dancing body and the singing voice, a distinction that is further entrenched by an asymmetry in which *gechang pian* vastly outnumber *gewu pian* (as chapter 4 discusses in greater detail).

The question of generic norms and their cross-cultural transposition is not reducible to a question of influence, and to be sure, the impact of the American film musical can be discerned throughout the history of both *gechang pian* and *gewu pian*. For instance, in the early sound period, we find productions like *Yinhan shuang xing* (*Two Stars in the Milky Way*, 1931), a Chinese take on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) backstage musical *Show People* (1928);<sup>14</sup> *Yeban gesheng* (*Song at Midnight*, 1937), modeled on Universal's 1925 *Phantom of the Opera*; and numerous films inspired by the operetta-style romantic comedies of Ernst Lubitsch.<sup>15</sup> Not only did Shanghai filmmakers in this period often borrow from Hollywood musicals, but they also operated in a critical environment in which the impact of sound technology in the American and European film industries was intensely scrutinized and debated. But Hollywood was far from the only factor affecting the development of Chinese sound films, and in at least one notable example, it exerted a negative influence. Discussing *Genü Hong mudan* (*Songstress Red Peony*, 1931), considered to be China's first sound production, Zhou Jianyun, manager of the Mingxing Film Company, emphasizes the film's divergences from the spectacular formula of the American musical picture—which, he writes, fails to “stir the heart with pleasing sounds” despite its dazzling sets, lavish costumes, and hundreds of dancing girls.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Hong Kong productions of the postwar period frequently “borrow and adapt important plot devices and narrative tropes from well-known Hollywood musicals, comedies, and melodramas,” Gary Needham observes.<sup>17</sup> In the high-budget productions of MP&GI and Shaw Brothers, we see attempts to replicate Hollywood's elaborate musical spectacles; the English-language titles assigned by these studios to their productions are sometimes even lifted directly from popular American films. But as Needham goes on to note, even if many productions of this period fall within the influential orbit of American cinema and share in its surface features, deeper structural differences clearly distinguish these two bodies of work. Chief among these is the Hollywood musical's dual-focus structure and reliance on couple formation as a mechanism of narrative closure. If the musical upholds an ideology of heterosexuality by smoothing out oppositions in the “harmonious unity” of marriage, as Rick Altman has famously argued, we see in the Chinese films a consistent displace-

ment of closure away from the heterosexual couple and toward other relational axes—familial, communal, or platonic, but hardly ever romantic.<sup>18</sup>

Needham's analysis participates in an ongoing endeavor by scholars of non-Western cinemas to challenge, in his words, "the normative alignment between Hollywood and genre in both film studies and the popular imagination."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, a comparative perspective that looks solely to Hollywood as a benchmark runs the danger of overlooking and marginalizing those elements that do not map onto this model. Moreover, the problems of such an approach are compounded by the normative alignments that emerge from within the critical construction of a genre like the musical. For example, Richard Dyer has noted that "for a long period the ideal of the musical was seen to be integration," defined as an overcoming of the disruptive effects of song and dance "by smoothing out the transition between [registers], by having the numbers do narrative work."<sup>20</sup> The ideal of integration is realized in the heyday of the "Metro musical," and some accounts of the Hollywood musical view the MGM works of the early 1950s as the culmination of the genre. Such accounts in turn reprise a credo that permeates histories of the Broadway stage musical, "according to which all elements of a show—plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting—should blend together into a unity, a seamless whole."<sup>21</sup> Scott McMillin points out that this model of the organically unified work, so influential in American musical theater, finds a basis in nineteenth-century opera and the Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the synthetic total work of art.<sup>22</sup>

