Acting Real in Chinese Silent Cinema

Common scientific knowledge is something that can be understood by all. The people of the Republic of China, however, sorely lack this scientific consciousness. They constantly neglect scientific rationality. . . . This makes us the butt of many a joke. . . . Lately, many already have come to this realization and are taking it upon themselves to impart scientific knowledge to our people. Film is a powerful medium for this endeavor.

— Gu Kenfu, “Introducing Shadowplay Magazine”

We have gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We have found a universal language.

— D. W. Griffith, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me
(Lillian Gish)

In 1876 the Qing Empire sent its first official ambassador to Europe, partly to resolve a current diplomatic dispute with Britain but also to gather knowledge about the ways of Westerners. John Yu Zou recounts how, during the journey, the ambassador, Guo Songtao—already a “seasoned bureaucrat and renowned expert on Western affairs”—took great interest, as recorded in detail in his diary, in the code of etiquette and system of signals followed by two Western ships passing each other on the sea.¹ The Chinese diplomat’s diary entry concluded: “Alas, with such balanced civility and spontaneity were the rituals maintained. China is indeed trailing far behind.”² Zou explores the complexity of the ambassador’s response: from one perspective, the power of the West “loses its strange menace” a bit when it seems to be expressed through the kind of ritualized conventions
at which the Chinese literati had long excelled. Then again, the need for a
detailed explanation showed that these international conventions remained
“beyond the interpretive horizon” of the Chinese, who thereby suffered an “insufficiency of knowledge and lack of immediate linguistic access”
to the relentlessly universalizing codes of the modern West.³

The incident suggests the sorts of difficult contradictions that, for a
slightly later generation of Chinese intellectuals, would lend a particular
type of utopian attraction to the methods of science, the accompanying
notion of “objectivity,” and the technology of film. The imperialist West
appeared to operate by its own set of arbitrary codes—as suggested by the
etiquette of two passing ships—which, if not impenetrable, nonetheless
put the weaker Asian power always in a position of translation, of either
bafflement (“the rituals among these Western men” being a “closed book”
to Guo Songtao)⁴ or, at best, the conscious decoding of what functioned
in the West as a more automatic flow of information. Science, however,
insofar as it aspires to “a set of neutral values and truths in spite of cultural
and historical differences,” offered the promise of a universal language,
which the Chinese need not approach as translators faced with sometimes
indecipherable Western languages but rather as equally “objective” ob-
servers of a common material reality. Science thus figured prominently
in what Zou labels the “transfer of modernity” to China during the late
Qing and early Republican eras.⁵

The semicolonial condition of China lent a particular twist not just to
the status of science but to the exuberant and widespread claims for cinema
as a universal language as its popularity rose rapidly across the world in
the early decades of the twentieth century.⁶ Such a claim to universality
rests on the idea that cinema, like science, bypasses the conventionality
and arbitrariness of cultural codes to establish a direct rapport with real-
ity, a trick accomplished in large part through the ostensible ontological
realism of the photographic image. Siegfried Kracauer, whose *Theory of
Film* argued that cinema offers the “redemption of physical reality,” opti-
mistically concluded that “ideology is disintegrating” under the “steadily
increasing prestige of science,” with film offering the kind of “physical
data” that would ensure future beliefs would be grounded in the real itself.⁷
Much earlier, the Hungarian critic Béla Balázs had similarly declared
that “the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel. The screens of the entire world are now starting to project the *first international language*, the language of gestures and facial expressions.” Balázs thus tied the photographic realism of silent cinema particularly to its capture of nonverbal human expression, which was said to have the ability to communicate much more widely than verbal or written language. Kracauer’s “redemption of physical reality” hence facilitates Balázs’s “redemption from the curse of Babel”; an audience with direct access to a performer’s bodily movements and facial expressions can grasp a silent film’s meaning without needing recourse to the symbolic codes of verbal or written language.

However, it is telling that Balázs himself, in the very same paragraph in which he asserted cinema’s “internationalism,” predicted that it would “help to produce a uniform type of the white race.” This stark turn to the rhetoric of race suggests that cinema may be “more universal for some than for others” and that non-European peoples may only gain access to this universality by in some sense attempting to become more “white,” not least in the details of bodily gesture and facial expression. In other words, this passage from Balázs captures a tension, if not an outright contradiction, between the claim to universal access to material reality through cinema and science, on one hand, and the ongoing relevance of culturally specific, ideologically laden codes, on the other—that is, a tension between realism and convention.

As Balázs’s focus on film actors’ gestures and facial expressions indicates, a key place where the claims for cinema’s objective realism met the ongoing relevance of culturally relative conventions was in the theory and practice of film acting. This was true even during the age of silent film, before spoken language entered the medium to more emphatically assert the cultural specificity of cinematic performance. In this chapter, the example of film performance and discourses about acting allows us to explore the claims for cinema’s ontological realism both in China during the silent film era and in canonical film theory more generally. This exploration leads inevitably to the potentially contradictory evidence of the centrality of convention in film performance, even when the latter is predicated on an assertion of realism. Related questions concern fiction
film’s status as both a variation of and a departure from drama in general: how was film acting conceived in relation to stage acting? In examining the claims for an intrinsic ontological realism of cinema, made by both Western film theorists and their Chinese counterparts, as well as the much broader discourses of realism in Republican China, in this chapter, we will find that the cinematic medium did not so much provoke entirely new ideas about the nature of representation as it rather uniquely embodied new ideologies of mimesis, objectivity, and scientism circulating in Chinese culture at the time. Meanwhile, the rise of a star culture in Shanghai silent cinema offers a case study not just of the claims of film’s realism but also of the phenomenon of reverse mimesis, in which real life mimics cinema, new conventions are propagated through “realist” means, and realism thereby becomes not only verisimilar—reflecting the existing reality—but also prescriptive, pointing the audience toward a desired reality.

**RUAN LINGYU, REALISM, AND THE STAR’S PERFORMANCE**

The silent era of Shanghai cinema is the setting for *Ruan Lingyu* 阮玲玉 (called *Centre Stage* or *The Actress* in English), Stanley Kwan’s 1992 film commemorating the eponymous silent film star’s life and tragic death by suicide. The film’s experimental narrative structure edits together three distinct elements: (1) standard documentary materials, including photographs, film stills, and clips from Ruan’s actual filmography as well as interviews with surviving people who knew her; (2) a straightforward biopic in which the contemporary Hong Kong star Maggie Cheung (张曼玉) plays Ruan Lingyu; and (3) a self-reflexive, “making-of” documentary about the biopic, in which the movie set is visible as such and the actors and filmmakers reflect on Ruan’s life as well as the film they are currently making about it.

Possibly the most gut-wrenching moment of the film occurs in a striking sequence in which Ruan’s corpse lies in state in an open casket at her 1935 funeral. In the sequence, all three levels of the film’s narration are combined. Maggie Cheung, performing as Ruan, is holding her breath to appear corpse-like during the shooting of a scene from the star’s funeral (Figure 1a). After an off-screen Kwan orders “Cut!” Cheung opens her
mouth and breathes deeply—which is precisely when the film cuts to a graphically matched archival photo of the actual corpse of Ruan at her funeral, an image of unbreathing death frozen in time (Figure 1b). The edit provides a shock due to the sudden transition from the living actor Cheung to an uncomfortably similar image of the corpse of the “real” Ruan Lingyu, confronting us with the ultimate, brute reality of death.

The poignancy of the actual photograph of Ruan’s lifeless countenance in this scene relies in part on the ontological realism specific to
photographic media; it strikes us not just as a verisimilar representation of reality but as its uncanny doubling. The frighteningly real image of Ruan’s prone body thus belies in a particularly forceful way the preceding image of Cheung’s mimicry of her. If the film had cut to an artist’s sketch of the scene or a description from a newspaper, for example, those would be just another secondhand representation, but the photographic image of Ruan’s actual cadaver has a presence and finality that provide the jolt of the real itself.

