Ruan Ling-Yu (26 April 1910, Shanghai—8 March 1935, suicide). "Ruan Ling-Yu is probably the most talented, most famous movie star in 20s and 30s Chinese silent film era. In her short life she had starred in more than 20 films, many of them are regarded as masterpieces.

"Ruan Ling-Yu was born in Shanghai in 1910. Her family was a poor migrant family from Canton. Lost her father in the early age, she had to help her mother who worked as a house maid. However her mother managed to send her to a school where she recognised her passion for stage performance the first time.

"Ruan Ling-Yu was discovered by director Bu Wancang from Star Film Company and starred in her first film The Couple in Name (1926). The film was a mild success and she starred several films for Star in the next few years. Her career took off when she left Star and joined Da Zhonghua Baihe Film Company which merged with other companies and became Lianhua Film Company later. The first film she starred for Lianhua, A Dream in the Old Capital (1929) was a huge success and made her name. In Lianhua, Ruan Ling-Yu worked with a group of creative and exciting young directors and writers and starred in a dozen of critically acclaimed yet commercially successful films, including Wild Flowers by the Road (1930), Love and Duty (1931), Little Cuttie (1933), Goodbye Shanghai (1934), New Women (1934), The Goddess (1934). Her ability to understand and convey the director's intention was universally praised by the directors she worked with.

"[In] Contrast to her success on the screen, her personal life was a tragedy. She fell in love with Zhang Damin, the young master of the house her mother worked, before starting her film career. They lived together eventually. But in a class-divided society they couldn't get married because of the objection from Zhang Damin's mother. Their relationship deteriorated when she became successful. She later left Zhang and lived with a businessman Tang Jishan. When Zhang sued Tang for damage this became a scandal in 30s Shanghai and Ruan Ling-Yu was hounded by the tabloid press. Under severe pressure, Ruan Ling-Yu committed suicide by sleeping pill overdose in the early morning of 8 March, 1935. Her sudden death ignited fierce debate on the behavior of tabloid newspapers and the protection of women in public life. Her funeral was attended by thousands of people.

"Ruan Ling-Yu's screen charisma and tragic life have since fascinated many people. Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan's The Actress (1991) starring Maggie Cheung tells the story of Ruan Ling-Yu poetically which won Maggie Cheung the Silver Bear in Berlin Film Festival and several Hong Kong Film Awards." (Dianying.com)

Ruan Ling-Yu, wrote two suicide notes, put three bottles of sleeping pills into a bowl of congee and calmly ate the poisoned gruel.

Ruan, whose many screen roles represented the suffering women of China, ended her life at the age of twenty-four after making twenty-nine films. These motion pictures not only demonstrated her versatility on the screen but also showed different phases of life in Shanghai and China during the late 1920s and early 1930s. They illustrated common social themes such as poverty, class struggle, feudalism and modernity.
Five days after Ruan’s suicide, tens of thousands of Shanghai residents watched silently as her funeral procession passed through the crowded streets of the fifth largest city in the world. Often called “the Paris of Asia” and “the brothel of Asia,” this decadent and sophisticated metropolis had an image known all over the globe. Sailors and others were said to be “shanghaiaied” when they were kidnapped on land and taken away to sea.

...Shanghai between the two world wars was a city of intrigues, political change, corruption, social disparities, and creativity. The region was a battleground between the conflicting roles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), left-wing romantics and the reactionary forces of the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party led by Chiang Kai-shek. The latter eradicated the Shanghai communist organization and forced Mao Zedong’s Red Army to embark on the Long March in 1934.

Within this political framework, there were really two Chinas: the modern semi-Westernized cities of the eastern coastal provinces, inhabited by the urban elite, who had little contact with life in the countryside, and rural China, which was unchanged in its poverty, ignorance, and hardships.

These tortuous conflicts were taken up by the emerging Lianhua Film Company, which in the early 1930s grew to become the most popular film production house in China. The Shanghai studio hired a number of May Fourth [a movement taking its name from urban protests on May 4, 1919 against the Treaty of Versailles award of territory to Japan] writers and artists and produced several serious films on contemporary social problems. Ruan, one of Lianhua’s most loved stars, mirrored the dichotomy of her country in her various roles as a peasant, worker, social butterfly, beggar, student, teacher, nun and more. She impressed “one quintessential image after another on the public’s mind in her twenty-nine film appearances.”