To privilege integration and unity as the telos of the American film musical is to overlook the manifold aspects of these films that do not square with these representational values, and therefore to oversimplify the genre. It is precisely such a reduced understanding of the musical genre that we see informing analyses that compare *gechang* and *gewu pian* with the Hollywood musical. For example, the film historian Stephen Teo offers an overview of the history of *gechang pian* with a focus on formal innovations driven by, as he puts it, the industry's desire "to be as Western as possible."<sup>23</sup> In tracing a lineage of songstresses from Zhou Xuan to her postwar descendants like Chung Ching and Grace Chang, Teo identifies a progression in their films from simple, interpolated song sequences—known as *chaqu*, or inserted film songs—to "the development of the full-fledged musical genre."<sup>24</sup> While the *chaqu* format allows for the inclusion of musical scenes that have no necessary connection to the story and transpire in a suspended space and time, as we see in many of Zhou's films, Teo denigrates this format as "technically awkward and underdeveloped."<sup>25</sup> In his reading, the achievement of postwar musical films resides

in their departure from the simplicity of the interpolated song sequence, endowing film songs with a narrative function and thematic significance. Yet the progression from a primitive, interruptive form to a mature, integrated one quickly collapses. Teo laments that “the musical in its integrative form where music, songs, characters and plots were inter-related to each other, survived only for a short period in the late 50s,” before reverting to its earlier interruptive tendencies.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty of sustaining a developmental account of *gechang pian* that takes integration as its main criterion, and the considerable number of films that must be dismissed on such a basis, tells us that this notion cannot fully account for what these films are doing and that their musical content is not just a means to narrative ends. As Altman asks in his study of the American film music, “are there texts commonly called musicals which in fact operate according to a logic different from the vast majority of other musicals?”<sup>27</sup> My discussion of *gechang pian* grapples with this question, beginning from the premise that their musical attractions—inextricable from the appeal of the singing star—must be analyzed on their own terms. I treat the figure of the songstress as key to articulating the specific logic, forms, and modes of address of *gechang* and *gewu pian*. In doing so, my aim is not only to flesh out a historical understanding of Chinese cinema and its soundscape, but also to work toward a more nuanced and expansive reflection on the intersections of music and cinema on a global plane, in which Hollywood occupies a decentered position. Do the musical and vocal manifestations of Chinese cinema indeed mobilize logics of presentation, performance, and identification that confound our expectations? To borrow a phrase from Dyer, what happens in the space of a song?

Dyer’s own exploration of this last question endeavors to articulate the unique ways in which songs in film make sense—a process steeped in linguistic and narrative conventions but also spilling beyond these conventions with the immediate, visceral, and sensuous impact of song performance. As Dyer argues, songs seem to hold out a direct channel to feeling and physicality and therefore to collapse the distance between singer and listener, to transcend the ordinary. They entail a transformation in the phenomenal experience of the spectator-auditor because “song, as befits an oral art, makes great use of repetition and redundancy and thus has an overall tendency towards a sense of stasis, towards not going or getting anywhere, to a sense of tableau, of suspended time. This is highly suggestive in the context of time and space in film.”<sup>28</sup> The effects described by Dyer apply as well to *gechang pian*, in which songs also pause the flow of diegetic time, prolong a moment and mood, heighten the emotional temperature, and even create an alternative reality. In giving the

“singing” of singing pictures its proper due, then, my objective consists not so much in asserting an essential difference between *gechang pian* and Hollywood musicals (or, for that matter, between *gechang pian* and musicals from any other region). Rather, it is to probe difference as internal to the individual work—where it marks a distance between its explicit and latent meanings—and consequently as inscribed in the fundamental mechanisms of Chinese song films. This approach is inspired by a strand of thinking about works of musical narration that understands heterogeneity and disjunction, rather than unity and integration, to lie at their core. Scholars like Gerald Mast, Richard Dyer, and Amy Herzog have all made compelling arguments for the importance of apprehending this difference in aesthetic and political terms, as the basis of the musical’s expressive modalities as well as its ideological work.<sup>29</sup> In Herzog’s formulation, the disruption of what she terms “the musical moment” refracts the genre’s conservative tendencies to “prescribe and reinforce meanings according to the dominant rationale of a particular historical moment.” Against and concurrent with these tendencies, the uneven flux of sound and image creates a space available for surplus meanings and “interventions of difference. . . . The musical moment is unusual in its capacity to make this tension palpable; it is at once one of the most conservative and most irreverent filmic phenomena.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Voices, Bodies, and Gender*