It is worth noting, however, that Ruan’s funeral featured another image that complicates the relationship between the photographic image and the “real” world. The enlarged photo of Ruan used to accompany her actual funeral procession (Figure 2a) was in fact an image from within the fictional world of her film *New Women* (*Xin nüxing* 新女性; Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1935), in which Ruan had played Wei Ming, a female author who becomes a celebrity and then commits suicide after being hounded by the scandal-obsessed tabloid press. The photo of Ruan used at her own funeral had been a prop within that film, appearing as a publicity still of the fictional author she had played. The same photo is hung on the wall of the fictional Wei Ming’s own home and appears in the background in multiple scenes in *New Women* (Figure 2b), including the one in which she overdoses on sleep medicine—the very method by which Ruan Lingyu would take her own life only weeks after the premiere of the film in Shanghai. The photo used at Ruan’s funeral thus suggests a much more complicated relationship between the real and the photographic image. While the publicity photo indubitably records the appearance of Ruan herself at a particular instant during the last year of her life, it nonetheless also serves as a representation of the fictional character Wei Ming, and the circulation of this image between fiction and reality alerts us to the slippery nature of cinematic realism itself. Any film with live-action footage makes use of the uncanny mimesis of life by its photographic trace—and, in the case of a fiction film, puts that ontological realism to work in the service of illusion. And yet fictional cinematic images themselves circulate in real life, so that films not only draw from reality (art imitates life) but affect reality by their own power of suggestion (life imitates art); mimesis goes both ways.
Figure 2. Publicity still of fictional Wei Ming, a, as used at Ruan Lingyu’s funeral and, b, in New Women (1935).
Ruan’s death was imbricated in a complex network of social and cultural phenomena in 1930s Shanghai, including a broad and contentious discussion of the “new woman” in urban semicolonial China and the rise of a modern, scandal-hungry press—issues that have been explored in detail in existing scholarship.13 *New Women* also is among the films marking the transition from silent to sound film in China, and here we will take Ruan the actor as the impetus for a look back on the Chinese silent film era that ended at roughly the same time as her life.14 In fact, her tragic end aside, Ruan now is widely recognized as one of the great performers of global silent cinema. In the first book written in English on Chinese cinema, Jay Leyda asserted that “any one of her films, even one of her worst, will support my opinion that here was one of the great actresses of film history, as perfectly and peculiarly adapted to film as we recognize Greta Garbo to be.”15 As we will see, many of Ruan’s contemporaries, including actors and directors with whom she worked closely, shared the view that Ruan embodied the essence of great cinematic acting. But what exactly does it mean to describe a performance style as being perfectly adapted to the medium of film? What constellation of ideas about art, performance, medium, and modernity led to the standards by which Ruan’s peers in the 1930s—as well as film scholars decades later—evaluated her work so highly? If Ruan represented great cinematic acting, what performance styles were felt not to be appropriate to film, and why? To answer such questions, the claims of the realism of the cinematic image must be understood in the context of a larger consumerist star culture as well as broader social discourses about science and objectivity in the early decades of the Republic of China.

In a discussion of Shanghai film actresses of the 1920s and 1930s, Michael G. Chang notes that both the public and private lives of female movie stars were widely covered in the popular press, and the “phenomenon of the female movie star was a form of discourse consisting not only of written words, but also of a number of new urban practices such as movie-going, reading fan magazines, writing fan letters, circulating and collecting personally autographed photographs, writing movie criticism, ranking of stars in contests, and so on.”16 In Chang’s analysis, the journalistic texts covering the movie stars “were even more ‘realistic’ than films
because they were filled with direct references to ‘real-life’ people and events outside of the movie theater.” The point is valid so far as the distinction between fact and fiction is concerned (although, as the preceding brief discussion of the film New Women shows, the line between the two could become remarkably blurred in some cases). However, from the standpoint of a rather different meaning of “realism”—that of the ontological realism of the moving image—one could argue the opposite: that amid the highly developed star culture of Shanghai during this period, consisting of all the various practices and experiences described by Chang, it is the film performances themselves, viewed by an audience in a movie theater, that constitute a privileged moment of realism within the larger star culture.

This point follows the argument John Ellis has made that “stars are incomplete images outside the cinema: the performance of the film is the moment of completion of images in subsidiary circulation, in newspapers, fanzines, etc.” These other aspects of star culture include everything from slick publicity stills to sensationalist gossip to reports of mundane details of the stars’ lives, setting up the paradox that stars are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary; that is, they have real lives with families, pets, favorite recipes, and the like, yet they also appear larger than life, transcending the ordinary with their fabulous lifestyles, fame, apparent physical perfection, and so on. Ellis further argues that the paradoxical simultaneity of ordinariness and transcendence of the star image echoes the fundamental photo effect of the film medium itself in that cinema provides a contradictory “present-absence,” in which the star appears right before our eyes, but “in the impossible mode of ‘this is was,’” being both near and remote, both present and absent, provoking our desire yet remaining beyond reach.

The film performance also is a unique moment within the larger movie star phenomenon for other reasons. One is its relative rarity, because a star appears in at most a handful of films per year, whereas what Ellis calls the other “subsidiary” forms of circulation of the star image and persona are ubiquitous in the media. More important, however, the film performance provides an exclusive opportunity for spectatorial voyeurism that only the film medium can provide:
Introduced here is a whole new dimension of the star: not just the star-in-movement, but also the incidental aspects of that movement. The star’s performance in a film reveals to the viewer all those small gestures, particular aspects of movement and expression, unexpected similarities to acquaintances or even to self.\textsuperscript{21}

The film-viewing experience gives the audience the opportunity to examine meticulously even the seemingly unconscious aspects of the star’s performance, incidental details of gesture and expression, giving the impression that the star is being caught unaware, revealing glimpses of a real personality, a real \textit{being}, beyond either the fictional character or the constructed and commodified star image.

This quality of the star performance in film results from the fact that, as Gilberto Perez has pointed out, even a fiction film provides a “documentary image,” insofar as the reels of film record actual performances that happened in the past—as Jean-Luc Godard reportedly once said, “every film is a documentary of its actors.”\textsuperscript{22} Because actors are also real human beings, there is always at least the possibility that the actor’s “own material reality begins to assert itself outside the boundaries that are supposed to be set by his [or her] role.”\textsuperscript{23} Within star culture, it is this raw material reality of the actor as a physical being that becomes most available to us in the film performance, in which even the unintended aspects of the actor’s mannerisms are displayed for our observation.

Put another way, star culture here exploits the capacity of film that Walter Benjamin dubbed the “optical unconscious”—the “scientific” function of the film image, particularly through techniques like the close-up and slow motion, that allows the viewer to register aspects of reality that might otherwise have escaped conscious notice.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, in the movie theater, the star is simultaneously a transcendent being and object of desire as well as a specimen available for our repeated inspection. Far from having the effect of demystifying the star, the uncanny reality of her physical being revealed in the filmed performance only adds to the fascination the actor holds for the spectator. Thus Perez counters Benjamin’s assertion of the loss of art’s “aura” in photography and film due to the mass reproducibility of those media, asserting that “a photographic image has its own kind of aura—the aura of a remnant, of a relic—stemming from the uniqueness,
the original particularity, not of the picture but of the referent whose emanation it captures.²⁵ Miriam Hansen also has qualified Benjamin’s assertion of the lost “aura” in film precisely by reference to his concept of the “optical unconscious,” which offers at least the possibility of an “auratic mode of experience” even for the mass film spectator.²⁶

Returning to the privileged position of the film performance within the broader star culture as asserted by Ellis, it is clear that the power of the film image, and the apparently even unconscious aspects of the star’s being that it reveals, result from what André Bazin and others have theorized as the ontological realism intrinsic to the photographic medium. As the introduction explained, for Bazin, a photographed image has a heightened realism because it not only resembles its referent in the real world in the manner of a painting but also has an intimate existential physical relation to its object in the “indexical” manner of, say, a footprint to a foot or smoke to a fire. Thus Bazin asserts that “the existence of the photographed object . . . shares in the existence of the model, like a fingerprint.”²⁷ It is this property of photography that makes the fiction film as star vehicle able to make us feel the uncanny presence of the movie star despite her actual absence from the room in which we view her. She is not actually there, yet we gaze at her with fascination nonetheless.