Contemporary filmmakers in China understood the underlying problems of their society: poverty and exploitation were major themes. As Betty Peh-T’ Wei writes, “cinematic heroes were poor but virtuous, while villains were rich, cruel, and self-serving.” In fact, most films made in the spirit of the May Fourth Movement, which championed women’s liberation among other social reforms, featured women as victims who “seemed to stand for all of the weak of China as well as for China itself, the so-called ‘weak man of Asia’.”

The May Fourth Movement also led to the introduction of Western authors translated into Chinese and a new Chinese literature modeled on Western literary forms. However, there was intense political repression by the KMT and extremely heavy censorship. Between 1929 and 1936, for example, 450 literary works and 700 publications in the social sciences were banned. At least 1,800 books and journals were proscribed as well as a host of newspaper items. Cinema, too, was censored and censorship played a role in shaping film culture of the 1930s.

Shanghai itself was really several cities. Half Western and half Chinese, it was divided into an International Settlement comprised of the former British and American settlements and the French Concession governed directly by the French through their counsel....

During the First World War Chinese industrialists made millions as they founded factories, shipyards, and cotton mills. Laborers from rural areas flooded the city to create a boomtown of enormous proportions. With the banning of opium in 1918, Shanghai became the center of large-scale organized crime, much as Chicago did during prohibition against alcohol in the United States....

In 1927, Chiang Kai-shek made an alliance with the Shanghai mob that gave him control over the activities of Chinese residents in the settlements....Leaders of the Green Gang were enlisted into the police forces...in order to strengthen the cocaine trade. Unlike Chicago, these gangsters were integrated into the system of state power that the KMT government developed during the 1930s....

The most “reliable” secret organization was Chaing’s Blue Shirts who were carefully picked from the Green Gang. This band of thugs tried to impose New Life standards upon public culture in Shanghai. They raided film studios and issued warnings that they would “cleanse the cultural world” of makers of leftist films. The tactics of the Green Gang, together with the work of the KMT censors, resulted in the rejection of eighty-three film scripts and closure of fourteen film studios between 1934 and 1935.

The Lianhua Film Company founded by Luo Mingyou, had close ties to the KMY, but left-wing employees who criticized social conditions were able to influence their productions. To curry favor with the Nationalists, Luo produced Ruan’s last film, “National Customs,” which featured the New Life Movement. A competitor, Yi Hua studios, was less fortunate. The Blue Shirts destroyed their facilities in 1933.

It was in this incredible metropolis that the Lianhua studio and their talented directors and actors created a film microcosm of all the disparities, pain, and struggle that was descending upon Shanghai and China at that time. To understand the city is to understand the films that reflected the collapsing system around them.

Frederick Wakeman Jr. Rote that: “Shanghai’s identity was both a foreign city with its movie theaters, street lights and civilized creature comforts such as running water and heat, and the native city inhabited by shed people with the homeless sleeping in coffins or begging on the streets.” It was in this decadent city of her birth that Ruan Ling-yu took her own life at the height of her career.

[Ruan’s father, a hard-working but low paid employee of a British oil company, died of tuberculosis just after her Ruan’s sixth birthday. She survived smallpox, typhoid fever and diphtheria. Her mother worked as a laundress and then for a wealthy family—“a typical wealthy Chinese clan with female servants who were virtually slaves and whose patriarch kept several concubines.”]

Despite her meager wages, Ah Ying was able to send her daughter to a private school. In just one year there, the girl wanted to study at a better institution of learning. Her mother selected an elite boarding school, the Chongde Girls’ School, where students mainly were from well-to-do families. In addition, she asked her daughter to state that she was an orphan and changed her name to Ruan Yuying. Ah Ying kept this secret from Madam Zhang....
During her sixteenth year, Ruan invited her mother to come to parents’ days at the school and hear her sing. The next day, she journeyed to the Zhang home to ask her mother how she had enjoyed the performance. Instead of a warm reunion, Ruan learned that Madame Zhang had accused Ah Ying of stealing money and would send for the police. At that moment, Zhang Damin [the youngest son] said that he took the cash. His mother did not believe him and dismissed Ah Ying. Damin, who had gambled away the money, arranged for Ah Ying and Ruan to stay in a cottage formerly used by his father to house one of his concubines. He also gave money and proposed marriage to Ruan. After his offer, he raped her. The teenager, overcome with shame and humiliation and uncertain of her and her mother’s future, accepted. Madame Zhang flatly refused. Ruan decided to quit school and find a job in order to support her mother and herself. It was in March of 1926 that she read a newspaper ad placed by the Ming Xing Film Company, the leading studio in Shanghai at that time.

