

1-1-2012

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## Recommended Citation

Guo, Li, "“Rethinking Female Voice and the Ideology of Sound: A Study of Stanley Kwan’s Film Center Stage (1992).”" (2012).  
*Languages, Philosophy, and Speech Communication Faculty Publications*. Paper 1.  
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Rethinking Female Voice and the Ideology of Sound: On Stanley Kwan's Film *Center Stage*

Film Credit:

*Center Stage* (Ruan Lingyu, 1992)

Director: Stanley Kwan

Screenplay: Tai An-Ping Chiu

With Maggie Cheung (Ruan Lingyu), Han Chin (Tang Jishan) and Tony Leung Ka Fai (Cai Chusheng).

Runtime 126 minutes

Author's Biography:

Li Guo is an Assistant Professor of Chinese at Utah State University. Her research interests include feminism, psychoanalysis film and media theories, as well as women's narratives in late imperial and modern China. She is currently preparing a book project on Chinese women's chantefable narratives in the late imperial and early modern period.

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## Rethinking Female Voice and the Ideology of Sound: On Stanley Kwan's Film *Center Stage*

This essay explores the representation of the feminine voice in the film *Center Stage* (*Ruan Lingyu* 1992) directed by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan. *Center Stage* offers a retrospect of the life of the Chinese cinema legend Ruan Lingyu (1910–1935) and the events leading up to her suicide at the age of twenty-five. Ruan's legendary life stirred Hong Kong film director Stanley Kwan to make a film based on the scant remaining sources of Ruan's life and career. In discussing Kwan's representation and reproduction of the female voice, I examine the extent to which Kwan's film does or does not revive the female subject's voice, paying careful attention to the restrictions on such revivification which inhere in the cinematic apparatus itself.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon Silverman's and Doane's feminist studies of voice in film, I study the disempowered woman's voice which, in Kwan's film, is synchronously joined with images of Ruan's impersonated body, thus revealing the profound exclusion of the woman from symbolic power. The remake of certain scenes from Ruan's original films, with Cheung standing in for Ruan, evokes a dialectic interaction between the diachronic narrative of the actress and Kwan's synchronic cinematic representation. Relating Kwan's representation of the female body to Comolli's study of "historical film," I explore how the body and voice of Ruan as an imagined character are both fictionalized and endowed with vivid realism.

As was one of China's most prominent silent film actresses in the 1930s, Ruan played in twenty-nine films altogether. From 1930 to 1935, she played a variety of roles, such as female teacher, worker, writer and student, and became an icon of the modern Chinese woman. Ironically, however, in her personal life she was yoked to three unsuccessful relationships. When her film *The New Woman* (*Xin nüxing* 1934) offended the public and media with its disclosure of

dark social reality, malicious and slanderous attacks of her personal life ensued. Popular media's very public, very intense assault on her directly contributed to her suicide. Ruan's personal tragedy intersects also with the transitional historical period during which sound technology was introduced to China's film industry and foreshadowed the replacement of silent films by films with sound. Ruan, who achieved her fame as a silent film star performing through body gestures and facial expressions, spoke mainly Cantonese and might have been afraid of losing her presence on screen because of her inability to speak fluent Mandarin. When Ruan's personal crisis escalated to the level of scandal and was brought to a public trial, she committed suicide with an overdose of barbiturates, thus ending her life at the height of her brilliant career.

In his film, Kwan presents a pastiche-like structure containing remakes of Ruan's films, interviews with actors and film directors from Ruan's life, conversations with Kwan's own film crew, as well as self-reflective scenes in which the off-screen directors and filming crew appear onscreen as part of the diegetic world. Embedded in this highly diegetic structure are multiple levels of "voices," including the voices of the narrator, a within-the-screen director, and an actress-playing-an-actress (the well-known Hong Kong actress Maggie Cheung playing Ruan). The overlaying of voices produces notable effects: when Kwan, the on-screen director, interprets the old text and directs the new, his voice takes on a discursive power, remaking as well as annotating history; yet Ruan remains largely silent in Kwan's remakes of her earlier film scenes, as portrayed by Maggie Cheung throughout the different ages of film.