To explore further the thesis that the film performance grants the audience unique access, via film’s ontological realism, to the physical being of an actor whose star persona had already been established by previous films in addition to all the “subsidiary” phenomena of film culture, such as fan magazines, let us examine a brief scene in one of Ruan Lingyu’s latest, and greatest, films—The Goddess (Shennü 神女; Wu Yonggang 吴永刚, 1934). In that film, Ruan plays a single mother who is forced to work as a prostitute as the only means of raising her son and providing him with an education.²⁸ In the scene in question, which comes early in the film, Ruan’s character (who is never named, though the title Goddess came from a Shanghainese slang term for “prostitute”) ducks into a random doorway while trying to flee a policeman, only to find that the room is occupied by a burly local thug whom she had seen in an altercation on the street earlier. This small-time gambler (who will later become her pimp, phony “husband,” and abuser) vouches for her to get the police off her
back but then demands that she spend the night with him as payment for the favor. What follows are two memorable shots that show the reaction of the “goddess” while also powerfully showcasing Ruan’s acting ability and serving well to illustrate Ellis’s arguments regarding the film performance of the star. In the first shot, at medium range, Ruan ruminates on the thug’s proposition, showing through her expressions a series of apparent thoughts and emotions—first calculation over whether there is any way out of the situation, then sadness at the realization that there is not, and finally resignation to her fate for the evening. The shot that follows is a long shot showing much of the room, in which Ruan walks slowly by the gangster, sits on the edge of a table, asks the man for a cigarette, and then takes a deep puff before the shot fades (thus eliding the blackmailed sex that assuredly soon follows).

One thing this shot illustrates is the tendency identified by Ellis for certain moments in a star’s film performance to exceed the fictional narrative and tend toward a “point where the fiction is suspended in favour of the pure performance: the ‘fetishistic’ moment.” Here Ellis undoubtedly is recalling Laura Mulvey’s arguments about the tendency of classical Hollywood films to provide moments in which the narrative becomes secondary as the female body is displayed for the male gaze to enjoy as a fetish—in contrast to the voyeuristic male gaze, which sadistically watches the female character go through a series of ordeals that effectively punish her for the threat presented by her sexuality. Whereas the latter, voyeuristic moment is essentially tied to the fictional narrative, the former, fetishistic image detaches itself, however briefly, to indulge the spectator in the enjoyment of the actress just as a spectacle. In fact, both conceptions are relevant to The Goddess, insofar as the narrative is a maternal melodrama in which the protagonist prostitute is punished through a series of increasingly harsh traumas that end with her locked in a jail cell and forever separated from the son who provides the only real meaning in her life. In the scene in question, though, the narrative gives way momentarily to the fetishistic display of Ruan in the role of the sexualized “modern woman” (modeng nüxing 摩登女性 in the Chinese parlance of the time).

Despite Ellis’s implicit reference to Mulvey, this kind of “fetishistic”
moment is not limited to female star performances, and the gaze involved is not necessarily a masculine one. Instead, we might interpret this sort of moment in *The Goddess* more broadly as an instance in which predominantly narrative cinema gives ground briefly to the “cinema of attractions,” the kind of voyeuristic, nonnarrative display that Tom Gunning theorized as the key aesthetic of early cinema and one that survives in later narrative cinema, but in an “underground” form—coming to the fore, for example, in the song-and-dance numbers in Hollywood musicals. Miriam Hansen adds to this category—the residual manifestations of a cinema of attractions in later feature filmmaking—precisely “the erotic appeal of particular stars.” In other words, the fetishistic moments identified by Ellis, in which the star’s performance seems to appeal to the audience beyond even the narrative motivations of the fictional story, are often the moments in which the star’s physical attractiveness is put on display in a way that directly engages the spectator’s desire rather than being contained within the diegetic world. The spectator may temporarily enjoy the “attraction” as such without regard to its function in the ongoing story.

This shot in *The Goddess*, in fact, almost works against the ostensible requirements of the narrative. In the film as a whole, the audience is generally cued to see Ruan’s character as a maternal martyr sacrificed on the altar of society’s hypocrisy. She has a properly Confucian devotion to her only son, which is clearly her sole reason for prostituting herself, having no other way to provide for him. The thug who comes to dominate her, in contrast, is depicted as a complete villain, never provoking the slightest audience sympathy, and in general the film’s narrative provides very little in the way of titillating enjoyment of the protagonist’s status as a sex worker. In this scene, however, after the protagonist has agreed to spend the night with this stranger, she seems to subtly change her character—sauntering slowly across the room, displaying her legs to the audience through the slit in her *cheongsam* dress as she sits down, asking for and then smoking a cigarette with the weary air of a woman who has seen it all (Figure 3a). In short, if only for the length of this shot, she appears more in the character of a sex worker than a mother, countering the vulnerability of her position with an attitude of toughness and self-assured sexuality—even briefly living up to Ruan’s tag as the “Chinese Garbo.” The shot
makes a display of Ruan Lingyu herself, the accomplished actor who nonetheless is also a commodity in the emerging urban consumer culture. In such a moment, the audience might briefly pause to enjoy every aspect of the star’s performance—her gait, her gestures, her peculiar mixture

Figure 3. a, Ruan Lingyu and, b, Maggie Cheung playing the same scene in The Goddess (1934) and Centre Stage (1992).
of weary sadness with erotic appeal—in a manner that goes beyond the requirements of the fictional narrative and the character she plays in it.35

Here a comparison of *The Goddess* with Stanley Kwan’s 1992 biopic of Ruan Lingyu’s life offers an interesting test of the thesis that the film performance provides a unique opportunity to experience the singular aura of a star through her actual movement captured in time, while also forcing us to reckon with the complications of labeling a performance style as realist or naturalist as opposed to being in some way theatrical or conventionalized—a central concern of this chapter. As mentioned earlier, in *Centre Stage*, Ruan is played by Maggie Cheung, who also comments, as herself, in the self-reflexive documentary portions of the film. Cheung herself is quite an accomplished film actor—arguably one of the best in the world of her generation—her fame and acting skill simultaneously making her a strong candidate for capturing something of Ruan’s “aura” and also possibly distracting the audience with her own.

One shot in *Centre Stage* mimics the previously mentioned shot in *The Goddess* in which the heroine walks across the floor, sits down, and lights the cigarette proffered by the man who has trapped her (Figure 3b). *Centre Stage* does not attempt a total re-creation of the original shot, depicting rather the *shooting* of the original shot; it is in color and has sound, unlike the silent *The Goddess*, for example. However, it is clear that Kwan tried to get every element right in the set, costumes, and so on and, more important, that Cheung tried to capture all the details of Ruan’s performance: her look of resignation, the gait of her walk across the floor, the subtle toughness of her attitude, her exact body language in swaying her head and upper body back while taking the first drag on her cigarette. Kwan encourages a comparison of the remade scene with the original by editing in the original scene’s footage in close proximity to Cheung’s reenactment. The two performances inevitably vary in a number of small details—differences in the two women’s build, features, and body language as well as small discrepancies in action (Cheung, for example, slightly overplays the bodily tilting back during the puff on the cigarette). Most fundamentally, however, the problem is precisely that all the details of movement and gesture that had appeared more or less unconscious in the original performance are here imitated in such a conscious manner
as to call into question the apparent naturalness of the performance. The self-conscious mimicry of a performer celebrated for the realism of her acting inevitably results in a performance that now looks conventionalized due to its second-order nature. Even more, the reenactment calls our attention to the theatricality of the original performance, which may have seemed entirely “real” or “natural” on its own; the juxtaposition of two great actors forces the audience to realize that even the most realist acting is staged.