If a close scrutiny of the difference constituted in the musical moment—or, alternatively, in the space of a song—discloses political effects that are related to filmic codings of nation, race, gender, or sexuality, as Herzog suggests, this insight has particular relevance for the *gechang pian*. For the Chinese songstress has no male equivalent. A clear division of labor informs these films from the outset: their singing stars are invariably women, while men contribute to the musical performance chiefly as composers, instrumentalists, or occasional duet partners. The songstress phenomenon points to a distinctive gendering of lyrical expression and a persistent alignment of femininity with musical spectacle in the Chinese filmic tradition. This pattern arose in the Shanghai period as part of what Zhang Zhen terms the “acoustic dominant” of the 1930s, as the gradual adoption of synchronized sound technologies transformed the aesthetic structure and sensorial parameters of Chinese film.<sup>31</sup> Zhang observes that “early sound films commonly privileged singing girls and self-reflexive references to the theater world,” beginning with the release of Shanghai’s first sound-on-disc production in 1931, *Songstress Red Peony*, which featured the

movie queen Hu Die as a Peking opera singer.<sup>32</sup> Solo performances by singing actresses predominated throughout the transition to sound, and many of the female stars of early sound cinema, like Zhou Xuan, came to filmmaking by way of the musical stage and recording industry. As the mainland-based filmmaking and popular music industries entered a phase of nationalism and mass mobilization starting in the late 1930s, the female singing voice was joined by male voices and eventually swallowed up in a revolutionary chorus. But this did not mark the last gasp of the solo female vocalist, for she would emerge with even greater force in the postwar period of Mandarin cinema, as the singing women of early sound cinema were borne along on the tides of the wartime exodus of cultural workers and intellectuals to Hong Kong. Stars like Zhou Xuan, after building successful careers on the mainland, resumed their work in the colony's reconstituted entertainment industry and were eventually succeeded by a new generation of performers cast in their mold. These singing actresses reigned over the Hong Kong movie world in the postwar years, overshadowing their male costars. Their voices dominated the airwaves, and their images graced the screen in picture after picture dedicated to displaying their talents to the fullest advantage. The gendering of lyrical expression grew even more pronounced during this period, as the idea of "no film without a song"—to use an oft-cited phrase from the popular music historian Wong Kee-chee—became something of an industry watchword.<sup>33</sup>

The songstresses of Chinese cinema call to mind counterparts from filmmaking traditions around the world: in Hollywood, stars like Jeanette MacDonald, Marlene Dietrich, Judy Garland, and Doris Day; *enka* singers of Japanese cinema, such as Hibari Misora;<sup>34</sup> and the playback singers whose voices permeate the soundtracks of Indian cinema, to name just a few examples. But in most global traditions of musical filmmaking, song performance is not the exclusive province of female vocalists. Given the tight association between song and femininity in Chinese films, the Chinese songstress is more akin to the *chanteuse réaliste* of French cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. Kelley Conway has described the ways in which the adoption of sound technology catalyzed an absorption of performers and styles from a culture of popular music rooted in the *café-concert*, cabaret, and music hall. As realist singers like Fréhel, Damia, and Edith Piaf became involved in film production, their chanteuse personas were mythologized in stories that unfolded in a working-class underworld of cafés, nightclubs, and city streets. The earthiness and bold sexuality that characterizes the personas of these singers set them apart from their Chinese counterparts, who were for the most part more idealized and held accountable to restrictive notions of feminine virtue (a point to which I will return). But

the affective disposition of these *chanteuses réalistes*, with their world-weary songs of heartbreak and abuse, their lyrical expressions of “female loss and suffering,” closely mirrors that of the Chinese songstress, who plays for pathos and uses her voice as a testament to suffering and pain.<sup>35</sup> The turn to song as a signifier of female subjectivity and desire suggests an alternative vector of musical expression in the cinema, one that can be mapped with respect to culturally specific songstress traditions and isolated moments of song performance that erupt even in films that are not musicals.<sup>36</sup>