A stock market crash in China after the First World War became a boon to the emerging film industry. Speculators started to invest in the movie business resulting in an unprecedented cinema craze. Li and Hu estimate that by 1922 there were 130 film companies in Shanghai and an additional 50 companies in other Chinese cities. [Bu Wancang gave her a second screen test and exclaimed “We have discovered an exceptional talent.” She worked with famous stars.] In 1928, the eighteen-year-old Ruan decided to leave Ming Xing....She applied to the Da Zhonghua-Baihe Film Company, which was known for its martial arts and period costume drama movies. Zhu Shouju, a founder of Baihe films before its merger with Zhonghua, directed three and wrote all of the scripts for Ruan’s six productions at her new studio. He was delighted to have her perform in these quickly produced and moneymaking productions. Zhu’s company was considered solid but not as important as Ming Xing.

Ruan was typically typecast as a “fast” woman in her first two films for Da Zhonghua-Baihe, Quigyu Baojian (Amorous Lesson) and Yinmu Zhi Hua (Flower of the Screen). However, in Zhenzhu Guan (Pearl Hat) she played in a typical love story with a happy ending. Her fourth and fifth films were typical knight-errant stories of the period when audiences were still aware of the warlords who controlled parts of the country. Dapo Jiulong Wang (Total Defeat of the Nine-Dragon King) and Huoshao Jiulong Shan (The Burning of Nine-Dragon Mountain) gave Ruan a chance to use new skills as she performed martial arts. The tradition of female performing martial arts in Chinese films continued throughout the years and is best illustrated among recent films by Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, starring Michelle Yeoh. Ruan’s final role in Jiehou Guhong (Solitary Survivor of a Disaster) told the story of a girl who suffered during the warlord period.

Ruan worked hard at the studio and with her earnings supported Damin, her mother, Good Auntie, and her newly adopted daughter. Her relationship with Damin was difficult. He gambled away his inheritance and convinced his mother to give him more, then lost that as well...Pleading with Ruan for money and only getting what few dollars she possessed, he told her goodbye.

That evening, in her first suicide attempt, Ruan took an overdose of sleeping pills. Fortunately, Ah Ying found the empty bottle beside her daughter’s bed a short time later and sent her to Fumin Hospital. The doctors were able to pump her stomach and she recovered in her mother’s arms. Damin came to the hospital on learning the news and promised he would never leave her again. He asked her to return to his house, which she did.

While living with Damin and recovering from her almost fatal accident, she learned that Luo Maingyou had founded a new film company—Lianhua. He had years of experience operating movie theaters all over China and saw that American imports had been responsible for the bulk of the audience. Chinese films with their low budgets and poor production could not compete. Luo realized that with the distribution of American sound features in 1929, he had a chance to do something. Due to the language problem, audiences did not respond as they had before and the novelty wore off. What was startling to Luo was the lack of any new silent films. He persuaded the owners of Ming Xing, Da Zhonghua-Baihe, Shanghai Motion Pictures and Hong Kong Film Companies to merge into a new venture called Lianhuam an an organization that promised to produce Chinese films of high quality for the domestic market, employing the best directors, writers and actors in the country. It emerged in March of 1930. The goal of Lianhua was to popularize social education and to reform the traditional themes of domestic films, which focused on popular superstitions and bloody action sequences. The merged company also attracted Sun Yu whose work Ruan admired. The twenty-year-old actress had suffered her bout of depression. She now discovered she was part of a huge cinema empire and her spirits soared.

