

What is a good Chinese man?

In Chinese cinema the ‘protector’ archetype is a common trope of a ‘good’ Chinese man; Wu Yonggang’s 1934 *The Goddess* explores traditional Confucian ideas of masculinity in Mainland China, peripheral to modern perceptions of misogyny. Whilst Chan Tze-woon’s 2022 *Blue Island* demonstrates complex realities of masculinity and its tie to political activism in modern-day Hong Kong. In both films the women support male heroism, tracing the evolution of the Confucian ‘protector’. Certain binaries pertain to *The Goddess*, on a personal scale, and to *Blue Island* on a national scale: good and evil, and entrapment against escapism. Socio-cultural attitudes toward masculinity shift between geo-temporal contexts, alongside values of ‘Chineseness’ and identity. In 1930’s Shanghai, during a crisis of modernity, perspective was largely shaped by “class struggle and the threat of foreign invasion.”¹ *The Goddess* polarises masculinity, juxtaposing predatory men who treat women as “merchandise for consumption” and benevolent intellectuals who are “surrogate fathers.”² *Wen-Wu*, the cultural and martial masculinity, is “autoethnographic” of traditional Chineseness, versus post-1997 Hong Kong which saw a hybridity of identity, where masculinity is at “the whim of fate.”³⁴

The woman as a ‘saveable’ object

The Goddess revolves around a young mother, the Goddess, and her prostitution to support her son; to avoid the police, she inadvertently comes under the protection of a criminal Boss who assaults her – forced to continue sex work, she saves money to give her son an education – her impurity leads to her imprisonment. The ex-principal of her son’s school agrees to adopt him.

¹ Richard Meyer J., “Ruan Ling-Yu: The Goddess of Shanghai,” in *The Moving Image*, Hong Kong University Press, 2005, 110.

² Kenny. Ng, ‘A Revisionist Reading of The Goddess’. *Journal of Chinese Film Studies* 3, (April 2023), 119.

³ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, “Historical Introduction: Chinese Cinemas (1896–1996) and Transnational Film Studies,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, University of Hawai’i Press, 1997, 8.

⁴ Laikwan Pang, ‘Masculinity in Crisis’, *Feminist Media Studies* 2, (January 2002), 331.

Yonggang's film, set in 1930s Shanghai, upholds contextual patriarchal structures of male and female relationships, narratologically the male figure is able to rescue the Goddess, fulfilling his protector archetype. The title itself is a "euphemism for prostitutes as well as an allusion to divine nature"; presenting the Goddess as not just a fallen woman, but far more complex.⁵ In the eyes of the "hypocritical school board" she is impure, conflicting with her pure maternity⁶ – the prologue reflects her duality: "in the streets of the night, she is depraved," but "when she embraces her baby, she is a saintly."⁷

Yonggang utilises strong side lighting, intimate close-ups and montage nightscape sequences to form his expressionist poetic realism. There are two pivotal sequences in which the Goddess requires rescuing from men, the first critiques abusive masculinity, juxtaposed to the latter which emulates heroism. In the second prostitution sequence the Goddess runs into a dark alley, hiding from officers conducting a raid and seeking refuge in the criminal Boss's home; he coerces her to stay, asking: "How do you think you should repay me?" A shot-reverse-shot depicts her uncomfortable expression and his evil grin. "From then on, the Boss treated her as his property" the following intertitle reads.⁸ The Boss's "salacious glances and malicious smiles"⁹ mirrors the audience's consumption of "commodified female movie stars."¹⁰ The Goddess is later imprisoned for killing the Boss after he spent her money on gambling; a medium shot in the courtroom: her ragged hair, dazed expression, limp body and dark under-eyes. The Principal arrives to tell her he will look after her son, indirectly saving her; she cries in her cell, beside her face appears an opaque vision of her son, her ultimate fantasy is for his happiness.

Blue Island represents ideals of contemporary masculinity as less connected to femininity and saviourship, but rather a protection of family and freedom. Tze-woon tries to depart from "men liberating women"¹¹ and focus more on a "generational struggle."¹² Despite this attempt, *Blue Island* still maintains,

⁵ Meyer, "Ruan Ling-Yu", 111.