**FILM VERSUS STAGE PERFORMANCE**

Indeed, this example draws our attention to the distinction—and yet close relationship—between the ostensibly intrinsic realism of the film medium and the issue of acting styles or methods, which may present themselves as more or less realist in their aesthetic. As the history of early cinema in China shows, the medium itself appeared to dictate, over the course of the 1910s–30s, major changes in the art of acting in the view of the contemporary actors and filmmakers themselves. Discussions of acting became means of differentiating cinema from the other arts, in particular various forms of stage drama, as well as placing film in a privileged modern position within the dramatic arts in general.

These issues are evident in what has been called the first work of Chinese film theory, the April 1921 introduction to the inaugural issue of *The Motion Picture Review*, or literally “Shadowplay Magazine” (*Yingxi zazhi 影戏杂志*). The Chinese word for film used here—*yingxi 影戏* or “shadowplay”—alerts us to the fact that the “prehistory” of cinema varies across cultures owing to different preexisting dramatic forms and optical entertainments (including, in China, shadow puppetry), and the intermedial relationships that result will vary accordingly. The word shadowplay was a shortening of two earlier terms for cinema—*Western shadowplay* (*xiyang yingxi 西洋影戏*) and *electric shadowplay* (*dianguang yingxi 电光影戏*)—and film commentators in China tended to see film both as an extension of existing dramatic forms and as a significant departure from them. In fact, as in the West, early Chinese film theory often revolved around the question of just how film distinguished itself from theater,
and arguments for cinema’s medium specificity served to justify both its artistic value and its wider social function.

The introduction to Shadowplay Magazine (I use the more literal translation of the journal title to underscore the connotations of the original)—written by chief editor Gu Kenfu 顾肯夫, a drama actor who would soon go into film production—describes the “raw materials” of cinema as being of three types: technique, literature, and science. Under the rubric of technique, Gu emphasizes performance style, and although in some passages, he treats cinema as simply another form of drama, after a discussion of how the dominant trend in “world drama” is the “realist school” (xieshipai 写实派), with its emphasis on being “true-to-life” (bizhen 逼真), he asserts that film is the dramatic art most capable of such verisimilitude.36 Traditional dramatic forms like Beijing (Peking) opera (jingju 京剧) are said to be particularly deficient in this regard, especially in comparison to cinema. Gu describes Beijing opera as “stylized” or “patternized” (tu’anshi de 图案式的) and film in contrast as “lifelike” (xieshengshi de 写生式的), without any “exaggerated expression.”37

Gu illustrates the problem of China’s tradition of exaggerated or overly stylized performance through the specific example of the Beijing opera The Drunken Concubine (Guifei zuijiu 贵妃醉酒), in which the main character acts out intoxication in an acrobatic manner, striking the pose known as the “reclining fish” (woyu 卧鱼). Gu complains that, “ever since the beginning of human life on earth, no matter whom you ask in all the nations of the world,” in real life, one will never find anyone who behaves drunkenly in this particular manner.38 This global consciousness is of course particularly significant in the context of the aspirations of Balázs, mentioned earlier, for cinema to help achieve an “international language . . . of gestures and facial expressions.”39 Gu, too, aspires to a universality of body language that would allow no place for the symbolic poses that even the Beijing opera performer “only half understands.”40 He goes on to list several other standardized opera conventions that he also views as irredeemably unrealistic—indeed, as nothing less than “jokes.”41

At least in the context of a rapidly globalizing urban modernity, it is no doubt true that the reclining fish pose did not appear to represent drunkenness as mimetically as, say, the slapstick performance of Harold
Lloyd (whose face had graced the cover of that first issue of Shadowplay Magazine in 1921) as a drunk man in High and Dizzy (Hal Roach, 1920). The relatively conventionalized and stylized nature of Beijing opera may be seen from the fact that one can look up the “reclining fish” pose in a recent encyclopedia of traditional Chinese drama with more than 650 pages of specialized opera terms. The entry describes and illustrates the pose and explicitly mentions The Drunken Concubine as one of the standard repertoire performances in which it is featured.

As the entries in such comprehensive dictionaries make clear, traditional Chinese opera performance tends toward *semiosis*, or the indication of symbolic meaning by convention, rather than *mimesis*, or lifelike verisimilar performance. The performers’ poses, actions, makeup, and costumes follow codified sign systems shared by performers and spectators, and while the world depicted is of course in some sense still mimetically related to human reality, it is a highly stylized version of that reality, with narrative events that demand semiotic reading from a culturally literate audience. Silent cinema, on the other hand, had aspirations to universal intelligibility, and the mimetic directness of, say, Harold Lloyd’s slapstick comedy or D. W. Griffith’s melodramatic rescue sequences indeed seemed to allow engaged viewership from people of vastly different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of course, as I use them here, *semiosis* and *mimesis* are relative and inescapably intertwined terms; just as traditional Chinese opera has mimetic elements, cinema always engages any number of social, cultural, technical, and artistic conventions. Still, a film shot of an actual mountain, for example, is more immediately and universally recognizable as such than is a chair on a Beijing opera stage that is being used to represent a mountain. Or, as Peter Wollen put it in his classic discussion of the “semiology of the cinema,” symbolic rhetoric “may still hold good in the Chinese theatre where a complicated code is used to express, say, weeping,” but in the kind of realist performance preferred in cinema, “to show one is weeping, one must weep.”

Gu Kenfu’s similar point regarding naturalistic rather than conventionalized acting was in keeping with his overall goal of enlightening his readers about the ostensibly world-dominant “realist school” and the utmost importance of verisimilitude. Such a concern would be reiterated...
by a variety of Chinese filmmakers, actors, and critics throughout the 1920s who felt that cinema called for a drastic change in performance style. Exaggerated acting had to be replaced by subtle performance, stylized gestures had to give way to realistic body language and facial expressions, and the practice of having men play women’s roles had to be put to an end. This latter point was emphasized by many critics in the 1920s, because Chinese-made films in the 1910s had followed the traditional convention in Chinese drama of separating the gender of a character from that of the performer. In fact, films from that period had largely still followed the Qing dynasty ban on female actors, even though by this point the regime had fallen and the ban had been officially lifted. Thus the films of the 1910s had featured all-male casts playing both male and female roles. However, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of filmed performances of traditional Chinese operas, most of the film actors of the time were drawn from the burgeoning New Drama (xinju 新剧) theater movement that had been influenced by the Japanese shingeki (the same characters as the Chinese term), a self-avowedly “modern” form of drama inspired by Western theater. It was thought that New Drama performers had a more realistic performance style than actors in traditional Chinese drama and thus were more suited to the new medium of film.

By the 1920s, further developments in acting practices were motivated by the medium’s perceived demand for realism. First, women’s roles began to be played by female actors, partly because it was believed that film made male actors look ridiculous in female roles. This change was explicitly connected to the realism that was viewed as required by the new medium. For example, as a 1927 argument in Women’s Journal (Funü zazhi 妇女杂志) put it,

because movies have no sound and words that might assist in expression, everything depends on movements and gestures. The performance is completely real and is completely intolerant of disguise. Thus, women must be sought out to play the female roles that must be included in movies.