Luo Maingyou’s strategy to continue production of Chinese silent films for domestic consumption was a success. In addition to persuading Li Minwei of Min Xin to join him in forming Lianhua, he inherited its most creative director, Sun Yu. Li’s first cinema experience was in 1913, but he made his reputation by filming the inauguration of President Sun Yat-sen for Chinese newsreels in 1924....

Sun Yu had the experience to appreciate Ruan’s raw talent. A graduate of Qinghua University, he studied at the University of Wisconsin where he translated the works of Li Bo. He then went to New York City, studied at the New York Institute of Photography, attended a theater school where classes were taught by American dramatist David Belasco and enrolled at Columbia University for its evening film studies program. In one year, he acquired knowledge of photography, film processing, editing, acting, make-up, scriptwriting and direction. In 1926, on the return trip to China, he traveled through Europe and departed from Moscow on the Trans-Siberian Express, arriving in the Middle Kingdom with Western influence and training.

Sun was demanding of the young actress. Ruan was asked to play Yan Yan, a prostitute or “singsong” girl. Her initial reaction was that she didn’t want to be typecast again, but in order to work with Sun she agreed. The director watched the first take and asked her to really think about the character and of people like Yan Yan she had met in her life. She remembered the concubines of the Zhang household as well as Madame Zhang. Ruan acted out the dual nature of the prostitute’s personality—seductive and yet fierce. It was considered her best
Ruan and her films were big hits. A new audience of upper-class and educated Chinese were attracted to these local productions for the first time. Previously they had attended only foreign and especially Hollywood films. ...Ruan’s notoriety in the tabloid press was to increase throughout the next six years. While Ruan’s professional career continued to improve, her personal life suffered. After returning from Beijing, she learned that Madam Zhang had died. Damin, her lover, had gambled away all of his inheritance and deceived Ruan into believing that his mother’s will dictated that they should not get married. He told her that he would not follow those instructions but that they should wait three years out of respect for his deceased mother. Damin also lied that his bank funds, which he had actually spent, had been frozen. Furthermore, he claimed that the Zhang mansion and the cottage where they had both lived had to be sold to pay for the funeral and the debts of his brothers....

Her growing personal misery encouraged her to identify more closely with her films, a pattern that would eventually lead to her death. ...The next year was pivotal for her career. In 1932, Lianhua produced ten films and four of them starred Ruan Ling-yu. The top three, Lian’ai Yu Yiwu (Love and Duty) Yi Jian Mei (A Spray of Plum Blossoms), and Tsouhua Qi Xue Ji (Peach Blossom Weeps Tears of Blood), also known as The Peach Girl, featured her co-star Jin Yan and were directed by Bu Wancang. The cinematographer for all of these motion pictures, as well as her films of the previous year, was Huang Shaoen. He was twenty-one, Cantonese, and spoke the same dialect. Huang experimented with the camera lens in order to disguise Ruan’s rough-textured skin and her pockmarks from childhood smallpox. He tried using a black silk sock over the lens. When that did not work, he removed some threads, producing a gauze-like effect. After several attempts with different densities, he discovered that for a close-up he preferred a fine gauze, while on a long shot he employed a thicker one. Huang claimed that he used the first soft lens in China.

Encouraged by the sympathetic techniques of her cinematographer, Ruan was now ready to deliver her great performances. Love and Duty was based on a Polish novel, La Symphonie des Ombres. Ruan plays the role of a lifetime. She begins as a teenage schoolgirl, then a wife in an arranged marriage, a mother, an outcast and finally an old woman. In addition, she portrays her own teenage daughter at the conclusion of the film. Ruan’s use of non-verbal communications at the bridge where she is deciding whether or not to commit suicide is an excellent illustration of the language of silent cinema. Theorist Béla Balázs believed that the medium expressed ideas that words cannot express:

The gestures of visual man are not intended to convey concepts which can be expressed in words, but such inner experience, such non-rational emotions which would still remain unexpressed when everything that can be told has been told, Such emotions lie in the deepest levels of the soul can cannot be approached by words that are mere reflections of concepts: just as our musical experiences cannot be expressed in rationalized concepts, what appears in the face and in facial expression is a spiritual experience which is rendered immediately visible without the intermediary of words.

