

In the wake: Women as ghostly matters in *Center Stage*

1, “Isn't she a replica of myself?”

After working with Anita Mui in *Rouge*, Stanley Kwan was ruminating on his next project, and when he was researching about the early silent film star Ruan Lingyu, he had an uncanny feeling while seeing Ruan's picture in her funeral. " I thought it was Anita.", said Kwan in an interview in 2013, 10 years after Anita Mui's untimely death (Kwan2013, youtube). Anita didn't manage to work with Kwan again, Kwan had changed his idea during the research and cooperated with Maggie Cheung, another rising star in the Hongkong film. Kwan insists that *Center Stage* is where Maggie has become a real actress (Kwan2013, youtube), which is a declaration proven by the success of the film. The film's other name *The Actress*, therefore, has multiple meanings: the death of an actress, the birth of one, and the absence of another.

The first time Ruan Lingyu is embodied by Maggie Cheung in the film was in the shooting scene of "The Dream of the Ancient Capital" when she is throwing a flower vase. Flower vase (Hua Ping) means bimbo in both Mandarin and Cantonese. Cheung's acting skills had been questioned because she started as a beauty pageant, and Ruan could only play some trophy roles in the early stage of her career. They both worked hard to get rid of the stigma of being a bimbo, so when Kwan talks about Ruan's early experience, Cheung doesn't hesitate to say: "Isn't she a replica of myself?" Ruan Lingyu spent all her life looking for breakthroughs in her deduction career and was reluctant to be fixed as an enchanted image of a woman with lure and desire. Cheung's Ruan Lingyu started with a manifest gesture of smashing the vase, set the tone for the disruptive narrative of this biopic movie, which makes the re-enactment more than

a replica. The fact that Cheung's experience of playing Ruan has become the turning point of her, also makes the echo of this film go beyond its diegesis.

Except for the intertwining of Ruan Lingyu and Maggie Cheung's lives, there are many other levels of mirroring and intertextuality in the movie *Ruan Lingyu*: the movie *New Women* and *Ruan Lingyu*, the life of Wei Ming and Ruan, the prototype of Wei Ming— Ai Xia and Ruan, etc. If we count Anita in, the deathly repetition in and out of the production makes the movie shadowed by the ephemerality of women in different periods. When we see Maggie Cheung lying on the death bed, it is like a wake ritual after the repetitive death. By going back to the death scene, which is the last iconic moment of Ruan, Kwan tries to disturb the fixed representation of Ruan as a film star with the ephemerality of the women characters in and out the film.

## 2, The wake:

*Wake comes to have multiple meanings, including the trail of waves of a ship as a metaphor for ongoing traces of the violence of slavery as well as the period of sitting and tending to the dead. (Sharpe2016,13)*

After Ruan's death, the commodification of her art and her life went even wilder, the picture which inspires Kwan is just one version of her dead face. As a legend of her time, there were more media and presses than relatives and friends at her funeral. People even intended to do a plaster model from her death face to preserve her beauty, the gypsum stayed on her face so long that it makes her face in the funeral swollen (Liu2020,Topys). Jackie Stacey claims that because stars are such intense figures of subjective identification and fantasy, photos of them frequently function as resonant sites of what he calls “iconic memory”, this process of star-

based remembering often assumes “the form of a particular frozen moment, taken out of its temporal context and captured as ‘pure image’”, hence the term, “iconic memory”. It is a process that, importantly, serves to retain and repeat not only “memories of the stars, but also the spectators’ memories of themselves.” (Stacey1994,67) In Ruan’s case, her iconic memory as her last picture shows how she is overrepresented and commodified after her death. This same force of commodification was also the vortex that led to her death, which is caused by ambivalence in Chinese women's relationship to the cinema: the promise of liberation and social mobility as well as the lure and risks of a new kind of commodification of the body by film technology. (Zhang2005,13)