In the film, the dialectic relationship between the historical account and the cinematic portrayal of Ruan is importantly associated with the diegesis of sound--that is, the relationship of sound to the represented space of the *mise-en-scène* and the narrative. Briefly, the term "diegesis" refers to a narrative or story. Prince defines diegesis as "The world in which the

situations and events narrated occur” (Prince 2003, 1964). In cinema, diegesis refers to the internal world the story creates: the narrative space that characters encounter and experience. The use of sound in Kwan’s film is deliberately associated with the theoretical construct of “the diegetic.” The director’s efforts to retrieve the sound of 1930s Shanghai through sound editing and reproduction reflects a deep yearning to retrieve the voice of Ruan. Engaged in this process of reconstructing Ruan’s voice is Ruan’s portrayer Maggie Cheung, who performs according to Kwan’s directions and constantly submits to the director’s exterior position of authorship.

### I. Voices of Anxiety

In Kwan’s film, Ruan is submitted to a triply diegetic inferiority: to spectators in semi-colonial 1930s China, to Kwan’s film crew in pre-1997 Hong Kong, and to the cinematic and multicultural audience of *Center Stage*. Shuqin notes that Cantonese Ruan’s silent death, as the film suggests, is partly owed to the actress’s frustrated attempt to speak Mandarin for the Shanghai cinema during its aforementioned transition from silent films to “talkies.” Perhaps analogous to Ruan’s story is Kwan’s endeavor to deliver his own voice to a transnational audience at the time of Hong Kong’s reversion to China in 1997, a year that would witness breathtaking transformations of the social, cultural, and linguistic environments of Hong Kong when the city was handed over to the Main Land. As Hjort notes, Kwan’s film is a classic of the New Hong Kong cinema and bears an “intimate relation to the ruptures and potentially creative dynamics of a socially significant time” (Hjort 2006, 4). Kwan’s attempt to redefine the identity of Hong Kong cinema within a shifting socio-historical context, according to Harris, renders *Center Stage* “a documentary lament,” which, “shot mainly in Cantonese, accentuat[es] a bleak parallel with the fate of contemporary local filmmakers as they confront a Mainland Chinese film

industry dominated by Mandarin and Beijing” (Harris 1997, 298). In other words, a sort of cinematic anxiety about “losing one’s own voice” seems to be embedded in the very “discursive interiority” that entraps the female character’s voice in this film.

How does *Center Stage* critically reflect on the physical, psychical, and discursive manipulation of the female voice via the cinematic apparatus? How are the connection between Maggie Cheung’s voice, her body, and Ruan’s body naturalized by the film narrative? And in what ways does the reproduction of Ruan’s voice re-enforce psychological and ideological assumptions of this cinematic dream-work? With these questions framing my discussion, I first review current theoretical discussions of the female voice in film criticism, most notably Silverman’s groundbreaking work. In her analysis of the maternal voice in cinema, Silverman offers a scintillating re-reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis on the formation of the Subject, citing Lacan’s “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”: “I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object” (Silverman 1988, 8). Silverman notes that “Lacan emphasizes here that speech produces absence, not presence. He also reminds us that at the moment the subject enters language, he or she also undergoes a phenomenal ‘fading’ or ‘aphanisis’” (8). In the cinematic narrative, voice is endowed with a comforting, fetishistic value that obscures the splitting of the subject from itself as it enters into language. The mother’s lack is thus transformed into the subject’s terrified projection. The subject’s “loss” then experiences a reworking, either through the subject’s own writing of the trauma in terms of his own body (fear of physical or actual loss), or through the projection of this trauma onto the woman (as the one who has figuratively suffered the lack). In other words, the cinematic apparatus attests to a powerful desire for unity, simultaneity, and completeness as a protest against the divisions within subjectivity. This cinematic desire for unity, origin, and

authenticity is evident at the beginning of *Center Stage*, when Kwan's voice-over recounts Ruan's life, starting with her early career, to actress Maggie Cheung and the audience.

