

**Jean Ma. *Sounding the Modern Woman – The Songstress in Chinese Cinema.*  
Durham/London: Duke University Press 2015. 282 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5876-3.**

*Sounding the Modern Woman* is less concerned with the real life of female singers than with their representation as a popular phenomenon in Mandarin Chinese film. Beginning in Shanghai in the early 1930s, Jean Ma's fascinating study ends thirty years later in Hong Kong. Her eloquently written analysis of Chinese films concentrates on the songstress and includes reflected portraits of cinematic songs, moments and interactions. With its long-term perspective, it fills a significant gap in our understanding of the songstress's discursive meaning and power in Chinese film up to the present day.

The introduction outlines the complex relations that define the songstress phenomenon. One starting point is her rise as a modern woman in a newly emerging star system that included theatre venues, tea houses, cabarets, music (dance) halls, radio broadcasting, music records and a specific kind of film genre, the "song-singing film" (*gechang pian*). On another level, the song itself, the lyrics, and the musical moment come into focus, revealing "political effects that are related to filmic codings of nation, race, gender, or sexuality" (p. 11). The seductive and intimate power of female-voiced songs on the screen are considered for their extra-textual meanings, e.g. the pleasure of repeated listening, the reference of songs to space and memory. Divided into five chapters, *Sounding the Modern Woman* guides the reader through three decades of cinematic song history.

The first chapter, "A Songstress is Born", focuses on the city of Shanghai and the first generation of singing actresses. Songs on record were already valuable cultural commodities and became even more prominent aspects of film production with the arrival of sound film and the influence of Hollywood. "Street Angel" (*Malu tianshi*, 1937), with singer Zhou Xuan and her two famous inserted film songs (*chaqu*), creates a lasting image in film, even a mythology of the songstress: "the songstress as a tragic figure and victim of society" (p. 61). With the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the songstress disappeared from revolutionary Mainland China.

In Chapter Two, "From Shanghai to Hong Kong", the author follows Shanghai's singing actresses to the British colony and provides an excellent overview of the postwar

film, music and entertainment world of the 1950s and 1960s. During those decades, the “songstress was a commodity par excellence” (p. 73), displayed in major film journals and music films which could include six to a dozen songs of different music styles. Shanghai’s old tunes were recycled, Japanese and Western tunes of various musical genres absorbed and new songs composed. The repertoire expressed a more optimistic and forward-looking atmosphere and was performed by an increasing variety of singing actresses of different ages, character and talent. These are traced in the next three chapters which explore three main types of singing actresses in Mandarin film.

Chapter Three, “The Little Wildcat”, provides a close reading of the film “Songs of the Peach Blossom River” (*Taohua jiang*, 1956) and its main actress Chung Ching, who plays a singing country girl nicknamed Wildcat. Contrary to many old Shanghai films, the urban modern space is positively connotated and the film tells the story of the natural, rural “rustic songstress” (p. 108) who becomes transformed into an entertainment professional in Hong Kong. Chung Ching, however, did not sing herself. Her songs were dubbed by the popular Shanghai singer Yao Lee.

Chapter Four celebrates the “emergence of a new songstress type, one entirely without precedent in past filmmaking traditions” (p. 139). In the film “The Mambo Girl” (*Manbo nǚlang*, 1957), Grace Chang plays a young, carefree, dancing and singing teenager from postwar middle-class Hong Kong. Chang, a gifted singer and dancer herself, became the model for a number of other film productions. Interestingly, while the main body of the film carefully avoided any challenges to dominant familial values and gender norms, these were articulated in the song and dance scenes.

In Chapter Five, we are introduced to another type of singing actress, also played by Grace Chang, in “The Wild, Wild Rose” (*Ye meigui zhi lian*, 1960). The film narrates the tragic liaison between a nightclub singer and an unfortunate musician and teacher, inspired in both plot and music by Bizet’s opera “Carmen” (1875) as well as by Alexandre Dumas’ novel “The Lady of the Camelias” (1848). The film’s success rested on what Jean Ma identifies as a leitmotif in Hong Kong’s songstress films, namely on making “the sensory pleasure afforded by the song and dance indistinguishable from feelings of desire for the performer herself” (p. 195).

Despite its success, the songstress-tradition came to an end in the 1960s due, among other things, to the rising popularity of male action heroes and the arrival of new youth cultures. However, the songstress was not completely forgotten, she was “lingering in the attic of film history to be occasionally revived for an encore return” (p. 215). Her revival began with the wave of Shanghai nostalgia during the 1990s, as her songs, her image and her sounds entered the film world again, linked to the cultural memory of Old Shanghai and the Lady of the Camelias.

*Sounding the Modern Woman* includes far more films, songs and “songstresses” than can be mentioned here. It is a rich book with a specific focus and a new perspective on roughly eighty years of Chinese film. The only quibbles are that there could have been more complete song lyrics and that the aspect of “sounding”, as mentioned in the title of the book, receives too little attention. The importance of songs, the particular moments of singing, the lyrics and the diegetic/non-diegetic qualities and effects are repeatedly mentioned, yet what a song’s “sound” actually did to or for the songstress, the film and the audience at different periods could have been better worked out.

In sum, a highly inspiring study beneficial to everyone interested in modern Chinese history and culture.

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