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TITLE

The film, *The Goddess*, delivers a fairly transparent narrative which portrays the contentious duality in the life of a caring mother ostracized for working as a lady of the night. Perhaps most obvious -if you know any Mandarin- is the film’s untranslated title, *shennü* (神女), which can be interpreted as “goddess” or “prostitute” depending on the context. An aspect of the film that is not quite so clarion, however, is its critique of the effects modernization has had on the condition of the worker. Because he is introduced as a troublesome bully and dies a troublesome bully, it is easy to write off the boss as a static character whose sole purpose is to antagonize the mother. The boss’s character may not change much during the film, but impulse aside, I think he serves as much more than a simple antagonist. I think he represents a tragic figure; the result of contradicting pressures forced on the common person during their pursuit of a modern lifestyle.

~~What it means to achieve~~ the ideal modern lifestyle is revealed early in the film when the mother leaves her home to work the streets. At minute 00:04:44, she exits the frame riding a rickshaw, and the camera fades into a low-level, low-angle shot of Shanghai’s nighttime skyline lit up by neon department store signs. Two of them belong to the illustrious, Sydney-backed   
Sun Sun (新新) and Sincere (先施) department stores.[[1]](#footnote-1) Members of The Four Great Companies, these two department stores supplied Shanghai with modern goods like soda drinks and cosmetics.[[2]](#footnote-2) They tower over the camera’s viewpoint in this shot and serve as idealized symbols of socioeconomic status in the modern world. To achieve the ideal modern lifestyle means becoming a successful businessperson like the owners of the department stores.

After revealing the ideal of a modern lifestyle with its shining lights and business ownership, the skyline scene immediately dissolves into a ground-level, long-distance shot of nicely dressed people scurrying about at the foot of the department stores staring through storefront windows and purchasing modern trifles. A pawn shop is found in the background and herein lies the inherent contradiction modernity imposes on the lives of characters like the boss. The pawn shop embodies the contradiction that impacts people like the boss. Like the owners of the department stores, pawn shop owners desire the success and happiness that is expected with the modern lifestyle, yet never achieve the status because they can only be as modern as the used goods they sell. The pawn shop owner belongs to the *xiao shimin[[3]](#footnote-3)* consisting of clerks and shopkeepers who reside ~~somewhere~~ in the lower middle class and ultimately end up stronger consumers than producers. The *xiao shimin*, or petit bourgeoisie is where the boss also resides. The more rigorously the boss pursues the idealized modern lifestyle, the more entrenched in consumerism he becomes. He embraces consumerism because it the only obtainable aspect of his ideal.

Contrary to the happiness he believes he will enjoy as a member of the petit bourgeoisie, the boss’s attempt at a modern lifestyle traps him in a self-destructive cycle of consumerism. To solidify this point, Wu Yongang includes an objective shot in *The Goddess* at the eleventh minute where the boss is observed through the bars of a staircase handrail smiling and gambling his monies away in a room full of people. He loses every cent he has, yet is so entrenched in his mission to live the modern lifestyle that the trouble on his face quickly evaporates. In this case, the bars literally represent the boss’s imprisonment by consumerism. Next, the camera follows him as he leaves the table and stares out the window. Again, his face is framed by two bars (the boards in the window’s framing) as if pointing out that even though he is broke, and even though his life really bears no reflection of the modern lifestyle he pursues, he will not be shaken awake to ever realize the folly of his dream.

A match on action occurs when the view outside the window is revealed to be the Shanghai skyline; the film’s metaphor for the modern lifestyle. This time, however, the skyline appears at nearly eye-level, and suddenly the mother’s image is superimposed over the scene alongside the buildings. Even though the mother, as a prostitute, has also failed to acquire the happiness of the ideal modern lifestyle, the boss has mentally equated her to modernity and thinks she will enable him to achieve the lifestyle he desires.[[4]](#footnote-4) Near the end of the film it becomes apparent this is not true and he will never achieve a modern lifestyle, but he is too fixated on his ideal. Tragically, he will never see the bars that imprison him and sever his dream from reality.

The boss devises a crooked plan to seize the modern lifestyle he craves and smiles smugly to himself. His plan? He will force the mother to support him in a prostitute-pimp relationship. He gloats to himself and the mother’s image disappears just as abruptly as it appeared. Though she plays a vital role in the boss’s delusional plan, she is forgotten as soon as the boss begins dreaming of his modern future. The reason the skyline appears at nearly eyelevel is because the boss already looks upon the scene as though he were an equal member. He thinks he is making his own good fortune like the department store owners and is dependent on no one else.

The boss has effectively persuaded himself that he is still an independent man and justifies his exploitation of the mother by relying on the fact that he protected her from police once. At this early juncture in the film, we have witnessed the boss’s desperate and evil conniving ways. Already eleven minutes into the film, it becomes apparent there will probably be no further development of the boss’s static, antagonistic character, but this is not true! There is one subtle change that takes place in the film and it can only be noticed at the very beginning and end of *The Goddess*. The subtle detail that is easily overlooked is the wallpapering of the boss’s room and the wallpapering of the room he gambles in.