These are the early stills when Ruan starts her film career at age of sixteen. Some of the copies are no longer available. Given casual roles, Ruan often plays minor characters in folklore, romance, and even spooky action films. Only when she joins Lianhua in 1929 does she play serious characters. (Kwan, *Center Stage*)

Founded in 1930, as one of China's leading film corporations, Lianhua was well known for its capital management system and technical cinematic innovations. With its headquarters in Hong Kong along with three film studios on the mainland, Lianhua released about 100 film productions between 1930 and 1938. Included in these films are many featuring Ruan, such as *Wild Flowers* (1930), *Three Modern Girls* (1933), *Little Toys* (1933), *The Goddess* (1934), and *Sea of Fragrant Snow* (1934). In the above passage, the voice-over of the off-screen director provides to Cheung and the audience commentary about the photographic stills of Ruan from her earlier career. Ruan's passiveness during the production of her earlier films immediately elicits a sympathetic response from the actress Maggie Cheung, who, upon hearing Kwan's account of Ruan's life, exclaims, "Wasn't she much like myself?" Cheung's sympathetic response, delivered with a tone of self-mockery, draws attention to the discursive disempowerment that the female is subject to. Both Ruan and Cheung in their early careers were passively cast in stereotypical roles and were constructed as objects by the cinematic apparatus rather than as subjects with agency. Ruan's entrance into the film as a deceased silent film star suggests her inability to speak in her own voice. In the mechanism of the film's sound regime, Ruan is obliged to bear the burden of being twice dispossessed. In other words, the cinematic representation of historical figures like Ruan possibly represents the desire of the film director to

remedy the absences, gaps, and splitting of historical reality through editing.

The opening scenes of *Center Stage* present an example of the tension between history and cinematic representation. The silent film actress, located in the pre-Oedipal phase, represents the female subject who precedes language and symbolic construction. The elusive figure of Ruan in the photographic stills becomes a site of insufficiency and discursive impotence within the cinematic narrative. As Kwan explains to Maggie Cheung, most of the stills are from silent films that no longer exist. Ruan's ephemeral image, only partially retrieved by the fragments of photos, posters, and a few considerably impaired film clips, represents the effects of splitting, and loss parallel to the subject's entrance into the symbolic. Her silenced figure is ridden with the anxiety of the filmic apparatus itself, which seeks to compensate for the lost subject through sound synchronization.

## II Sound Editing and Intelligibility

To further consider the relation between the female voice and the cinematic apparatus, I next review Kwan's efforts to retrieve Ruan's voice through sound editing and reproduction in *Center Stage*. Ruan's unfortunate personal life intersects with the significant period of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when silent film was gradually being displaced by sound film in China. In his discussion of the introduction of the sound synchronization technique into cinema, Bazin notes, "Now that sound has given proof that it came not to destroy but to fulfill the Old Testament of the cinema, we may most probably ask if the technical revolution created by the sound track was in any sense an aesthetic revolution" (Bazin 1967, 23). Does this evolution of the cinematic language, then, offer the (female) subject an alternative space of speaking on screen, or does it rather reveal the limitations of the cinematic apparatus in delivering the female voice? This

question invites an investigation of the ideology underlying sound editing in film, particularly, the relation between the ideology of sound and the intelligibility of the woman's voice.

The intricate relation between sound editing and the intelligibility of women's voices is profoundly determined by the work of ideology in sound editing and mixing, which Doane has analyzed in depth in her article "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing." Doane argues, "If the ideology of the visible demands that the spectator understand the image as a truthful representation of reality, the ideology of the audible demands that there exist simultaneously a different truth and another order of reality for the subject to grasp" (Doane 1985, 55). The image and sound track are both subject to ideological over-determination. What sound introduces to the cinema is "not so much the intelligibility as the presence of speech—banishing its absence through writing, in the intertitles which separate a character's speech from his or her own image." (Doane 1985, 56) While sound is introduced to "buttress a unitary ideology of the visible," it also risks a potential ideological crisis. (56)

The risk lies in the exposure of the contradiction implicit in the ideological polarization of knowledge. Practices of sound editing and mixing are designed to mask this contradiction through the specification of allowable relationships between sound and image. Thus in the sound technician's discourse synchronization and totality are fetishized and the inseparability of sound and image is posited as a goal. The "joy of mixing," according to one sound editor lies in watching the emergence of "something organic." (Doane 1985, 56)

This potential ideological crisis underlies the difficulty in rendering the female voice intelligible. For Doane, the ideology of matching is "an obsession which pervades the practice of sound-track construction and demands a certain authenticity of the technique" (Doane 1985, 60).