Like the *chanteuse réaliste*, the Chinese songstress embodies the traces of a live entertainment culture predating and paralleling sound cinema, anchored in a milieu of teahouses, cabarets, and concert halls. The feminization of vocal performance can be explained in part by recourse to what Emilie Yeh describes as the “female-centered musical amusements” of the urban demimonde, with the songstress finding a kindred relative in the singsong girls and other “female entertainers who [sold] nocturnal delights to pleasure-seekers in colonial Shanghai.”<sup>37</sup> According to Meng Yue, the presence of these female singers contributed greatly to the “decadent anarchism” and heady, seductive ambience of entertainment districts like Baoshan Street.<sup>38</sup> We see this world recreated in numerous songstress films that nod to the singer’s origins in this culture of stage performance, from the seedy teahouses where she works to attract customers (*Street Angel*) to the luxurious art deco nightclubs where she reigns over the dance floor (*Song of a Songstress*).<sup>39</sup> The lyrical offerings of these stage performers included regional forms like *tanci* (Suzhou-based storytelling songs) and other urban folk melodies; opera arias, sung individually without the props, costumes, gestures, and interspersed dialogue associated with stage performance, in a practice known as *qing chang* (pure singing); and the jazzy tunes of Western-influenced modern pop music (*shidai qu*). These female singers continued to maintain their central position with the advent of mass-mediated music, moving into the sphere of radio performance and phonograph recording as *shidai qu* gained a foothold in the urban soundscape. In this period there was a dearth of male vocalists in modern popular music, which was dominated instead by songstresses like Li Minghui, Zhou Xuan, Yao Lee, Bai Hong, Gong Qiuxia, and Ouyang Feiying.<sup>40</sup> The division of musical labor onscreen was thus consonant with the actual division of labor in the modern music industry, where the vast majority of professional singers were female and most songwriters were male. Yet this fact alone cannot account for the extreme imbalance between female and male pop stars that uniquely characterizes this context, nor does it explain how things came to be this way in the first place.



In grappling with the gendering of vocal performance, it is necessary to consider the historical moment in which this modern mass culture of sounds and images took shape, situated at the endpoint of a long-standing culture of music in which “singing in a performance context” was “culturally coded as feminine,” in the words of Judith Zeitlin.<sup>41</sup> Music making and lyrical performance were an integral part of the courtesan culture that flourished throughout the late imperial period. The female entertainers of this milieu engaged in the practice of pure singing. Along with the operatic repertory, their performances also drew upon a long-lived tradition of popular ballads, consisting of lyric verse—usually written in the first person—set to existing melodies. Grace Fong writes: “The Chinese lyrical tradition has a history of female-voiced songs that are often anonymous [in authorship] and have folk or popular origins.” On the one hand, these songs “represent some of the strongest expressions of a female lyrical subject in the Chinese tradition.”<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, they also represent a reified expression of the social and erotic relationships that transpired in the pleasure quarters, with their status as melodies performed by courtesans for the pleasure of male literati listeners. These relationships were constituted through a highly formalized exchange of entertainment services, money, objects of literary or material value, and—in some instances—sexual favors and companionship between courtesans and male literati.<sup>43</sup>

As many scholars have emphasized, courtesans were not prostitutes in the Western sense of the word because they did not extract payment for sexual services in the manner of a commercial transaction. Even the less elite among them were artists and performers who, in the words of Gail Hershatter, “prided themselves on ‘selling their voices rather than their bodies.’”<sup>44</sup> The distinction between the courtesan and the common prostitute, however, is further complicated by the strongly erotic connotations of song performance itself. Zeitlin’s work is illuminating on this point. She writes: “Singing was fundamental to the courtesan’s art in China not only because song was a social and sexual lubricant and the lyrics were appreciated for their literary and sentimental value, but because singing itself, when offered as entertainment at banquets or other settings, was culturally gendered as feminine. To perform a song was to submit oneself to the gaze as well as the ears of another, and there was a perpetual tendency for the audience to conflate the physical beauty of the singer with the acoustic beauty of the song.”<sup>45</sup> These comments point to a decidedly corporeal and sensuous understanding of song in the performative context, one that metonymically relates the quality of the singing voice to the beauty and sexuality of the singer. In Zeitlin’s description, the performance of song is a gateway to physical arousal as well as to more refined forms of aesthetic delec-

tation, with the pleasures of intangible notes and fleshly substance converging in the body of the female singer.