When the mother first takes shelter from the police in the boss’s room (00:09:30 in the film), his walls are covered in newspaper. In the scene ~~I described~~ where the boss is ~~observed~~ gambling, there is no newspaper ~~on the walls of the room~~ at all. The change ~~to note~~ is that at the end of the film, the newspaper in the boss’s room has vanished and the gambling den is plastered in it ~~at (~~01:03:00). This is ~~probably~~ the only character development the boss receives in the entire film. It represents the spread of the ideals associated with the pursuit of the modern lifestyle. The idea started as individual musings by common people like the boss, but quickly spread like a virus to the public space represented by the gambling den. The spread of the modern ideal, which could also be compared to the spread of a sensationalist article in a newspaper, is evidenced by the fact that the boss has thugs at his side throughout the film and spends his time and money with people who assumedly engage in similar activities. Near the end of the film, the public space has been overwhelmed by an ideal of modernity that cannot be achieved and can only corrupt.

The subtle change in newspapering is the reason the boss should not be considered a simple antagonist. From the moment he decided to exploit the mother, the stage was set for his own tragedy which parallels the mother’s in the sense that they both pursued ideals in their lives that were almost entirely unobtainable and ultimately paid a large price for their actions. In the boss’s case, he could no longer be freed from his spiraling consumerism. To borrow the disparaging words of economist Gonda Yasunosuke who spoke of modern girls and modern boys in Japan, the modern lifestyle the boss pursued “connected [him] to the petty bourgeoisie” with deep roots in consumerism and “no direct connection to labor.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The world he lived in prescribed an unrealistic, modern lifestyle as a successful owner of a massive business. In his pursuit of this end, he grew completely irrational. He sold nothing, yet believed he did because he enjoyed a fairly steady income from stealing the mother’s earnings. He was not working, yet believed he was because he passively worked as a procurer. The boss internalized unrealistic ideals and, like all the other gamblers in the gambling den, publicly pursued activities to achieve that ideal, but ultimately grew visibly corrupt.

Unfortunately for the boss, modernity cannot exist in the form he embraced. This is why his purpose in the film is not to serve solely as the antagonist to the mother, but as the symbol of the negative effects the unrealistic and conflicting ideals modernity had on regular people. His character is tragic because he pursued the life of a wealthy businessperson, but ended up dying in a gambling den because he lost himself in a world of insatiable consumerism where he mistreated everyone. Because the boss and the mother both played tragic roles in *The Goddess*, I believe the boss should not be villainized, but rather pitied because he was just another person who lost his way in pursuit of the unobtainable.

1. Positive aspects

This paper offered an interesting, alternative reading of an underappreciated character, the male villain in *The Goddess*. Instead of depicting him as a black-and-white, flat character, the author argues that he is an important character, who is a victim of modernization, victimized as much as the main character of the prostitute. The author argues this point using solid visual analysis for the most part, and the author has a great eye to visual detail. I particularly enjoyed his/her observation about the newspaper missing and reappearing in the public space (though I did not necessarily agree with the reading of the scene).

1. Things that need improvement

The writer needs to work on producing a more concrete analysis that comes from visual evidence, not from the writer’s own subjective opinions. I did not understand how the writer reached some of the conclusions—like how the newspaper appearing in the public space was somehow an indication of a “modern life spreading like a virus,” or the quote about how “He was not working, yet believed he was because he passively worked as a procurer.” These statements seem to read into the psychology of the character, instead of showing how the character believed in such a thing through strong textual evidence.

The writer also needs to work on development of thought. It felt like the writer wanted to just make one point: that the boss is not a simple villain. Although this was clearly argued by the evidences cited, it never really developed into anything innovative. The main thing the writer needs to do is to organize the paragraphs by the writer’s thought development. Note how most paragraphs begin with a description of a scene (“A match on action occurs when the view outside the window is revealed to be the Shanghai skyline”) instead of the writer’s analytical thought. Try to do the latter next time, and it might help bring out the thoughts. The visual observations are great, but they need to be used as evidence, not as the main points.

1. Grammatical/Stylistic Notes

The writer needs to work on writing in a more concise style. Unnecessary phrases are inserted throughout the paper, which obstructs the reader’s comprehension. Please note some examples where I have crossed off phrases like “I think,” along with some repetitions.

Two minor points (see highlighted parts):

-two independent phrases require a comma before “and”

-use double hyphens to insert phrases, not single hyphens

1. Grade

B: The idea is good, visual analysis is fine, but the arguments need more evidence and development; Style needs to be more concise and clear.

1. John Fitzgerald, “Equality and the ‘Unequal Treaties’: Chinese émigrés and British colonial routes to modernity,” Bryna Goodman and David Boodman, *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday and the World*. Abingdon: Routledge. (2012), p.194. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/先施 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Miriam Hansen, “Vernacular Modernism,” p.305. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Though not said in class, I derived these ideas from our lectures [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Barbara Sato, “The Modern Girl as a Representation of Consumer Culture,” p.72. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)