In *Center Stage*, Ruan's voice is reproduced through the female character as "the actual voice of the person speaking in the picture" (Doane 1985, 61). In Doane's words, the marriage of sound and image reveals a modernist ideology of grounding the knowledge of the female subject's interior life on the "fullness and spontaneity of his or her speech doubled by the rhetorical strategies of music and sound effects, as well as *mise-en-scène*" (61). This reconstruction, or rather, reproduction, of an organic "female voice" is simultaneously undermined by the ideology of sound editing. *Center Stage* reflects the discrepancy between the film's nostalgic impulse to retrieve the voice of an organic and unitary female subject, and Kwan's rendering of the female character in a self-reflexive multi-diegetic filmic structure that makes problematic the "intelligibility" of the female's resistant voice. This critical contradiction between the fetishized organic totality of the "speaking" female subject and the film technician's consistent discursive intervention (which undermines that totality of the female character) is embedded in the ideology of sound editing itself, and underlies the question of feminine voice in film.

Kwan's film, specifically, seeks to retrieve Ruan's voice in the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai in the 1930s when China was at the threshold of modern era under the social, economical and cultural influence of the West. The film recounts Ruan's personal history by reconstructing Ruan's life meticulously, such as the scenes at the Lianhua Film Shot Site, in luxurious dancing halls, restaurants, and in Ruan's exquisite apartment. In regard to language, as Ruan the actress speaks Cantonese, Cheung's Hong Kong background makes it easier for her to restore an "organic nature" to the female character's speech.

The luring music and songs of 1930s' cosmopolitan Shanghai, in addition, are important parts of Kwan's reproduction of the "sound" of the time and the technicians' efforts to enhance the fidelity of the reproduced sound to its source. Composer Xiao Chong comments that to

imitate the music of the time, the technicians adopted single-track recording as was often used in earlier periods, and even stepped on the audio tapes to give them a slightly damaged quality in sound and create a “fragmented” and “dated” effect of sound. The “noise,” the singing and the melody were then mixed by using the most advanced sound recording technology. While writing the lyrics and melody of the theme song “Burial of Her Heart,” Xiao Chong conducted extensive research on sound recording technology of the 1930s by collecting samples of music from Taiwan, Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong. To recreate a voice that is close to Ruan’s background and image, Xiao Chong drew inspiration from the singers of Yue opera, a traditional southern opera that contains Cantonese singing and dialogues. He even asked a singer to sing the theme song with a clothes-pin on her nose in order to imitate the nasal sound of Shanghai singers at the time. Also, Kwan discusses in great detail with the sound specialists the story, setting, light, the main characters’ relationships, dialogue, and even their make-up. Sound and music, in Kwan’s film, are not merely non-diegetic elements irrelevant to the story world. Instead, the reproduction of sound and music are acutely dependent on space of the story world in the film, and thereby acquire a diegetic quality. These aspects in film production seek to construct an “authentic” aspect of Ruan’s story, underlying which is a cinematic desire to retrieve the historical subject and make her “voice” audible. As the composer says about the song “Burial of Her Heart,” “Sometimes, when the night is deep and the noise of the world dies down, I will listen to this song, feeling as if that a Ruan Lingyu is just by my side.” (CCTV-9 2004)

Along with this nostalgic impulse to restore the original, the film self-reflexively reveals a multi-diegetic structure that projects the female subject into history. Kwan’s reconstruction of Ruan is carried out in a complex temporal and spatial structure, showing a postmodern intervention in cinematic representation of history. Ruan’s life is sophisticatedly constructed

through an interpolation of various film genres. Kwan's flexible *mise-en-scène* intervenes the narrative flow "with metafictional asides and ellipses, constructing an entire movie, actress, like a cube of interrelating but separate film forms — romantic fiction, documentary, archival footage, film history re-creation." (Atkinson 1996, 83) Kwan's interpolations and textual cross-stitches are organized overall in a unique structure, with Ruan situated at a central point where multiple narratives intersect. The reconstruction of Ruan's life is worked through an embedded narrative frame, involving the actress Maggie Cheung, who performs Ruan both in her voice and bodily manners, the film director, the impersonated film crew of Lianhua, and recorded interviews with actors of Kwan's film and veteran members of Lianhua who actually worked with Ruan in her life time. In the intersection of these scenes, Ruan's life story is reconstructed and reconfigured.