In *Ruan Lingyu*, this iconic memory has been re-enacted, and becomes the pivot of the narrative: all the directors, actors and the producer of the Lianhua company come in to show grief to Ruan's death, the scene with Maggie Cheung lying on the death bed overlaps with the archived photos. The juxtaposition of the filmmaking process and the authentic photos give an uncanny feeling to the spectators of the film. However, after a close shot of Cheung's corp, it starts to zoom out and includes the people who are in the story, then the zoom-out continues, until people who are at the shooting scene is also in the frame. This sequence of zoom-out cinematography becomes an analogy for the movie: if the death of the actress is at the center of the film, then the interview、the fiction、the archived photos and movie clips are also part of mourning ritual. If this zoom-out continues, the grief will be passed on from the actor to the spectators, and makes the process of watching the film become part of the wake ritual in different time and space. The ritual which happens after the death but before the burial, therefore extends like the ripples on the water, becomes a liminal space between past and future,

detaches the individual from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, or any representation, overrepresentation. As Victor Turner claims, if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it potentially can be seen as a period of scrutiny for central values and axioms of the culture where it occurs. (Turner 1982, 156) In this case, the unfolding of female identity and promise of liberation in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century China has been brought back through the liminal space of wake ritual and has become something under the scrutiny.

It is not the first time Kwan uses the liminality and ephemerality of women characters to disturb the representation of history: In *Rouge*, Fleur embodies herself in a time and space she does not belong to. When Maggie Cheung cannot hold the breath and pretend to be dead anymore, it is like the dead and lost part breaks the boundary of fiction and documentary and makes its way into the present. If the incarnation of the dead in *Rouge* is conditional and Fleur was meant to be disappointed, then the breath of Maggie Cheung makes it a dissipation of the death of Ruan, and a reincarnation of the women in plural form who have been suffered from the repression in a patriarchic society like Ruan.

As tending the death in a wake, there are a lot of tears in and out the diegesis of the movie: Maggie Cheung cried a lot when playing the role of Ruan, tears mixed with repetitive music makes the film extremely heart-wrenching. Is Maggie crying as Ruan or she feels the pain for Ruan and cries as herself? Or is she like Ruan, using life as her rehearsal for art? Having her handsome income, Ruan Lingyu did not get real independence but left behind the international Women's day and an unaddressed speech to commit suicide. Ruan kept her habit of bookkeeping until the last moment before her death, without knowing that she is also one of

the commodities to the society, a relationship that cannot be annulled even by her death. This brings us back to Anita Mui, whose abusive family she was never able to get rid of and the exploitive economic relationship that the family brought about. Things have not changed regarding woman's precarious status in Asian society. It is clear from *Ruan Lingyu* and *Rouge*, Kwan has deep sympathy for women and has been using film as a lament for women in the commercial world.

Ruan Lingyu's career matures in the Lianhua company. But it seems that she keeps a certain distance from the left-wing tendency in the company: it is the revolutionary songs she can't sing, it is also the revolutionary reunion she passes by but doesn't join. Her personal life is often criticized as a tragedy caused by "not being progressive". To restate Ruan Lingyu's choice as a person and a woman and the motivation behind it, Kwan amplifies those apolitical moments of Ruan and creates a space for her personal life. Despiting Kwan's awareness and empathy on women's precarity, the film *Ruan Lingyu* is more of a wake work than woke —— political awareness. "In the wake" means waiting to be haunted, waiting until the truth of Ruan reveals, which has also been long lost in the violence of interpretation. The death promises to come back, as the wake continues, the haunting of death is yet to happen.