Second, even New Drama actors fell out of fashion in film roles, in favor of actors in the even more “modern” movement of “spoken drama”
(huaju 话剧), which was supposed to be the equivalent of vernacular plays in the modern West. That is, spoken drama actors now appeared to be more “realistic” than New Drama ones, just as the latter had appeared more realistic than Chinese opera performers and thus more suited to cinema.48

These developments were tied in particular to cinema’s variable shot distance, and especially to the spread of the close-up to Chinese filmmaking in the 1920s. In a 1925 essay, pioneering Chinese filmmaker Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋 argued that actors needed to adjust to such differences if they wished to make the leap from New Drama acting to film acting. Drama, he asserted, “is made for exaggeration rather than subtle performance” because of the relatively distant stage in a theater that is often crowded, noisy, and filled with distractions.49 In film, however, “the situation is completely different”; whereas drama actors remain on the stage at a more or less set distance from the audience, in film, “the camera can move and magnify in close-up with ease.” Even “extreme long shots that resemble stage distance” are different because of the magnification of scale in screen projection. Thus, whereas stage actors must move about in an exaggerated manner, “it is inappropriate to overact on screen, as everything is big and close,” an injunction that applies even to “extremely subtle expressions such as frowning eyebrows or a smiling face,” not to mention to bodily movements. “Hence,” Zheng concludes, “film and stage drama are completely different things.”

In the same year, New Drama turned film actor Feng Xizui 凤昔醉 also emphasized the difference in the type of performance required by the two media, outlining the “interior performance” (neixin biaoyan 内心表演) called for by cinema. In this type of performance, actors must first feel the emotions of their characters, whereupon this interior feeling will be communicated to the spectator through facial expressions.50 In another 1925 essay with the same title, “On Interior Performance,” actor/director Wan Laitian 万籁天 confirmed that “the film actor’s eyes are equivalent to the stage actor’s mouth.”51 The idea of interior acting and the importance of the eyes in communicating feelings again were related to the closer proximity afforded by variable camera distance and to the broader rhetoric of the increased need for realism in modern acting. A
decade later, in a 1935 article drawing on Soviet filmmaker and theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin, the actor and later director Zheng Junli 郑君里 (who had costarred with Ruan Lingyu in her final two films) argued that on stage, exaggerated acting inevitably will turn into a sort of “schematism” (tushizhuyi 图式主义) and that stage acting could not resolve “the contradiction between the rich content of real life and the cramped spatial and temporal capacities of the stage,” whereas film, with the help of such techniques as the close-up and editing, could solve this problem and thus genuinely capture reality.\(^{52}\)

Film techniques like editing and variable shot distances already had reshaped cinema as a dramatic form in China by the end of the 1920s. In fact, the transition from stage to film acting is readily evident even in films based on traditional drama. In the classic play Romance of the Western Chamber (Xixiangji 西廂記), for example, there is a key scene in which the young scholar Zhang Sheng meets the beauty Cui Yingying on the grounds of a Buddhist temple. In the original Yuan dynasty play, the chance encounter is rhapsodized through lengthy and redundant prose descriptions and verses about Yingying’s beauty and the effect she has on Zhang Sheng.\(^{53}\) In a stage performance, this meeting would be represented through stylized bodily gestures in addition to the sung verses. In Hou Yao’s 侯曜 1927 film adaptation, in contrast, one finds neither singing (the film is of course silent, though live singing accompaniment could conceivably have been added during exhibition) nor dramatic gestures or poses from opera; instead, there is a series of shots that largely follow the conventions of classical Hollywood. Zhang Sheng’s initial interest in Yingying is clearly signaled by medium shots of his enamored gaze (Figure 4a). His attention is noted by the monk who is guiding him on his tour of the temple, with close shots of the monk’s face pivoting sideways to trace the line of sight from Zhang Sheng to Yingying.\(^{54}\) Finally, Yingying, who initially had responded to Zhang Sheng’s attention with the appropriately modest gesture of averting her gaze and covering her face, just before leaving the area through a gate, turns around to throw a flirtatious glance back to Zhang Sheng (Figure 4b). This final quick glance is accentuated by the scene’s only close-up, reinforcing for the viewer Yingying’s reciprocation of amorous interest by employing the capacity of cinema to make a brief,
Figure 4. a, Zhang Sheng shows his interest in medium shot and, b, Yingying reciprocates in close-up in Romance of the Western Chamber (1927).
subtly expressive performance the bearer of crucial narrative information by means of closer shot distance.

In tracing the particular powers of film to the close-up and noting the different style of acting the medium thus called for, Chinese critics and filmmakers articulated an incipient Chinese film theory that was not far from that of many of their contemporaries in the West. Balázs, for example, declared that “close-ups are film’s true terrain” through which film is uniquely able to create “the microdrama of the moment.” Benjamin, too, as already mentioned, identified the close-up as one of the means through which photography and film reveal the “optical unconscious” and fulfill the “scientific” function of the photographic image. In China, as in the West, the close-up was a privileged emblem of cinema’s medium specificity, an example of how its art was—or could be, even should be—fundamentally its own, rather than an imitation or extension of stage drama or any other art form. The specific implications of the close-up for acting for these Chinese commentators also resembled the conclusions of their Western counterparts. In their emphasis on the importance of the eyes and facial expressions for film acting, enabled by the use of the close-up, Zheng Zhengqiu, Feng Xizui, Wan Laitian, and Zheng Junli again appear in sync with Balázs and particularly his rhapsodic celebration of “the play of facial expressions” allowed by film in contrast to theater.

Theoretical and critical speculation aside, an actual transition to a new acting style to suit the medium of film already had occurred relatively early in Western cinema. By the late nineteenth century, European stage drama itself had developed a more naturalistic mode of acting to supplant a more broadly stylized or “idealized” classical method, and, as Johannes Riis has argued, from the silent to the early sound eras, European cinema tended increasingly toward an even newer naturalism in acting. Roberta Pearson similarly has traced how the performance style in the early Biograph films of D. W. Griffith shifted over five years or so beginning in 1908, transforming from a “histrionic” style with roots in nineteenth-century stage melodrama to a more subtle and film-specific “verisimilar” style. Griffith’s unprecedented reliance on closer shots accompanied the shift in performance styles. The director himself denigrated stage performance and advocated “real acting” and the use of close shots to capture the
emotional states of performers, whom he believed felt the emotions they were acting and externalized them through their faces and bodies (or roughly what the Chinese critics in the 1920s called “interior performance”).

This movement toward a more realist style of acting to suit the new medium, in China as in the West (and no doubt heavily influenced by the latter), provided the framework through which Ruan Lingyu was judged to be a model of naturalistic performance. According to Zheng Junli, for example, “the characters created by Ruan Lingyu in her films nearly all had a high degree of authenticity and persuasiveness. Each character seemed like an authentic person in reality.”

Like Griffith’s muse Lillian Gish, of whom Balázs celebrated the “crazy rapidity” with which emotions played across her face, Ruan seemed to have the uncanny ability to communicate contradictory emotions almost simultaneously. Indeed, apparently utilizing what Balázs called “the microphysiognomy of the camera close-up,” allowing us to see “the face beneath the play of expressions,” Ruan was skilled at conveying both a seemingly feigned surface emotion and an apparently genuine underlying one—most often taking the form of an inner sorrow to which the audience could bear witness even as the other diegetic characters were fooled by a forced smile. The Goddess director Wu Yonggang praised Ruan’s “astonishing natural gift for acting. Ruan Lingyu was like a highly sensitive piece of ‘fast’ film: whatever you required, you just had to explain it to her and she would immediately produce it in her performance—in the proper manner, and with great precision.”