In *Center Stage*, the limitations of sound ideology in synchronizing female voice and image is also reflected in the film's visual texture, especially in the multi-diegetic structure of film shots. One interesting example is the scene in which Kwan interprets Ruan's life to Cheung who is sitting in front of the camera. Slowly the camera moves from behind Kwan's shoulder to a mirror on the opposite wall, capturing a curious reflection of Kwan and two film technicians operating the camera behind him. The use of mirrors and reflection, as Kwan says in an interview, is a mainstay in his films and reaffirms his sense of identity. (Berry 2005, 449) In *Center Stage*, the moment when Maggie Cheung questions the "truth" of Ruan's mysterious life is also a moment of the film director reflecting and questioning the very multi-diegetic structure in cinematic representation that seeks to recover the "true voice" of the silent-film actress.

Another impressive example of the represented female voice is Kwan's remake of a scene in Ruan's film *Little Toys*, an anti-Japanese patriotic film shot in 1933. Because of political censorship by the Guo Min Dang Government (The National People's Party) which betrayed the

people and emphasizes “friendly relations” with Japan, film productions at the time were not allowed to use the word “Japanese” in any patriotic works. Instead, a general term “the enemy” was used. Kwan screens a scene of the female protagonist (played by Ruan herself) who runs along the streets of Shanghai, deliriously crying, “The battle’s come again! The Enemy’s coming! ... Bomb! ... Cannon! ... Aircraft!” Her words are projected in quotation marks on the dark screen in large and striking characters. On screen, Ruan’s outcry leads to frantic fear and chaos among people in the streets. This scene is crosscut into a moment when Ruan the character (played by Cheung) and director Cai Chusheng (Leung) quietly watch the film together inside a small theatre. In the darkened theatre, the desperate voice of the female protagonist in Ruan’s original, which is already suppressed by political censorship, is submitted to a complex structure of viewing and hearing, involving Ruan in front of the screen, Cai sitting behind her, and the projector on the upper side of the screen behind them both, not to mention the invisible framing of Kwan’s own camera. (Figure 4) Leung leans forward to Cheung and whispers, “Miss Ruan, I think you are the best film actress in China.” Ruan’s silenced body is thus placed “center stage,” resonating strongly with Silverman’s assertion that “discursive interiority” entraps the female voice in cinema. Her resistant voice is thus designated to a “recessed” area of the diegesis.

In Kwan’s film, the most striking example for the multi-diegetic structure is the remake of a scene in *The New Woman* (1935), a silent film directed by Cai. *The New Woman* was based on an actual life story. Ai Xia, an actress and writer, committed suicide after starring in *A Modern Woman* (1933) for which she had written the script. This tragedy and the subject of the modern women furnished Cai with an inspiring theme for a new film, entitled *The New Woman*. The protagonist Wei Ming, who represents the New Woman, is an actress who flees home after a failed relationship to make her living by writing and teaching. After losing her job and with a

child dying of pneumonia, Wei Ming has to rely on one-night sexual encounters to earn her living and support her child. Her personal life leads to rampant gossip and scrutiny from the media and society in general. On her death bed, she accuses the social oppression and injustices that cause women's suffering, and raises a strong protesting voice, "I do want to live! I do want to revenge!" Ironically, Ruan who starred as Wei Ming committed suicide one month after the premiere of the film. Reminiscent of the real actress Ai Xia, Ruan responded with suicide to the same unbearable pressure exerted by slanderous gossip and media exposure of her personal life.