The dawning of the republican era of modernity brought with it the end of the courtesan, and the elite entertainment culture centering on this figure gave way to a panoply of mass-accessible cultural productions catering to an urban petty bourgeoisie. Hershatter notes that by the 1920s, the courtesan performer was “completely absorbed” into the category of the common prostitute.<sup>46</sup> Yet the figure of the courtesan continued to adumbrate and permeate public perceptions of a new class of female entertainment professionals. As Jones argues, “the lingering taint of the popular musician’s (particularly the female vocalist’s) traditional association with unorthodox pleasures” persisted well into the twentieth century, enshrined in conservative prejudicial views of popular song as morally corrupting and of singers as *déclassé* and unwholesome. The endurance of this association is evident in the musical culture wars of the 1930s, he continues, when “the rhetorical equation of mass-mediated sing-song girls with courtesans and prostitutes” was leveraged in order to ideologically discredit their tunes as decadent, thus clearing the way for a masculine and revolutionary idiom of mass music.<sup>47</sup> The taint of the courtesan-cum-prostitute is also preserved in the cinematic pedigree of the songstress: time and again, she is imagined as a kind of *jiaoji hua* (social flower) who lives off the largesse of the male admirers to whom she makes her voice and body available. Alternatively, she is targeted as an object of social stigma and moral disapproval by others, deemed as unfit for respectable society on the basis of her lowly profession—most often by the parents of the well-bred young men who inevitably fall in love with her and want to marry her. The protest raised against the hapless songstress, in countless romantic melodramas whose plots turn on the collision between young love and parental prohibition, is that she exposes herself to public scrutiny, or *paotou loumian*—a phrase inscribing the transgressive physicality of female song performance. As will become evident in the following chapters, the songstress is plagued by this perceived transgression—and by a stubborn cultural logic that conflates *maige* (selling songs) and *maishen* (selling the body)—for the entirety of her existence.

The haunting of the songstress by her predecessors attests to the way in which residual codes are preserved in the very cultural discourses that have displaced them. On the one hand, the construal of the female singer according to an older set of cultural practices amounts to an anachronism, if not an outright excuse for the perpetuation of long-standing traditional social and sexual hierarchies. On the other hand, it pinpoints the historical truth of the commercial objectification of the female body in an emerging modern culture of entertainment and

mass media. The birth of the filmic songstress occurred in a moment when women's images and voices were consumed by others through the media of pictorial magazines, films, phonograph records, and radio on an unprecedented scale as well as in live amusement venues, and when even the experience of tactile proximity to their bodies was available to paying male customers in Shanghai's dance halls.<sup>48</sup> The sensuous and erotic cultural connotations of female song performance in the late imperial period did not die out with the latter's passing but rather were reanimated by and redistributed through the circuits of "the larger sensorial and libidinal economy of a modernizing society."<sup>49</sup> Transposed to the screen, female-voiced songs retained the electrifying charge of seduction, intimacy, and invitation to fantasy, as the examples discussed in this book will attest.