Her aging process through the life of Yang Naifan is one of the most remarkable screen performances and visual accomplishments of any actor in silent films. It is no wonder that Jay Leyda dubbed her “the Greta Garbo of Shanghai” and called her one of the great actresses of film history.

...But history soon caught up with them. Production of The Peach Girl was completed the night before the September 18,1931, incident. On that day, a bomb exploded on the tracks of the Japanese Railroad in Mukden, Manchuria. The blast, which was caused by the Japanese army, gave it an excuse to occupy the northernmost part of China. ...The reaction of Shanghai was instantaneous. All of its citizens joined in an extreme anti-Japanese boycott....One month later, on January 18, 1932, a crowd attacked five militant Japanese monks in the Chinese district of Chapei, as they chanted, killing one and wounding two others....The Japanese sent bombers and destroyed much of Chapei as the battle continued for five weeks. On May 5, a truce was negotiated which called for demilitarization. The Japanese agreed to remove their troops, except the garrison units, and the Chinese were able to keep their soldiers outside a thirty-mile radius of Shanghai.

This battle, known as the “Shanghai Incident,” provoked outrage in the United States and many European countries, International condemnation was influenced by one of the most famous news photos of the twentieth century. The image was “...a burned baby, arms outstretched, wailing on a deserted railway track...” Five years later, the Japanese invaded the city again, and this time remained for eight years.

While the Japanese were invading Manchuria and the anti-Japanese riots in Shanghai were causing instability, Ruan, Damin and Xioyu [Ruan’s adopted daughter] left for Hong Kong. ...Damin soon discovered the gambling casinos of Macau....When the truce between the KMT and the Japanese government was signed in May 1932, Ruan returned to Shanghai to see her mother. Damin remained in Hong Kong. Ah Ying told her daughter that Good Auntie and her whole family had been killed in the bombing by the Japanese.

Ruan was soon personally exposed to the destruction wrought by the invaders. She visited the Lianhua office to find it in deep financial trouble. One of its studios was completely destroyed. Its output had decreased and sixteen of the thirty-nine Shanghai cinema theaters were in ruins. She discovered a new sense of nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment among her colleagues. ...

Ruan soon had an opportunity to express her newfound sentiments on screen....The film [Sang Modeng Nuxing/Three Modern Women] was a box-office success and the first so-called “left-wing movie.” It became a model for other progressive anti-establishment films that were produced in subsequent years.

...Negative reaction was violent....Her films continued to explore issues that were tearing China apart.

Life, released in 1934, was another opportunity for Ruan to portray a character aging from a young girl to an old woman, as she did in Love and Duty. After being abandoned as a child, her character has a series of menial jobs as garbage hauler, servant, factory worker and, for most of her life, a prostitute...She dies alone and in misery. This ending may have been influenced by Hollywood movies, such as Stella Dallas and Intolerance, which her directors and scriptwriters would certainly have been familiar with....
One of the most important productions of the golden age of Chinese films because of its symbolism was Wu Yonggang’s first endeavor Shennü (The Goddess). Wu had spent several years in Hollywood before working as an art designer for Dazhonghua-Baihe Film Company and moved to the Tianyi studio in 1928. He wrote the screenplay after observing streetwalkers who used forced smiles to line up customers. Lianhua accepted his script and asked him to direct the film. It was his good fortune to secure Runa Ling-yu as the lead.

The title of the film The Goddess, was the Shanghai way of describing a woman who sells her body. Ruan plays a prostitute who uses her earnings to support and educate her son. The heroine is forced to become a streetwalker, as it is the only way for her and her child to survive and provide for his education. One night she encounters a gangster as she flies from the police. He forces her to work for him by giving up her earnings at the end of each night. Yet she is able to hide some of the money in order to continue payments to her son’s school. The school board discovers her occupation, and the boy is expelled despite the pleadings of the sympathetic headmaster. When the gangster finds and steals her money, the prostitute, after a brief struggle, kills him. She is sent to prison for twelve years.

More than any other film, The Goddess captured the misery and hopelessness of China at the time for its audience. The final scene in jail depicts the headmaster promising to raise her son, forestalling his being sent to an orphanage. Ruan’s acting in the last sequence displays her complicated response to the news of her child’s good fortune and the kindness of the headmaster. Ruan, as in many of her films is the symbol of China’s suffering. Only as a prostitute could she support her child and give him an education.