The film foreshadows Ruan's inability of speaking in her own voice in several preceding scenes. If the new technology enables the female actress to speak on the screen and possibly presages "the emergence of a female voice in the wake of gender consciousness," (Cui 2000, 76) the voice of Ruan is however tragically disrupted by her suicide and not delivered to her projected audience. When *The New Woman* (1935)<sup>2</sup> was released, the film's criticism of social media caused some people to plot revenge against the film crew. The vulnerable Ruan, who acts the role of Wei Ming, becomes an easy target of the masses. Her former lover Zhang Damin, who was bribed into raising a law suit against her, falsely accuses her and her partner Tang Jishan of adultery. Ruan desperately struggles against slanderous attacks from the public and her enraged partner's domestic abuse. In a related scene, Ruan (played by Cheung) visits Zhang to question his reasons for betraying her, only to find herself surrounded by numerous cameras and journalists who were informed of her visit by Zhang beforehand. The film captures a scene of Ruan, hearing slanderous attack from the crowd, looking back with silent indignation, fully surrounded by the mass of spectators. These scenes reveal a stern social reality that strips Ruan's right to speak for herself: if film industry increases Ruan's social visibility and distinguishes her from ordinary women of the time, such social position eventually enthralled Ruan with isolation,

passiveness and victimry. In striking similarity with Ai Xia and Wei Ming, Ruan's personal life becomes the reincarnated New Woman in her resistance and her tragic suicide.

In *Center Stage*, Kwan seeks to remake the scene of Wei Ming's death in the hospital as well as the shooting of the scene itself in *The New Woman* by Cai. After the shooting of the death scene, Maggie Cheung, playing the silent-screen actress, has indulged herself in the emotion and starts to sob under a white bed sheet. Tony Leung, playing the director Cai, is seated by the side of her bed and apparently entranced by Ruan/Cheung's muffled sobbing under the sheet. In a single long and high-angle shot, the take captures not only the two characters within the frame but also the cameras, the monitor, the switches, and the technicians around them. Stanley Kwan enters the frame with another moving camera to remind Tony Leung, "you forgot to lift up the blanket to have a look at Maggie." (Figure 5) The multiplexity of the cinematic narrative reflected in this scene illustrates the ideological control over the woman's voice in filmic presentation. In the original *The New Woman*, Ruan's outcry "I do want to live!" is not shown as intertitles as in silent films, but as striking and rapidly maximizing characters simultaneously projected from the protagonist's image on screen, showing the strength of her voice, and the helplessness of the film technician of the original who fails to deliver that power in Ruan's resistant voice. (Figure 3) Kwan's remake of the scene intends to synchronize Ruan's voice with Cheung's image on screen. Cheung's unnatural utterance in Mandarin, the socially approved voice for the modernist New Woman, fails to come off as "organic" to the female experience silent in history. Despite the evolution of sound techniques, Ruan's voice fails to be rendered intelligible in cinematic representation both in the original and in Kwan's remake. The film's sound editing seeks to enclose the gap between the subject's image and her voice yet inevitably suffers frustration.

The irreducible distances between the viewer and the spectacle, between the audience and the female voice underlie the voyeuristic pleasure in cinematic representation. Ruan's voice is necessarily located in the confined recess of the silent-screen to enable cinematic fetishism. Conversely, Kwan's highly self-reflexive shots expose the very structure of cinematic specularization of the female voice. *Center Stage* articulates the tension between these two aspects, that is, the fetishization of the woman's voice and the self-reflexive exposition of that fetishization. This tension shows that cinema cannot present any intelligible voice without the mediation of narrative focalization, or rather, the structures of discursive control from ideological positions in a patriarchal social order.

### III. (Not So) Silent Bodies

As part of the film's hyper-diegetic structure, remakes of scenes from Ruan's films further reveals the ironic discrepancy between Ruan's on-screen presence and her suppressed voice. Juxtaposing Ruan's ephemeral figure in celluloid stills with Maggie Cheung's glamorous image on screen, the film identifies Cheung's voice in the remakes with the voice of Ruan's. As is noted, film remakes typically invoke the aura of the original rather than the memory of the earlier film (Leitch 1997, 139). In the remake of a scene from Ruan's film *The Goddess*, Cheung's voice is endowed with a natural connection to the early actress's image, when the original and the remake (with reduced color hues as imitative of the black-white film) are crosscut to intersect with each other. (Figure 2) Underlying this aura of the original is a normative relationship of the film to the original historical resources. The actress's lost voice is submitted to image and sound editing which constructs a complex narrative structure of the movie. Interestingly, the film director's flexible *mise-en-scène* engages Ruan's faded image on

screen “there and then” into a dialectic interaction with Cheung’s voice in the remake “here and now.”