The gesture of this film being a wake than woke is clearer if we compare *Ruan Lingyu* to another film with the actress as ghostly matter: Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*. In *Ruan Lingyu*, Kwan and his team seem to be trying to approach the objective materials like interviews and documentation as a tool to find their own story, Maggie Cheung's identity as an actress is an important part of the diegesis rather than just narrative tools. As all those documented materials have a dead nature comparing to live performances (Phelan2003, 147), *Good Men, Good Women*'s Liang Ching's presence as a human being is consumed by memories

and documentations, while Maggie Cheung still has a chance to speak and reflect on her own life. Chiang denies the presence of herself and her only goal is to live in another woman's body and bring into life the lost personal story in history. Deleuze argues that time is the inner form that both regulates and splits the ego and I from each other and he quotes Rimbaud's statement of "I is another" to elaborate this Kantian recognition (Deleuze 1997, preface), memory sneaks into Ching's actress body, therefore "I" become "another (woman)". As the actress becomes someone who is haunted, Hou uses the filmmaking as the witchcraft of exorcising the ghost of colonization and try to bridge the shattered identity of Taiwanese in the post-colonial period. While in Kwan's case, the stillness of the dead body is calling for the ghost to come back. Actors as a ghostly being keeps resurrecting and regenerating in the stories of others: Jiang as someone who lived in the past comes to Ching and possesses her; while Cheung as an actress, chooses to step into Ruan's body and wait for a conversation to happen as she is going back and forth between different layers of narrative.

In the reconstruction of Ruan's personal life, the problem of kinship is as complicated as romantic relationships compared to other female characters in Asian films. In Asian society, women are responsible for maintaining kinship, including the connection between the dead and the living: in *When the tenth month comes*, Duyen was the one who connects her dead husband and the whole family. In *The scent of green papaya*, the two mistresses Mui worked for spent almost their whole lives before the shrine, which is also a space for the dead in the family. Mui, who is pregnant at the ending scene, was sitting under an old stone idol. As a woman who inherits life, she seems to be treated correctly for the first time, with the radiance of a mother or a goddess. As women have been materialized as reproductive labor in East / Southeast Asian society, the female body becomes a liminal space that bridges the dead and the living, the

individual and the collective, the past and the present. **Being a mother figure is important for Ruan's acting career, she was a mother in so many films, however, the only reproduction she did in her short yet proliferate life was filmmaking, she lives a life of a mother through film and gives it back to her adopted children.** In this sense, even Ruan was a victim of Patriarchal society, she manages to fight back by choosing her way of reproduction.

Those artistic choices Kwan makes in the filmmaking process are his way to keep the dead company, in a gentle, apolitical way. After three years' research and several months shooting on-site in Shanghai, cinematographer of *Center Stage* Poon Hang-sang claims that in one of the shooting scenes, he saw the specters of Ruan crying in the corner, when Kwan brings this up in front of the journalist, he doesn't **deny** but says: "After three years of tuning and researching, we might have found the right channel finally." (Kwan2013, youtube) If the filmmaking is the wake work for the haunting to happen, if there is an ultimately haunting, then "it is about how to transform a shadow of life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of peaceful reconciliation. In this necessarily collective undertaking, the end, which is not an ending at all, belongs to everyone." (Gordon2008, 208) In *Ruan Lingyu*, it means the female power which is unveiled but yet to be developed, will have a chance to become undiminished and fulfilled.

### 3, In the wake of the big steamship:

*Wake: the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow. (Sharpe2016,11)*

After the visit to Hongkong, all the staff of the Lianhua company takes a group photo, with the company's logo —— a lifebuoy—— in the middle of them . It was as if they were on a huge ship, ready to sail through the wind and waves to a brighter future. The solidarity of the filmmaking industry in the 1930s makes a lot of film workers consider this period as a golden age of filmmaking, including Kwan. (Kwan2013, youtube) Scholars metaphorize Shanghai in the 1930s to sea: The cinematic vernacular came out of the tumultuous cultural sea change across the threshold of the twentieth century..... this history is one that parallels, interests, and embodies the history of the urban modernity in the wake of the industrial capitalism in the world context. (Zhang2005, 37)