Gail Hershatter in her research estimated that approximately one in thirteen women in Shanghai were prostitutes with the total number about 100,000. She also noted that life as a “lady of the night,” while being insecure and tough, was not the worst of all situations for poor women in the city, Silk workers and other female laborers who toiled twelve hours a day earned dimes while call girls made three to five dollars in an evening. 

The Goddess was also a breakthrough for Wu in a sympathetic depiction of a prostitute. He used montage to portray Shanghai at night. He also employed inanimate objects to convey non-verbal messages to the audience. He used close-ups of the prostitute’s qipao in several scenes, including the one where the headmaster discovers them hanging on her wall and realizes what she does for a living....

In the script, Wu showed that Ruan was moral, but evil social forces were the cause of her plight. To Ruan, the film must also have seemed symbolic of her personal life. On screen, the public adored her, while in real life she was considered a member of the show business crowd, seen by many as little better than a prostitute. Her love life and actions were written about in great length and exaggerated in the so-called “mosquito press.” Her work became her refuge.

Ruan felt all the emotions displayed by The Goddess in her own life. Wu, her director, who became famous with this film, commented that:

Ruan is like some sensitive photo paper. Whatever you want from her, she acts out at once, no more, no less, just right. Sometimes my imagination and requirement of her roles are not as delicate and profound as what she experienced. During shooting, her emotion is so undisturbed by anything outside and her representation is always so lucid and real, just like a water tap—you want it on, it’s on, you want it off, it’s off.

Ruan’s acting elevated the role of a prostitute from streetwalker to a heroine. Tony Rayns, a leading Asian film scholar, writes that Wu’s film was not only startlingly modern” but was the first produced “anywhere in the world to deal with prostitution without equating it with moral degradation.”

William Rothman places The Goddess on the same level as the great classics of the silent cinema from the United States, France, Russia, Germany and Japan. He also believes the film in its depiction of the exploitation of women and the hypocrisy of the educational establishment “is passing judgment on virtually all of Shanghai society.” Rothman accepts the prostitute as a strong female:

In The Goddess, the woman never looks to a man for her self-fulfillment because she is not on a quest to fulfill herself. True, she is not in quest of a self because she does not doubt she already has a self. But she does have doubts on this score because she knows her mission in life is to provide her son with an education.

Ruan’s popularity and Lianhua’s need for more income resulted in her being asked to make two films at the same time. She became tense and tired. She worried about the coming aspect of sound because she spoke with a thick Cantonese accent. Furthermore, her next film dealt with a topic that was always at the back of her mind—suicide....Li Lili, who became a popular star and enjoyed a successful career in Shanghai and Hong Kong, often visited the set of New Woman to learn how to improve her own acting techniques. She remembered watching the scene where Ruan, as Wei Ming [the character was based on the life and death (by her own hand) of screen actress and scriptwriter Ai Xia in 1934] takes the sleeping pills:

...she went very silent for a while and quickly went into character: tears started falling from her eyes, and while she was crying she took the sleeping pills. What appeared on the screen was a close-up of her face: she didn’t show much expression, she just gazed as she swallowed one pill after another. However, the look in her eyes underwent a subtle change, showing all the contradictory emotions of a suicide at the moment when her life hangs in the balance, and expressing her thirst for life and dread of death, her indignation and sorrow...she couldn’t stop crying for most of the day...

The younger actress then asked Ruan what she was thinking of when she took the pills, Ruan said:

... unfortunately I’ve also been through a similar experience, but I didn’t die. When doing this scene, I experienced all over again the state of mind I was in when I tried to commit suicide. In that split second, your feelings are all confused: I felt like freeing myself from all the pain of living, but instead I just added to it...

[Ruan’s personal life was tumultuous. Damin who had
agreed to legal separation threatened more bad publicity unless Ruan gave him more money and Tang, her more generous lover planned a counter suit for defamation. The press frenzy played up the scandal and legal maneuvers. Ruan feared public hearings and humiliation despite support from her colleagues who told her to ignore the lies and gossip.