This dialectic interaction between history and present, between the original and the remake, is first of all a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the female subject’s formation into history. Transformed into a vehicle of the cinematic desire to reconstruct the historical Ruan, Cheung herself is positioned at the intersection of history and cinematic representation. Cheung’s body is also engaged into a dynamic interaction with Ruan’s body, as retrieved from Ruan’s ephemeral images from the screen. This discussion of cinematic representation of historical figures recalls Comolli’s article “Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much.” While discussing the deployment of imaginary characters in filming a historical fiction, Comolli argues,

If the imaginary person, even in a historical fiction, has no other body than that of the actor playing him, the historical characters, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much” (Comolli 1978, 44-47).

Resonating with Comolli’s comments, there could hardly be a less imaginary character than Ruan Lingyu: historical in that her name was born by a sacred body on China’s silent film screen in the 1930s, and the image of the body has come down to us in famous stills and film. Ruan’s mysteriously motivated suicide, together with the long-lost time and radiance represented by her films, renders herself a “legend” in Chinese film history. In Kwan’s *mise-en-scène* of Ruan’s life story, the dialectic between history and the present interpolates into the body of the historical character Ruan. The body of Ruan the character is a representative of a historical referent, a silent image of a woman in framed film stills transferred to celluloid records. Simultaneously, this is the same body of the famous actress Maggie Cheung who, with her interrogative

imagination, represents the radiance of the deceased Ruan to a contemporary audience. The rivalry of the two bodies is deeply woven into the texture of the film. While the diachronic historical narrative bleeds into the synchronic rendering of sound and image, the character of Ruan's body is engaged in a synthesis of silence and speech, presence and absence. The cinematic narrative thus transforms Ruan into, in Comolli's term, "a body too much."

The dialectic relation between Ruan image and Cheung's body evokes a psychoanalytic re-reading of the female "voice(s)" as the "maternal voice" which cannot be assimilated into the symbolic order of language. Cixous, in *La Jeune Née*, views voice with a capital "V" as the legacy of motherhood resisting symbolic codification. For her, the voice of the father is a powerful stream of sounds that cannot be cut off by the symbolic order, the paternal order of language. This is represented in the dominant male voice-over in most Hollywood films, as Silverman points out. This psychoanalytic reading of "voice" also reveals another dimension of its meaning. In *Center Stage*, the word "voice(s)" includes not only the female actress Cheung's voice as mediated through the male-dominated cinematic narrative, but also the "silence" of the deceased Ruan whose voice fails to reach the audience. "Silence," I argue, does not equal the "lack" of a voice, but rather refers to the discourses of the "Other" which fail to enter into the symbolic order of the paternal language and thereby are repressed into social unconscious.

This investigation of "silence" as the "voice" of the (m)other opens up new interpretation of Ruan's suicide. Ruan committed suicide because she was overwhelmed with the "malicious gossip" of the mob when her personal life was exposed to the public. The film's representation however offers an alternative reading. Ruan's death or "silence" might be an ultimate gesture of resistance against discursive hegemony. Ruan committed suicide on March 7, a day before International Women's Day. On the evening of March 6, in a farewell party for an American film

specialist Mr. Skinner who has introduced a recording facility to the Lianhua film studio, the film characters become excited about the opportunity of speaking on-screen. Ruan, with great enthusiasm, announces that she will soon give a presentation in Mandarin at a woman's school on the subject of Chinese women's liberation from five thousand years' of patriarchal history.