In the resimulation of Shanghai in 1930s in *Ruan Lingyu*, there are a lot of symbolized ship elements too: In the jazz club Ruan Lingyu frequently went, the jazz band played in front of the big symbol of an art deco styled steamship, people swing and spin in the dancing pool, makes the spectators get the same dizziness like on the ship. The groundlessness of the 1930s Shanghai gives everyone an illusion of hope, but we all know that it did not last. It is in the jazz club that Ruan meets Tang and decided to break up with Zhang, which eventually causes her death. It is also in the same space that Ruan finished her last Rumba dance and went home to commit suicide. In the farewell party of Skinners (the engineer of sound film apparatus), the environment is a bit surreal, we can only tell that the group of people is in a restaurant, but as the background is blurred and only the dinner table is shown, the porthole shaped window makes it looks like they are in a big steamship, sailing to the future of the sound movie.

When asked to explain the particular interests of Ruan Lingyu, Kwan said it could be anyone: Zhou Xuan, Lee Xianglan, or any other legendary actresses of the time. But the thing about Ruan is, her death symbolized the ending of the silent movie, and also the golden age of



filming in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Shanghai. (Kwan2013, Youtube) As "The city is discovering itself at the very moment of its disappearance", (Harris1997, 298) Kwan is also using the ephemerality of the women's character to analogize the ephemerality of the golden age of the industry.

Shanghai in the 1990s, where the Movie *Ruan Lingyu* was made, has a lot of similarities to Shanghai in the 1930s. Stanley Kwan reinterpreted history on the same location, makes it a continuation and transmission, and this continuation and transmission are first of all mourning of the lost history. In the 90s, the idea of connecting with the world has been brought up a lot (Zhang2013, 98), however, it seems like connecting and open-up means the abandonment of history. For Kwan, the connection is reconnection, it is the restart of the unfolded yet sabotaged female identities and the diversities of the film industry. By looking into the wake of the disappearing ship, he is looking for the futurity of the disappeared golden age.

## Conclusion

*That to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding." (Sharpe2016, 13–14)*

The interruptions between the present and the past, the re-enactment and the documentation happen all the time in *Ruan Lingyu*, they works as pieces of puzzles but but they seldom contradict themselves, except for one scene: In the last shooting scene of *New Women*, Ruan Lingyu cannot stop crying after performing the protagonist Wei Ming's death. She covered her body with the white sheet when Stanley Kwan cuts in and says: Ka Fai, you forgot to unveil Maggie's sheet. Ka Fai Leung sits still with a full heart and is not able to follow the director's instruction. The arrangement in the rehearsal is disrupted by the affects of the live

performance of the actors. Furthermore, this improvisation of the actors in the present time and space has an impact on the fictional level: in the farewell party of *Skinners*, Ruan kisses everyone including Tsai, and says: “He is the shiest. Do you remember when we were shooting the last scene of *New Women*, you were so shy that you forgot to unveil my sheet?” The slippage from the present into the past, the documentation into the fiction, makes the authorship of the film stand out. By following the wake of the ship of his film industry predecessors, Kwan also manages to rediscover his authorship in front of the authority of the documentations. These unsaved silent films are re-simulated in the film, and those historical figures who have little archive are able to have a different life in this film. This is not a film dedicated to authenticity. There are many places where the director affirms that these reproductions are speculative, but the speculative could be true, just like Brecht says: “The musician’s attitude to his text, the spokesman’s to his report, shows the extent of his political, and so of his human maturity. A man’s stature is shown by what he mourns and in what way he mourns it. To raise mourning to a higher plane, to make it into an element of social progress: that is an artistic task.” (Brecht 1964, 106)

In *Center Stage*, Kwan creates the modality and tempo of the not-yet-here which Muñoz defines as “Queerness”: “We may never touch queerness.....but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer yet queerness exists for us..... as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future,” now, “is queerness’s domain”(Muñoz 2009, 1). By leading us into the wake ritual through movie making, Kwan looks for the futurity both for women and filmmaking, in disrupting the space and time with the queerness in his authorship, he reveals wakefulness in the wake.

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