Later film scholars have echoed these high assessments. Katherine Hui-ling Chou describes Ruan as being ahead of her time in developing a naturalistic style that approximated Stanislavskian method acting, even though the latter was unknown in China until the late 1930s and did not predominate until much later. Ruan Lingyu nonetheless was not just an exceptional example of acting skill but more important, in the context of the present discussion, represents the epitome of a broader valuation of verisimilitude in acting that began many years earlier and would continue as part of an overall prioritization of realism.
REALISM ACROSS MEDIA

We have seen how filmmakers and critics in China, no less than many of their Western counterparts from Griffith to Balázs, laid claim to a distinctively cinematic realism that formed the basis of film art and called for a naturalistic or verisimilar performance style that made stage acting inappropriate for cinema. Such arguments are crucial for understanding not just the nature of cinema as perceived by early twentieth-century practitioners and thinkers but also the self-positioning of those same figures as they attempted to establish the cultural capital of film, and by extension themselves, within the social, cultural, and artistic arenas of the time. In particular, their claims must be understood in the context of a much broader discourse on realism in China that began in the late nineteenth century, intensified during the New Culture Movement from 1915 into the 1920s, and became increasingly politicized by the 1930s. Indeed, assertions of a uniquely realist aesthetic for the cinema only gained their effectiveness in the context of a cultural ecology in which virtually all the arts in China were scrambling to reestablish themselves on a new foundation of realism that was largely imported from abroad. In this sense, the realism of film, like that of all the arts, rests not just on medium-specific technologies like the camera and techniques like the close-up but also on a response to the aggressively imposed modernity of semicolonial capitalism and the epistemic violence that went along with it, sweeping away other modes of thought, art, and culture and imbuing Chinese artists and intellectuals with both an inferiority complex and a determination to catch up with the West and Japan—culturally and artistically as well as politically, economically, and militarily—as a precondition for national survival. The favoring of modern realism over the stylization of traditional Chinese operatic forms is hardly surprising given the “demand for authenticity that burdened modernity,” so that the modern age perceived itself as intrinsically antitheatrical, in contrast to other periods (such as the Renaissance and postmodernity) that are more self-consciously theatrical. Indeed, under high modernity, “not even the theater itself was theatrical.”
In the field of modern Chinese literary studies, the importance of realism is unquestioned, or rather, it is so widely assumed that alternatives to it are studied precisely as that—essentially as pockets of resistance to the realist hegemony.\textsuperscript{70} Going back to reformers such as Liang Qichao 梁啓超 before the fall of the Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals had been calling on a representationally realistic and linguistically vernacular fiction to aid in the project of building a modern nation. Such efforts had a foundation in China’s own late imperial vernacular classics (indeed, \textit{Jin Ping Mei} 金瓶梅 may well be among the world’s first realist novels),\textsuperscript{71} but by the early twentieth century the desired modern style of realism was viewed equally as a necessary import from the West, particularly during the May Fourth Movement and its calls for literary reform and revolution in the pages of the magazine \textit{New Youth} （新青年） beginning in 1915.\textsuperscript{72} Later, China’s variant of socialist realism would be ensconced by the Communist Party as the officially sanctioned form of literature (and film)—see chapters 4 and 5) in the Mao era.

In painting as well, the late Qing and Republican periods saw a wave of experimentation and a struggle to define a new, cosmopolitan mode of realism that, for leading figures such as artist and curator Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 in the 1920s, had to replace the outdated aesthetics of China’s indigenous artistic traditions. The modern approach of realism (\textit{xiéshi} 写实) was explicitly contrasted with the traditional value of expressionism (\textit{xiéyì} 写意) (see the introduction). As Eugene Wang explains, in Chinese literati ink painting, forms are “evoked rather than depicted,” and a few highly expressive brushstrokes capable of capturing the artist’s subjective experience of the spirit of the object are valued over representational detail or a verisimilitude that provides the illusion of the object’s actual presence.\textsuperscript{73} By the May Fourth era, in contrast, there was, as David Der-wei Wang describes, increasingly a “shared notion among contemporary Chinese literati and artists that the foundation of artistic merit would necessarily be the authentic representation of the Real.”\textsuperscript{74} The effort to establish Western-style mimetic realism as the new artistic style for a modern China would proceed, in the 1920s and over the next several decades, in various ways, in tension with the countervailing desire to
assert a Chinese cultural identity through a distinctively Chinese expressionist style. Even Xu Beihong himself, the leading advocate of realist painting in the 1920s, would return to a more expressionist style later in his career, not least because Chinese “sketch conceptualism” offered a veritable branding of Chinese artists in Europe, with intriguing overlaps with Western aesthetic modernism. At home as well, the conventions of traditional art forms would often find a wider audience owing to their familiarity among the masses, for whom Western realism could at first be an alien experience. In fact, as David Der-wei Wang emphasizes, realism itself could amount to a kind of formalism, insofar as it demanded rigid adherence to the conventions of mimetic illusionism.

Finally, and perhaps most important in relation to film, the successive waves of reforms even in Chinese stage drama belied any notion that cinema was unique in its concern for realism, even if filmmakers with roots in theater insisted on the radical difference of film acting from stage performance. As mentioned earlier, in the early twentieth century, new dramatic forms based on Western influences were introduced—first the New Drama, also called “civilized play” (wenmingxi 文明戏), from which much Chinese cinema of the 1910s was derived, and then the even more “modern” (i.e., Westernized) “spoken drama” that became a respected literary form and also an increasing influence on film in the 1920s, as we have seen. In 1918, New Youth devoted an entire issue to drama reform. As was the case with much Chinese literature and painting of the same period, the new dramatic forms sought to adopt a Western-style realism and thereby set themselves apart from the various “traditional” Chinese operatic forms. In an illustration of how compulsory the aesthetic of realism had become in Republican China, even Beijing opera underwent a major reform movement just as it was being elevated to the status of a national form; the great actor and cultural ambassador Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 may have inspired Bertolt Brecht with the stylization and ostensible alienation effect of traditional Chinese drama, but the same actor met, praised, and absorbed the lessons of none other than the pioneering naturalistic actor and director Constantin Stanislavski in the Soviet Union. Under the influence of the drama reformer Qi Rushan 齊如山, Mei put
increased emphasis on facial expressions in his opera acting, and Mei and Qi subscribed to the notion that only when actors lose themselves in their characters can those characters be fully realized.  

All this would suggest that even a “traditional” dramatic form like Beijing opera was reforming to reflect the priorities of modern realism, such as visual mimesis and interior performance. However, it would be more accurate to say that the distinction between modern realism and traditional formalism was itself a product of modernity. Indigenous Chinese drama did in fact posit a correspondence between the fiction of the theater and the truth of life, and some of the modern realists’ claims for a radical rupture with traditional theater aesthetics appear to be overstated. The seventeenth-century theater impresario Li Yu 李渔, for example, had emphasized that an aria must be sung not just with the mouth but with the heart and that it should be reflected in facial expressions and bodily movements.  

Indeed, the notion that performers should feel the emotions of their characters and then convey them through facial expressions was by no means foreign to premodern Chinese drama aesthetics. According to Qing dynasty scholar Ji Yun 纪昀, an actor in 1747 once explained, “When I impersonate a female on the stage, I not only try to look like a female in my physical appearance; I also try to feel like a female in the depth of my heart. . . . I always put myself in the shoes of my characters, completely identifying with their emotions: happiness, anger, sorrow, or joy as well as kindness, resentment, love, or hate.” It is true that this actor was claiming to be the exception rather than the rule—“the reason I am the best on the stage is because I am different from the other female impersonators, who may look and move like their female characters but do not feel like them”—but his remark nonetheless suggests that interior performance was not a concept completely alien to traditional Chinese drama. What was new in the early twentieth century was an idea of mimesis that emphasized not so much the subjective state of the performer in capturing the emotional meaning of the character as the connection of such a performance to the ideology and technologies of modernity, including cinema, with its apparent ability to serve as a medium for accurately conveying the affect of the performance in all its detail.
REALISM AND SCIENTISM