Immediately following Ruan's rehearsal of her speech is a series of crosscutting that links Ruan with each film director in Lianhua. After Ruan kisses each director to express her gratitude, the film crosscuts immediately to Ruan's death scene. As Cui notes, when the camera switches back and forth in crosscutting, "the editing strategy alters the position of the speaking subject. In one frame, Ruan will start to introduce a director; in another the director, sitting by her deathbed, comments on Ruan's life." (Cui 2000, 76) A subtle transition from woman as speaking subject to woman as object to be commented on by her mentors again shows a deep inherent irony in the film's narrative. The crosscutting of Ruan's rehearsal of speech and the scene at her deathbed illustrates another side to her "silence." At her deathbed, one of the film directors pleads with her to repeat her performance in her own movie *The Goddess*, "Please get up to smoke and drink, as a poise of resistance." The cinematic articulation of the death *mise-en-scène* indicates that Ruan's suicide becomes a most eloquent mode of resistance. The fact that Ruan's voice failed to be "synchronized" on screen indicates the subject's rejection of being assimilated and contained by the symbolic order that structures and regulates the visible and audible world.

#### IV. Epilogue: Love at Last Site

In this article, I have argued that the female voice in *Center Stage* is submitted to sound synchronization, which seeks to reconstruct an organic totality of female subjectivity, yet fails to articulate female silence in historical experience. The remakes of Ruan's films evoke a dialectic

interaction between the diachronic historical narrative of the actress and Kwan's synchronic cinematic representation. Ruan's resistant voice, however, is not intelligible, as it is situated in a recessed diegetic position determined by the very ideology of sound editing. The female voice, Silverman argues, is "autobiographical, evoking in a reminiscent fashion a fiction within which the speaker figures centrally as a bodily 'presence'" (Silverman 1988, 51). In the film, this autobiographical nature of Ruan's voice is represented strongly in Cheung's interior monologue in the scene of her suicide in long takes. Impersonating Ruan, Cheung re-articulates Ruan's will, "I am not afraid of death. I am afraid of the slanderous gossip, the slanderous gossip." In the interior monologue, Doane suggests, "the voice, far from being an extension of that body, manifests its inner lining. The voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the 'inner life' of the character." (Doane 1980, 46). In Kwan's *mise-en-scène*, Ruan's desperate outcry in monologue exceeds her fantasmatic image on screen. However, Ruan's voice of resistance is submitted to the destiny of her body, which lies silently amid the mourning wreaths. Her interior monologue ends with her last question for her partner, which he, in sleep, fails to hear, "Jishan, do you love me or not?" (Figure 6) Ruan's last utterance before death brings back her voice to her body as a form of narrative closure, although her last words, possibly like many other details in the film, are imagined by the film director, too. As Ruan's voice is re-engaged into the fictional space, Kwan's film ironically highlights the unintelligibility of her utterance, reflecting the film technician's ultimate inability to retrieve that voice to its original site.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1. The Silent-screen actress Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935).



Figure 2: Scenes from Kwan's remake of *The Goddess* (left) and Ruan's original film (right).



Figure 3: The film *The New Woman/Xin Nuxing* (1934) : In order to obtain more dramatic intensity, the director superimposes the sentence “I want to live!” on the picture, rather than using conventional inter-titles.



Figure 4. In the darkened small theatre, Cai Chusheng (Leung) watches his newly released film *The New Woman* (1934).



Figure 5. The multi-diegetic structure of filming within a film. Tony Leung is sitting beside the bed. Kwan's voice-over, "Jia-hui (Leung), you forgot to raise the blanket and have a look at Maggie."



Figure 6. Her last words: "Jishan, do you love me or not?"

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "cinematic apparatus," from the psychoanalytic perspective, refer to the "totality of independent operations that make up the cinema-viewing situation," including the technical effects produced by film equipments, the theatre, the seating, the illuminated screen, the film itself as a text; as well as the mental machinery of the spectator. (Stam et.al 1992, 145)  
This essay reflects on how the apparatus as a complex interlocking structure entails the spectator

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into the production process of cinematic fiction and redefines the position of the subject. In *Center Stage*, the importance of the apparatus is displayed in its reproduction of a female subject and her voice by creating a compelling sense of reality through sound editing, as well as remakes of Ruan's filmic scenes.

<sup>2</sup> As the film title represents, the New Woman is a cultural figure in the Republic China (1911-1949), which challenges women's prescribed gender roles, and suggests the transformation of Chinese women from backward or bourgeois women to a new form of subjectivity. The image "represents the necessity for the transformation of China into a new nation." (Stevens 2003, 83)