Even amid her despair, there were glimmerings of a new possible future. Li Minwei invited several directors and Ruan and Tang to a banquet to meet visitors from Hollywood and potential funders for his films. In his film about the actress’ life, [Actress/ Center Stage/Ruan Ling-yu Hong Kong:Golden Harvest Films, 1992], Stanley Kwan devotes considerable time to this dinner party, as it was Ruan’s last meal. Maggie Cheung, playing the actress, looks otherworldly at that moment, reflecting the inner emotions of the soon-to-be-suicide. Ruan (in the film) toasts each director with whom she has worked and then kisses them. It is Kwan’s intention here to foreshadow her later self-destruction.

Tang and Ruan argued the rest of the way to their house and continued their disagreement for another hour. Tang blamed her for all his difficulties, and she replied that if he really loved her she could get through the ordeal of the court appearance. The tea merchant revealed that he had a new relationship and then beat her—not for the first time. Ruan finally left the room to say good night to Ah Ying who made some congee for her. Embracing her mother, Ruan took the congee to her room where Tang lay asleep. It was now after midnight on March 8, 1935. She sat down calmly, wrote two suicide notes, opened three bottles of sleeping pills, stirred them into the bowl and swallowed each spoonful.

Before dawn on International Women’s Day, a woman who symbolized the suffering of Chinese women lay dying. Ruan Ling-yu, who had agreed to speak to a girl’s school to commemorate the day, was in a coma. Her lover, Tang, awakened by the heavy breathing, realized that she had poisoned herself. He screamed for Ah Ying to help him get the limp Ruan to an emergency room. The tea merchant decided to take her to Fumin hospital in North Shanghai, run by the Japanese. He chose this clinic because he believed that the Japanese doctors would not recognize Ruan and he, as usual, was worried about his reputation. There were two hospitals much closer to their home and Ah Ying would have chosen them.

Ruan’s death, unlike the screen personas she portrayed, was due to negligence that could have easily been avoided. At 4 a.m., there were no doctors on duty at Fumin. Tang decided to return home to the consternation of Ah Ying, who suggested they stop at other hospitals. When they arrived back at the house, Tang called a few European doctors to come over at once. In the meantime, he hid Ruan’s two suicide notes. ...Ruan never recovered from the coma. She died at 6.30 p.m. on March 8, 1935.

The tragedy could have been prevented. If Ruan had received immediate help after she was discovered by Tang, it is most likely she would have been saved as she had been after her first attempt at suicide. ...

Thousands from the public attempted to attend the memorial service on March 11, but only film people, family members and the press could gain access to Wanguo Funeral Home. Several Lianhua colleagues spoke at the eulogy. Fei Mu blamed the feudal ideology which he said was still in society for her death. Li Minwei said Ruan “had seen all the brutalities of social injustice, particularly those related to the inferiority of women... Protesting with her dead body, she demands justice from us all.” Luo Mingyou insinuated that the actress “did not die of suicide; she sacrificed herself to society and all women.”...

She was buried like royalty. After her body had lain in state for five days and had been viewed by over 25,000 individuals, Ruan’s funeral was held on March 14. Over 100,000 people were estimated to have lines the ten-mile route from the funeral home to Leun Yee Sayzoong Cemetery. Variety used the figure of over 300,000 in its obituary and observed that this outpouring of sentiment outdid Rudolph Valentino’s Hollywood ceremony....

Ruan became even more symbolic after her death than she had been during her life. Left-wing writers used the reaction to Ruan’s death and the outpouring of sentiment by the general population for her short life span as an excuse to attack the status quo, Nie Gannu, a cultural critic, wrote an essay that Ruan did not kill herself, but her murderer was “the residual feudal morality that still infatuates our minds.” Film critic Chen Wu agreed that feudalism was the cause of her death and stated that its representatives were Zhang Damin, Tang Goshen, reckless newspapermen and Ruan herself. The tabloids still scandalized the dead actress with lurid stories about her sex life. Some even linked her suicide with her role in “New Woman.”

The Central Chinese Daily News speculated that she killed herself because she was affected by all the negative roles she had played. Its editors kept asking in a series of articles who killed Ruan Ling-yu. A far-fetched theory is that she was murdered to hurt Lianhua because of its progressive films and/or its debts. Such conspiracy theories apparently drew on what happened to the Yi Hua studios wrecked by the Blue Shirts two years earlier....