### *The Songstress as Modern Woman*

The central position of the commodified female body in the cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Chinese modernity has been explored from numerous angles by historians attuned to, in the words of Catherine Russell, "a wider field of global visual culture in which the commodification of the female image intersected—and often conflicted—with received norms of gendered behavior."<sup>50</sup> The images of women circulating throughout this culture of consumption and modern media are a reflection of changing gender roles and newly available identities, as well as an active agent in the reconfiguration of femininity. Their impact can be discerned in the iconic construction of the New Woman and/or Modern Girl (translated alternatively as *xin nǚxing*, *xiandai nǚxing*, *modeng nulang*, and *modeng nǚxing*), who flaunted the styles of the time—short hair, cosmetics, *qipao*, and Western fashions—along with new ways of being: independent, educated, athletic, professionally active, and politically conscious.<sup>51</sup> Such images can be understood as a crucial element of those "simple surface manifestations of an epoch" that, in Siegfried Kracauer's view, afford a flash of insight into underlying historical processes.<sup>52</sup> Viewed as an amalgam of political aspiration, anxiety, and voyeuristic fascination, the discourse of modern femininity—in China as in other parts of the world—emerges as a vivid index of these processes. In the words of Weihong Bao, "as the battleground among residual, emergent, and alternative discourses of sociobiopolitical reorganization, and as the eroticized embodiment of capitalist circulation, the female body provided the experience of modernity with a tangible image in early-twentieth century China."<sup>53</sup>

It is only against such a historical background that the significance of the gendering of song performance can be fully grasped. This book is premised on the idea that the songstress belongs to the lineage of the modern woman, alongside those creatures of fashion and glamour, the independent new women and the fallen women who have riveted the attention of filmgoers since the silent era and whose echoes continue to permeate the transition to sound and the postwar decades. Like these antecedents, the songstress possesses an irresistible appeal to the senses as an embodied display of the new, the fashionable, and the allures of modern mass culture. Like the fallen women featured in many of the most notable works of Chinese silent cinema—such as *Tianming* (*Daybreak*, 1933) and *Shennü* (*Goddess*, 1934)—the songstress is also obliged to exploit her body, looks, and voice for a living, in the process violating traditional prescriptions related to gender, labor, and public space. Both the fallen woman and the songstress are invested with a high degree of affective and identificatory power, while simultaneously being shrouded in social opprobrium and marginalized within their fictive worlds. Even as they are aesthetically idealized, they are also rendered as passive objects to be disciplined, sacrificed, rescued, or redeemed—ultimately reined in by narrative impulses that betray the deep anxieties surrounding women, performance, and publicity in the age of mass media. And like so many fallen women of the silent screen, the songstress often meets a tragic end. As in the sad case of the great silent film actress Ruan Lingyu (who took her own life at the age of twenty-four, after starring in a film about a young mother and aspiring author who was driven to suicide by a hypocritical and corrupt society), the diegetic fate of the female singer is disconcertingly echoed in the actual fates of the stars who play these roles, many of whom have died in a tragic, untimely fashion, and frequently by their own hand.

To insert the songstress into this lineage is to engage the project of feminist film historiography, building on its investigations of the interrelations among femininity, modernity, and mediatized spectacle that have found a unique articulation in cinema—indeed, that have obsessed Chinese filmmakers from the beginnings of the industry. With this move, my objective is twofold: first, to extend the historical and regional parameters of a critical discourse that has focused on Shanghai cinema of the silent era, and second, to move beyond the primarily visual terms in which this discourse casts mass media. The historical boundaries of this discussion are largely consistent with standard accounts that equate the dawning of a revolutionary mass culture with the terminus of the cultural imagination of the modern woman. Already by the late 1930s, she

has set off on a path to disappearance, subsumed by a genderless ideal of the militant and patriotic worker that would define a subsequent era of socialist cinema. From the emancipated New Woman of the May Fourth period, she morphs into the “materialistic, urban femme fatale” and finally the “socially conscious Marxist Girl, who was to become an ancestor to the desexualized female communist cadre after 1949,” as Shu-mei Shih writes.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence of the displacement of the urban imaginary of the Shanghai era by a rural revolutionary imaginary, the modern woman fades into a collective of militant workers and national martyrs.