Here the fascination with cinema, including the attempt to elevate cinema over previous dramatic forms, is closely tied to the overwhelming concern for *science* among Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Recall that in 1921, Gu Kenfu called science one of the three bases of film (the other two being literature and technique). His emphasis on science is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the contemporaneous May Fourth Movement, in which students, artists, and intellectuals called for the introduction of “Mr. Science” (along with “Mr. Democracy”) into China. Here science represented not just a set of theories or laboratory procedures but a whole new way of being in the world, a mode of existence in which the arbitrary biases of ancient opinions would be dropped in favor of an “objective” view of reality.83 Thus, according to Shu-mei Shih, science “was not so much a system of knowledge for the study of physics, biology, or technology, as an ideology promising a new theory and praxis of culture.”84 Extending beyond the hard sciences to “the studies of society, politics, ethics, and morality” as well as “humanistic studies such as literary, historical, and philosophical research,” science became “a *cultural ideology* necessary for the enlightenment of the mind, while a broad understanding of the experimental method as a daringness to rebel against the old and to try something new was applied to all realms of cultural practice and discourse.”85

Indeed, as Wang Hui 汪晖 has analyzed in detail, a comprehensive “scientism” (*weikexuezhuyi* 唯科学主义) pervaded the thought of the intellectuals and artists who were most crucial to the May Fourth and New Culture Movements that dominated the Chinese arts and humanities of the late 1910s to early 1920s and had repercussions for decades beyond.86 For these thinkers, science was an overall “spirit of the age” that China must learn to catch up with the West, and its principles had to be applied to virtually all aspects of life. For example, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, the editor of *New Youth* and later a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party, believed that science held the key to understanding the material basis of all life. In an early *New Youth* essay on education reform, Chen used the
term *xianshizhuyi* 现实主义—which would become the accepted translation of *realism* for generations of artists—to describe the overall spirit of the age under the sway of scientific objectivity. This spirit, according to Chen, would manifest in every realm of human thought and activity under different guises—in philosophy as empiricism and materialism, in morality as utilitarianism, in religion as atheism, and so on. In the realm of literature and the fine arts, it would be expressed as mimetic *realism* (*xieshizhuyi* 写实主义, or “inscribing the real”) or as *naturalism* (*ziranzhuyi* 自然主义). In each case, one puts one’s faith only in the empirically observable material world: “within the real world [*xianshi shijie* 现实世界] there is merit; outside the real world there is no hope.” Human individuals are transient, but the material world of which they are part is an ever-evolving reality. As Wang Hui put it, “Chen Duxiu thus came to believe that the signal feature of science was the search for the pure objective causality underlying reality and completely negating the subjective role of human beings.” Such an ideal of objectivity, in turn, called for a new mode of subjectivity whereby objective reality would determine human thought and behavior, and recognition of scientific truth would remold the human subject and allow human society to progress rationally. This presented a challenge to any aesthetic philosophies that emphasized artistic truth as a subjective, perhaps even emotional experience—as seen, for instance, in the premodern aesthetics of expressionism (*xieyi* 写意), authenticity (*zhen* 真), or passion (*qing* 情). In a 1921 lecture titled “The Scientific View of Life,” activist/intellectual Yang Quan 陽泉 cautioned that aesthetic philosophies ranging from those of traditional China to that of Victorian poet Matthew Arnold tended to be based on emotion, whereas the scientific worldview was based on objectivity. In this context, then, *realism* became the aesthetic ideology that would bridge the gap between modern scientism, on one hand, and literature and the arts, on the other, inoculating the latter against the potential irrationality and emotionalism to which they had been prone and setting them firmly within the broader parameters of the realist worldview of science itself.

It is thus no surprise that Gu Kenfu, in his essay introducing *Shadow-play Magazine* (which appeared in the same year as Yang Quan’s lecture on “The Scientific View of Life”), attempted to link cinema closely with
science. His views on the superior verisimilitude of film as compared to other modes of drama were implicitly tied to the ability of photography to directly capture the real world. He notes that theater, “when it encounters a reality it cannot perform, resorts to supplementary narration or indirect methods of depiction. Only film can show [reality] immediately and directly,” replacing the inert or “dead” stage with real locations. Similarly, in his discussion of acting technique, Gu notes that actors in cinema, unlike those in traditional drama, had to master such skills as swimming, riding a horse, driving a car, or even flying an airplane. The realism of the medium demanded it, as these activities could be filmed in reality rather than represented by semiotic convention as in traditional theater—a prop such as a tasseled whip representing horseback riding, for instance. Film did not just represent the real world but showed it, thus potentially superseding the other arts in its ability to manifest the objective, scientific spirit of the modern age.

The linking of a new faith in objectivity to photographic media echoed that of modern Western scientists, particularly in the mid- to late nineteenth century, when scientists stopped using drawings of ideal types in favor of photography and other, more mechanical means of representing specimens—not only because photography seemed better for the task but because scientific knowledge itself was being redefined in a way that emphasized the elimination of the vagaries of human agency. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in their fascinating study Objectivity, trace a shift from a scientific ideal of “truth-to-nature” to one of “mechanical objectivity” in the course of the nineteenth century through the case study of imaging for scientific atlases. Earlier scientists had sought to produce images that were true, with the understanding that the scientist’s own knowledge and judgment were instrumental in producing this truth. This resulted in the practice of representing ideal types through sketching and painting: “the type was truer to nature—and therefore more real—than any actual specimen.” Later, however, partly through the testing of such representations of ideal types against the instantaneous automated images of photography, scientists became doubtful of their ability to reason out the truth without distorting it through the interference, however unintended, of their own subjectivity, thus producing “a paradoxical
contrast between truth and objectivity, between reasoned and objective images.” Thus, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, an “argument was advanced in favor of photography as a distinctly scientific medium. The automatism of the photographic process promised images free of human interpretation—objective images, as they came to be called.” In fact, mechanical observation in general became favored, but “one type of mechanical image, the photograph, became the emblem for all aspects of noninterventionist objectivity,” largely because “the camera apparently eliminated human agency.”

Here the scientific reliance on photography brings to mind similar claims made in classical film theory and its successors, from Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image to Benjamin’s optical unconscious to the cinematic “automatisms” explored by Stanley Cavell and more recently elaborated by D. N. Rodowick. The mechanical nature of the photographic image—the fact that it can capture aspects of reality not necessarily noticeable to the naked eye or intended by the photographer—not only appears to be essential to its art but also puts it in a privileged relationship to the discourses of scientism and objectivity in both China and the West.

In fact, for the purposes of this book, we might extend Gaston’s and Galison’s distinction between the subjectively mediated ideal type and mechanical objectivity beyond issues of scientific imaging and draw from them different general trajectories of thinking about cinematic realism. On one side would be the idea that—armed with steadfast principles and reliable knowledge (concerning, for example, the perceived laws of nature, society, and history)—the artist can render a representation of reality that is more true (as in Gaston’s and Galison’s notion of “truth-to-nature”) than any mere random reflection of reality’s surface appearances could be. In this view, with the proper understanding and scientific approach, the artist can eliminate distracting, irrelevant details and bring out the inner structure of reality and the direction of its evolution. The script writer or film director, for example, might create fictional characters not as random individuals but rather as types that distill larger social realities and historical forces. This, of course, would be especially relevant in later Chinese film history (examined in chapters 3–5) when social class became
an overriding concern—and it is important to bear in mind that, even as early as the 1920s, many Chinese artists and intellectuals viewed Marxism as a science of history, with principles every bit as reliable as those of other branches of modern science. In this model of realism, then, a properly formed subjectivity—one with the “correct” understanding—could penetrate the jumbled surface of reality and render clearly its inner structure, essential features, and direction of movement in the same way that a scientist might render an “ideal type” that is more true than a random specimen.