⁶ Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism'. *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (October 2000), 16.

⁷ Ng, 'A Revisionist Reading of The Goddess', 118.

⁸ Wu Yonggang, dir. *Goddess 神女 (1934) with English Subtitles*. Youtube, 1934, 17:09.

⁹ Ng, 'A Revisionist Reading of The Goddess', 111.

¹⁰ Rey Chow, "'Woman', Fetish, Particularism: Articulating Chinese Cinema with a Cross-Cultural Problematic'. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, (January 2007), 217.

¹¹ Lu, "Historical Introduction: Chinese Cinemas," 22.

¹² Tiffany Sia, 'New Territories: Reconfiguring Publics in Former and New Hong Kong Cinema'. KEATS, 10.

a strong allusion of masculine leadership and feminine passivity, with the intergenerational trauma weighing heavily on men through a genealogical link from fleeing to activism.

Blue Island explores Hong Kong's identity in the face of political struggle from the perspective of different generations; intertwining documentary features with exaggerated re-enactments, featuring young activists of the 2019 democratic protests immersing themselves within the lives of older generations who experienced the 1967 riots and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

The first dynamic sequence we receive is of a young man and woman hiking through dry forest terrain, the sequence jump-cuts to the evening where the woman sleeps on the man's shoulder whilst he sits awake, toying with his compass. As the journey continues the woman is seen to follow the man's lead, jumping across creeks and jagged stones. The journey depicts Chan Hak-chi, who fled the mainland in 1973 to escape persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Toward the end of the journey sequence the two enter the ocean, "tied to each other by a rope with the woman wearing a flotation vest as well, they swim toward Hong Kong in the dark."¹³ Anxiety ensues as a series of unsteady shots are spliced together, waves crash and bodies struggle under the ominous sky. The woman's reliance on a man hints at themes of rescue and protection. The scene transitions into a similarly shot sequence of Hak-chi in present time, amidst socio-political upheaval he consistently swims throughout the film, a symbol of solace and resilience.

Binary 1: Escapism and Entrapment

Obvious notions of entrapment and subsequent escapism are illustrated through the fleeing of many during the Cultural Revolution, but complicated by the rise of socio-political turmoil in the beginning of the 21st century in Hong Kong.

Throughout *Blue Island* there are a range of protest scenes, one in particular which caught my eye was the medium shot of several masked men throwing cardboard Chinese Communist Party signs into a blazing street fire – shouting: "Curse the CCP!"¹⁴ The 1989 "Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing and

¹³ Sia, 'New Territories', 15.

¹⁴ Chan Tze-Woon, dir. 'Blue Island.' Maughan Library KCL, 48:56.

the 1967 Hong Kong anti-colonial riots” are compared to the 2019 anti-extradition protests; montaged sequences build tension and as armed forces begin to attack protestors the scene jump cuts back and forth between shaky handheld firsthand footage of protestors being detained and pleading for help and the young couple running frantically through the forest from the beginning of the film.¹⁵ The final cut presents the couple who make it to the top of a steep hill, a longer shot from behind reveals the cameraman, the metatheatricality illustrates the young couple’s freedom to end their struggle with one cut, in contrast to so many others who were prosecuted. An ocean-scape sequence follows this, solace is interrupted by a close-up of a dead body floating, a purgatorial sea between democracy and communism.