Yet a different perspective on the fate of the modern woman comes into focus when we turn away from a mainland-centric account of film history and consider configurations of urban modernity in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world. The events that led up to the modern woman’s disappearance from mainland Chinese cinema also led to her reanimation in another context, Hong Kong in the postwar years. The massive influx of migrants into the colony in the years around the war and the Communist revolution spurred a wave of urbanization that would lay the foundations for Hong Kong’s current status as a cosmopolitan megalopolis. During the 1950s and 1960s, a vibrant commercial film industry was created in Hong Kong against the backdrop of urban concentration; industrialization; the absorption of Western and other foreign influences; transformations of the traditional family; the large-scale entrance of women into the workforce; the rise of a white-collar class; and the emergence of a distinct new pop culture erected on the sectors of design, fashion, and manufacturing. The impact of these developments is vividly registered in the cinematic productions of postwar Hong Kong, concretely indexed by the images and sounds of female stars circulating in this period. Here we encounter a new generation of modern girls, attesting to the ways in which this figure is constituted across translocal circuits of capitalist and colonial exchange. Returning to Bao’s formulation, in postwar Hong Kong as much as in prewar China, the female body stands out as the “eroticized embodiment of capitalist circulation.” From the vantage point of a longer temporal trajectory, the modern woman stands out even more clearly as a figure who mediates the tensions between residual and emergent historical forces, tradition and modernity, and the local and the global.

Many commentators have pointed to the contradictions at play in screen portrayals of modern femininity. These are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in *Goddess*, where Ruan Lingyu memorably portrays that most archetypal fallen woman of the silent screen, the prostitute. The film’s impact is inseparable from the charismatic, melancholic beauty of its star—cannily mined in shots that linger on her face and body—even as Ruan’s character is subjected

to a condemnatory, punitive gaze within the spaces of the fiction. This gives rise to a disparity between the film's presentation of the prostitute as physically desirable and its narrative construction of her as abject and pitiable—a disparity between its showing and its telling. Such a disparity can be construed as the outcome of a process of textual disavowal: the film fetishistically exploits the visual appeal of the very figure it narratively exiles from social and familial existence, with its story about a streetwalker and devoted single mother who ends up separated from her son and imprisoned despite her best efforts to provide for her child. In doing so, *Goddess* caters to a hypocritical morality that sees female sexuality as simultaneously alluring and deserving of punishment. This equivocation perhaps ultimately boils down to the duplicity of the cinematic medium itself, which allows a filmmaker to have it both ways.<sup>55</sup> Conversely, it also attests to the semiotic surplus of images, capable of undercutting and contravening narrative ascriptions of meaning.

Contradictions like these constitute a fundamental component of what Miriam Hansen describes more broadly as the fallen woman cycle of Chinese cinema. Hansen suggests that we might view these films as inscriptions of the contradictions of modernity itself, “enacted through the figure of the woman, very often, literally, across the body of the woman who tries to live them but more often than not fails.”<sup>56</sup> *Goddess* is just one of many melodramas of the silent era that evoke a sense of the dead end of feminine subjectivity, “trapped between the rock of societal bigotry and the hard place of sexual commodification.”<sup>57</sup> An object of media fantasy and male authorship, the modern woman is often divested of agency and autonomy and shaped by reactionary undercurrents that reaffirm traditional gender values, despite her outwardly up-to-the-minute appearance.<sup>58</sup> But as much as films like *Goddess* and *Daybreak* collude in these fantasies of regulation and discipline, they also clearly display the limits of their ability to determine the reception of the fallen woman figure. Hansen writes: “The meanings of a film are not only determined by directorial intention and an underlying social, masculinist discourse, but are significantly shaped by other voices, such as the mode of performance and the degree of agency, however precarious, that accrues to female actors in the star system. . . . [While] female figures may well be the privileged fetish of male/modernist projection and stereotyping, they are also the sites of greatest ambivalence and mobility, as traditional binarisms may be at once invoked and undermined through performance and masquerade.”<sup>59</sup>

For Hansen, the fallen woman's capacity to transcend the discourses that struggle to contain her stems from a specifically cinematic mode of porosity and affect, which is traceable to the power of the medium to elicit unanticipated