Another general approach to realism involves a more modest claim to truth, building on the mechanical objectivity of the camera itself, particularly its ability to inscribe events without necessarily foregrounding the intentionality of the filmmaker. Among other things, this would capitalize on cinema’s capacity to surprise us with the random event or the unexpected detail, delivering revelations of truth that do not necessarily come packaged with explanations. Such was the impression provided even by some of the earliest documentary film images. Dai Vaughan, for example, in an essay about the reactions of audiences to the earliest film screenings, meditates in particular on Louis Lumière’s actuality Boat Leaving the Port (Barque sortant du port, 1895). The brief (forty-nine-second) film simply shows a rowboat with three men aboard leaving a harbor while a small group of women and children stand on a jetty. What Vaughan particularly emphasizes is a moment in the film when the boat, having gone beyond the protective jetty, suddenly is knocked sideways by ocean waves, so that the men must struggle to turn it back around. For Vaughan, it is this moment of spontaneity that captures something about the essence of cinema. In such a moment of unplanned cinematic realism, we feel the presence of “the sea itself: a sea liberated from the laboriousness of painted highlights and the drudgeries of metaphor.” The human actors, too, “by responding to the challenge of the spontaneous moment, . . . become integrated into its spontaneity”; they are “drawn into the contingency of events.” For Vaughan, this moment in early cinema represents an ideal of a cinema that is “free . . . of the threat of its absorption into meanings beyond it,” and such spontaneous revelations remain “the secret of its beauty.” Just as nineteenth-century scientists were surprised at the
unruly world that confronted them through photography’s mechanical objectivity—which often annoyingly failed to manifest the ideal types the scientists had conceived—twentieth-century filmmakers and spectators alike had to be prepared to see things unexpected, to confront aspects of reality uncovered by the technology of cinema that may lie outside of their existing understanding of the world.

Vaughan relates the amazement of early film audiences to the movement of the image, in particular, images of things such as water, leaves, and steam. It is this, Vaughan argues, that gave cinema “its ability to portray spontaneities of which the theatre was not capable.” Interestingly, Gu Kenfu’s landmark 1921 essay also emphasizes movement as central to cinema’s unique power and its scientific advantage over theater. In fact, Gu’s claims for cinema’s relation to science do not rest simply on arguments about the mimetic fidelity of the photograph or other such contentions that could fall under the rubric of ontological realism (though such claims are implicit elsewhere in the essay, as described earlier). Instead, in the explicit discussion of film and science, it is the illusion of movement produced by the film projector that is said to provide cinema’s scientific credentials: “Film in essence is a phenomenon of science. That a series of frames passing in front of a projector can produce a moving image is a phenomenon that makes use of optics—film is a product of science.”

Gu’s essay thus not only reveals a concern with the ontological, mimetic realism of film in a manner consistent with classical Western film theorists like Bazin; it also lends support to the argument that the movement of the image itself provides film (or animation, or digital video) with a compelling perceptual realism that is at least as important to the viewer’s engagement. The importance of movement goes beyond the matter of the mimetic fidelity of the image to reality, as it is the key to the emotional engagement of viewers—the power of drama, mentioned by Gu in his first sentence, to elicit sympathetic tears of sadness or belly laughs of pleasure from spectators. Gu in fact carefully connects realism and verisimilitude to our capacity to be swept away by an unfolding drama and respond reflexively to the characters we watch, and it is on this basis that he asserts the superiority of cinema. Positing that the goal of acting should be a verisimilitude in which both actors and spectators identify fully with
and are moved by the emotions of the fictional characters, Gu concludes that, of all the dramatic arts, film can best approach this standard. He thus suggests that there is a connection between the mimetic realism of the “moving” (huodong 活动) image at the heart of cinema’s science and its ability to make the audience feel “moved” (gandong 感动). The unprecedented verisimilitude of film is put in the service of transporting the audience into a realm of feeling to a degree that Gu thinks no previous dramatic arts could match. Here the artist/critic Gu arguably departs from the strict scientism of the intellectuals mentioned earlier, insofar as he encourages emotional engagement rather than simply objectivity.

In the mimetic response of the spectator to the filmed drama, we begin to approach not just the claims made for the realist nature of the medium by early film commentators in both China and the West but also the more recent conception of popular cinema as a “vernacular modernism” that provided “a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity.” In their embodied responses to cinema—the laughter and tears mentioned by Gu—spectators publicly and collectively found in the strikingly “real” presence of the actor a means of reflecting on their own experiences of both the perils and the promise of modernity. Ruan Lingyu herself, in her wrenching performance of the ultimately fatal double bind in which the glamorous “new woman” was caught, provided a convincing and moving reflection—however larger than life and melodramatized—for the contradictions experienced daily by countless women in urban China at the time.

In fact, Ruan’s story serves as an exemplary case of reflexivity and multifaceted mimesis. Katherine Hui-ling Chou notes that the “realism” of Ruan’s acting style helped lead to a collapsing in public consciousness (and, Chou speculates, in the performer’s own mind near the end of her life) of Ruan the actress with the roles she played, leading to the enigmatic echoes between fact and fiction noted earlier in this chapter, such as the use of a fictional character’s publicity still to represent the deceased Ruan Lingyu at her funeral or the eerie similarities between the fictional death of the character in *New Women* and the actual suicide of Ruan herself. This uncanny slippage between fact and fiction alerts us to the fact that
the ostensible “realism” of a particular performance style, or indeed the intrinsic realism of the film medium, is tied in part to the pedagogical function of popular cinema in literally showing people how to be modern; cinema’s performativity both draws on and contributes to that of everyday life. Chou provides much evidence that, rather than saying, for example, that a performer such as Ruan Lingyu accurately reflected real people in her roles as a “new woman,” it may be just as accurate to say that real women learned how to be “realistically” modern precisely by watching films like hers. As was the case for the broader discourse of science, in this period, the very term realism was inseparable from the imperative of learning the ways of the West, whether those of scientific thought, artistic aesthetics, or practical matters, such as styles of dress, personal grooming, and details of gesture and facial expression—or indeed codes for ships passing on the high seas. Actors in either modern drama or film learned how to move in foreign-style clothing by watching Western films, for example, which thus taught them how to “realistically” act out Westernized roles.\footnote{109}

In 1926, the leading film producer of the period, the previously mentioned Zheng Zhengqiu, noted that Chinese actors were not even capable of depicting public displays of affection between lovers except by reference to the models provided by foreign films because, in traditional Chinese society, the sexes were so carefully segregated that such public displays of affection were virtually unheard of, and “whenever Chinese actors tried to act out any intimate love scene, their performance often appeared ‘European’ to the audience.”\footnote{110} Thus, for the dominant Shanghai performance group of the late 1920s, Nanguoshe 南国社, a female actor playing the role of a woman was not supposed to accurately depict how an ordinary Chinese woman would behave; rather, she was supposed to “realistically” reflect and model the idealized modern, Westernized “new woman.”\footnote{111}

In other words, employing the categories mapped out in the introduction, we are dealing here not just with an ontological realism that captures the real image of the star performer’s face and body, a perceptual realism that engages the spectator with the apparent movement of the image, and a social realism that reflects the actual contradictions of life under modern, semicolonial capitalism in Shanghai; we are dealing as well with a form of
prescriptive realism insofar as the film provides models (“ideal types”) for the audience to emulate. In China’s semicolonial situation of the Republican era, these models flowed largely from West to East, including not just a wide variety of conventions (of behavior, gesture, and expression, for example) but also the ideal of a scientific, objective view of reality that could bypass linguistic, cultural, and historical differences. Film, with its basis in photography’s ontological realism, seemed to be both a dramatic form and a pedagogical tool that best embodied that modern, scientific ideal, but it also served as a vehicle for the propagation of Western cultural conventions. As we will see in the next chapter, those included the conventions of Western genre cinema and “classical” cinematic language, but filmmakers of the so-called golden age of Shanghai cinema were far from uncritical in their adaptations of those conventions as they strove for a realism that would serve the Chinese nation.