Later in the film, Kelvin Tam plays the role of a young imprisoned Raymond Young in a re-enactment of the 1967 Hong Kong riots. A close-up through prison bars alludes to his unjust captivity, he says in desperation: “I won’t admit guilt whatever I do, because I pursue values that are righteous...”¹⁶ He tears up, continuing to speak about the government’s “hypocrisy and shamelessness”.¹⁷ Diegetic sounds of crashing waves and birds from outside the dark cell pervade the scene before there is a jump cut to Hak-chi swimming in a typhoon, wind blares and his limbs smack against the ocean. The repeated escapism cutaways to nature, following scenes of heartache and violence create a sense of continuity as he fights, the “relentless swimmer in a vast ocean” mirrors the resilience of masculinity against the odds.¹⁸ The camera lens is spotted with rain, white intertitles read: “All of Occupy 9 were charged as guilty. Offence: incitement to incite public nuisance”, the 9 activists who were charged in connection with the 2014 Umbrella Movement.¹⁹

Visually, escapism throughout *The Goddess* is portrayed through fantasy nightscape scenes in which the Goddess wanders the streets glamorously. Allusive cinematography in the opening sequence hints at the Goddess’ profession, she stops on the side of the road in between the crowd to smoke a cigarette. She first glares flirtatiously at a man who walks past, then going to stand next to another gentleman who is finishing his cigarette, feigning to be cold by exaggeratingly rubbing her arms, he is

¹⁵ Sia, ‘New Territories’, 18.

¹⁶ Tze-Woon, ‘Blue Island’, 01:08:24.

¹⁷ Tze-Woon, ‘Blue Island’, 01:10:50.

¹⁸ Sia, ‘New Territories’, 15.

¹⁹ Tze-Woon, ‘Blue Island’, 01:15:02.

uninterested. Another man jumps in to take his place, he is shabby and seemingly destitute, a taller officer ushers him away, she strolls away, glancing backward sensually before he follows her. The subsequent shot is the sun rising over the city before the Goddess walks shyly out of an apartment, wearing the same outfit and adjusting her hair.

Her return to prostitution after failing to get a job is marked by a longing look to the city-scape and a synecdochic shot of two sets of feet, hers, and a man's, walking away together. The Goddess escapes from her abusive pimp and prostitutes herself in efforts to eventually allow her son to escape, the city of Shanghai is described as a "suffocating reminder of the goddess's inability to escape her fate", regardless of her longing looks outward and upward, away from her current life, "there is no place for her to escape."²⁰

Binary 2: Morality, Good versus Evil

A 'good' Chinese man must hold dissonance to the immoral, in both films, morality is closely linked to heroism and protection of femininity and the nation. *The Goddess* explores this moral binary through two opposing characters: the Principal, who is educated and middle class, compared to the Boss, who is uneducated, lower class and uncouth. Two key models of Chinese masculinity are: *Wu*, the martial masculinity, associated with the space outside everyday civil society, utilising fighting skills for justice and comparable to that of Hollywood heroes; and the *Wen*, a cultured masculinity tied to law, the state and civilisation, culturally refined and typically soft or boyish. The ideal man, the "*Wen-Wu* dyad" is a combination peripheral to Chinese masculinity, where *Wen* controls *Wu* – coded differently to Western masculinity which may be attractive to Western women.

The Principal's *Wen* values outweigh and interact with his *Wu* qualities, exemplified when he visits the Goddess and confronts her on the controversy of her profession and the potential expulsion of her son. She paces nervously throughout the room before admitting to its truth and begging for forgiveness, collapsing onto the table she cries as her son runs in to comfort her. A short-reverse-shot

²⁰ Meyer, "Ruan Ling-Yu", 111.

between the Principal looking down upon them and their desperate pleading is depicted, he enters the frame to admit he was wrong and that she is a pure mother. He later pleads to the school board: “We cannot let ourselves be swayed by common prejudice!”²¹ He resigns in protest as the board does not change their decision, illustrated as a “moral figure” who “incarnates a sense of humanism,” but is ultimately systematically powerless as the son is still dismissed.²²

Blue Island presents a goodness and resilience of masculinity within the democratic protesting groups, and a stark immorality and inhumaneness of mainland China and the communist party. Throughout montaged first-hand footage of the 2019 Hong Kong riots, closeup shots of protestors hands brutally zip-tied behind their backs, sitting on sidewalks and being arrested is depicted. The “mass arrest” and Tze-woon’s imagery serves as a “disquieting reminder” of the thousands of lives awaiting trial, charging or sentencing following the anti-extradition protests; such visuals are a part of this “radical historiography” that explores the aftermath of such tragic upheaval.²³ In 2021 the film depicts the police sealing off the venue of Tiannanmen vigil for the first time ever, activists were arrested pre-emptively and a long-shot depicts empty grounds accompanied by somber non-diegetic music. A man holds up a banner that reads: “the people will not forget” and “stay strong and persevere.”²⁴