Lu Xun, China’s most famous modern writer, indicted the press with his essay, “Gossip is a Fearful Thing,” published two months later. He wrote “Newspapers are not what they should be,” yet the press still had power to damage individuals: Weak in the face of the strong, it seems strong enough to those weaker than itself; so although sometimes it has to suffer in silence, at others it still shows its might. And those like Ruan Ling-yu make good copy for the display of power, because, although a celebrity, she was helpless. Your small townsfolk love to listen to scandals, especially scandals about someone they know....Since everyone knew Ruan Ling-yu from the films, she was good copy for papers wanting sensational news and could at least increase their sales. Readers seeing items about her would think: “Though I am not so beautiful as Ruan Ling-yu, I have higher standards.” Or, “Though I am not so able as Ruan Ling-yu, I come from a more respectable family.” Even after her suicide, people might think: “Though I am not so talented, I am braver—I have not committed suicide.” It is certainly worth spending a few coppers to discover your own superiority. But once the public has these opinions of a professional artist, that is the end for her. So if instead of talking loftily about social systems or strength of character which we hardly understand ourselves, we put ourselves in her place, we can see that Ruan Ling-yu was telling the truth when she said, “Gossip is a fearful
thing.” And those who thought the newspaper reports had something to do with her suicide were telling the truth, too.

Fascinating still is Christian Henriot’s study of prostitution in Shanghai which noted that suicide was common among high-class courtesans who could either find nor refuse a husband. The author writes that sometimes suicide “provided postmortem proof” of a courtesan’s honesty. In a curious way, Ruan’s identification with her many roles as courtesans and prostitutes may have contributed to her myth and her death....

Just as Marilyn Monroe’s turbulent past and suicide gave rise to a Hollywood legend, Ruan’s private life and its lurid details, as reported in the tabloids, provided Shanghai with a dramatic episode in its history. Both actresses to this day continue to be used as sources of gossip, speculation and revelations of lurid personal anecdotes....

Ruan’s short life was a story of an individual rising to prominence against all odds. She struggled to get an education, worked diligently to learn the craft of acting, supported her family and remained loyal to her professional colleagues. Ruan showed warmth with other actresses and had a strong work ethic at the studio. Directors and actors at Lianhua knew how talented she was but also realized that, outside of her professional life, she had no one to help her. She was naïve in dealing with those who took advantage of her childlike innocence.

What is known are her surviving films. They demonstrate to those who have the opportunity to screen them that she was one of the greatest actresses of the silent cinema. Her melancholy and her relationship with the camera dominate each scene where her character is humiliated or beaten down by the feudal society, only to rise up again and struggle on. Even today, audiences who view her films are moved to tears. Ruan Ling-yu’s life and career provide a legacy to the Golden Age of Chinese Cinema in the 1930s.

Chen Kaige (Oscar nominee for Farewell My Concubine in 1994) to Jonathan Landreth, Jan 5, 2006:

Chen: I see the 1930s, when China was facing invasion from Japan, as a valuable period because the films made in Shanghai showed the reality of the society at that time. That’s very important.

Q: Who are your favorite directors from that period?

Chen: Wu Yonggang is really good. ‘Shennu’ (1934) could be considered the best film made in the 1930s. I really love that movie. Although it’s a silent film, you can see in it the real meaning of life.

Coming up in the Buffalo Film Seminars
XII, Spring 2006

Jan 31 Wolfgang Staudte The Murderers are Among
Us 1946

Feb 7 Akira Kurosawa The Seven Samurai 1954
Feb 14 Stanley Kramer Inherit the Wind 1960
Feb 21 Gillo Pontecorvo The Battle of Algiers 1965
Feb 28 John Boorman Point Blank 1967
Mar 7 Fred Zinneman A Man for All Seasons 1966
Mar 21 Robert Bresson Au Hazard Balthazar 1966
Mar 28 Richard Brooks In Cold Blood 1967
Apr 4 Ousmane Sembene Xala 1974
Apr 11 Wim Wenders Wings of Desire 1987
Apr 18 Andre Konchalovsky Runaway Train 1985
Apr 25 Karel Reisz The French Lieutenant’s Woman
1981