The final scene features Eason Chung, one of the Occupy 9, who re-enacts his own appeal before his sentencing: “We refused to be subservient to provisions... All of us sitting here today have a responsibility to step out of this courtroom... To experience the world ourselves.”²⁵ The film concludes with a silent montage of various individuals who are seated in a courtroom, staring directly into the camera. Intertitles identify them and their professions, including: “activist”, “community organiser”, “clerk”, “YouTuber”, “deliveryman” and lists their specific charges. The scene is poignantly symbolic of “a scale that cannot be captured on film: the thousands awaiting trial, to be charged, or awaiting sentencing.”²⁶ *Blue Island* suggests that the ultimate moral test is to maintain your core values as a man, as

²¹ Yonggang, *Goddess* 神女 (1934), 35:41.

²² Ng, ‘A Revisionist Reading of The Goddess’, 117.

²³ Sia, ‘New Territories’, 14.

²⁴ Tze-Woon, ‘Blue Island,’ 01:02:35.

²⁵ Tze-Woon, ‘Blue Island,’ 01:14:49.

²⁶ Sia, ‘New Territories’, 16.

“time will slowly erode your ideals” and as Young warns Tam: most comrades are eventually “abandoned.”²⁷ Smaller personal victories are achievable and should be celebrated.

In conclusion, to be a ‘good’ Chinese man is to defend your freedom and your family, harness values of *Wen* and *Wu* masculinity and fulfil your duty to protect. Whilst Chineseness and its goodness cannot be summarised in a sentence, or a few, *Blue Island* and *The Goddess* work together to expose what is not considered a good Chinese man, and help to highlight values that resonate with national goodness.

Tze-woon’s array of actors: protesters, students and the likes, as well as Yonggang’s unnamed protagonists, channel their character’s experiences through apposite body language and facial expression, driven forward by cinematography and post-production, the works in conjunction allow insight into the nuanced definition of a good Chinese man.

²⁷ Sia, ‘New Territories’, 19.

Bibliography:

Chow, Rey. ““Woman”, Fetish, Particularism: Articulating Chinese Cinema with a Cross-Cultural Problematic’. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas 1*, no. 3 (January 2007): 209–21.

https://doi.org/10.1386/jcc.1.3.209_7.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. ‘Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism’. *Film Quarterly 54*, no. 1 (October 2000): 10–22.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1213797>.

Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng. “Historical Introduction: Chinese Cinemas (1896–1996) and Transnational Film Studies.” In *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. University of Hawai’i Press, 1997. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqxw6.5>.

Pang, Laikwan. ‘Masculinity in Crisis: Films of Milkyway Image and Post-1997 Hong Kong Cinema’. *Feminist Media Studies 2*, no. 3 (January 2002): 325–40.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077022000034826>.

Meyer J., Richard. “Ruan Ling-Yu: The Goddess of Shanghai.” In *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005: 109-12.

Ng, Kenny K. K. ‘A Revisionist Reading of The Goddess : Visual Narrative Power in Chinese Silent Cinema’. *Journal of Chinese Film Studies 3*, no. 1 (April 2023): 103–23.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jcfs-2021-0021>.

Sia, Tiffany. ‘New Territories: Reconfiguring Publics in Former and New Hong Kong Cinema’. KEATS King’s College London, n.d.: 9-21.

https://keats.kcl.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/12449194/mod_resource/content/2/Cin%20Sin%2025%20Wk%2010%20Sia.pdf.

Tze-Woon, Chan, dir. ‘Blue Island.’ Maughan Library KCL, n.d.

Yonggang, Wu, dir. ‘The Goddess’ 神女 (1934) with English Subtitles. Youtube, 1934.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWo470hfB5A>.