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Children of Prostitutes in 1930's China: Comparing Portrayals in *Goddess* and "Crescent Moon"

In 1920's and 1930's Shanghai, historian Gail Hershatter argues, "The regulation against children in brothels sought to keep the sale of sex hermetically sealed off from a clearly defined realm called childhood" (Hershatter 1997: 213-214). This concept of childhood, defined by its distance from prostitution, did not reflect the reality that many children in early twentieth century Chinese cities did indeed have contact with brothels and prostitution, "not necessarily ministering to the sexual needs of depraved customers, but perhaps learning performance skills, visiting their relatives, or simply residing in the only home they knew" (214). Taking Hershatter's findings as a premise, this paper moves from the realm of social history to investigate the intersection of prostitution and childhood within the realm of literary works from mid-1930's China. Wu Yonggang's (吴永刚 1907 - 1982) 1934 silent film *Shennü* (《神女》 *Goddess*) and Lao She's (老舍 1899 - 1966) 1935 short story "Yueyar" (《月牙儿》 "Crescent Moon") both portray the stories of single mothers driven to prostitution in order to raise and educate their children, and both show how the mother's profession as a prostitute shapes her offspring's childhood. Although starting from similar premises, these works present vastly different visions of childhood. I argue that these differences stem from the difference in gender between the children in each of these works. In these works, childhood is indeed affected by proximity to the world of prostitution, but boyhood is affected differently than girlhood. For the son in *Goddess*, boyhood is a time of innocence and hope, despite

economic and social difficulties. Eventually, he is able to escape the world of prostitution and poverty through his adoption by his kind-hearted male principal. For the daughter in “Crescent Moon,” girlhood is a transitory time that offers only a slight respite from the miseries and cynicism that come with maturation and womanhood. In the end, despite her best efforts to the contrary, the daughter, like her mother, is doomed to a fate of prostitution from which she cannot escape. In a longer version of this paper, close-reading analyses of the two works were conducted to investigate these different concepts of childhood with respect to gender. This presentation summarizes the findings in regards to three themes: the moral expectations society holds towards the children, the role that education plays in the children’s lives, and the relationships of the children with their mothers.

Both of the children live in a society with strict expectations of morality and very little compassion, as revealed by the way society’s negative views of prostitution shape its members’ attitudes and actions towards the children of prostitutes, and by the way this affects the children themselves. However, these expectations and their effects differ depending on the child’s gender. For the son in *Goddess*, these negative views take the form of taunting by his classmates and their parents, and of parents on the school board who eventually force the son’s expulsion. However, the son is portrayed as too innocent to understand his mother’s shame, and he does not understand the social boundaries that separate him from his peers. For the daughter in “Crescent Moon,” society’s moral expectations are manifested by her innate knowledge that she is different from her peers, her deep shame in regards to both her poverty and her mother’s profession, and her fear of potential ridicule by her classmates if they should discover the truth. In this case, the

expectations of feminine virtue and chastity in Chinese society also play a role in the daughter's perception of the morals society places on her. At first, she is greatly ashamed and determined to separate herself from her mother. It is only when she attempts to make her own way and discovers that, as a woman with a low place in society, the only way she can earn a living is through prostitution, that she realizes that morals about feminine virtue are a luxury she cannot afford. Indeed, it was often acknowledged by intellectuals in early twentieth century China, including Lu Xun (鲁迅 1898 - 1936), arguably the most influential intellectual of the time, that a woman on her own only had three choices. She may "fall into sin and enter a brothel," "return home" to her male family members, or "starve to death" (2005 [1923]: 166). Without a safety net of male relatives, the daughter in "Crescent Moon" realizes that she will do anything, even sell her body, to acquire enough money to eat. Would the son from *Goddess* grow up to have such a cynical view of society's moral expectations? Given the scope of the film, which ends when the son is about six or seven years old, the viewer cannot know for sure. However, due to his gender and his eventual adoption by his principal, it seems unlikely that, even as he left childhood, he would develop such a jaded view. After all, as a boy he would almost certainly be spared the fate of turning to prostitution like his mother and like the female protagonist of "Crescent Moon." At the end of the movie, the boy's mother imagines him happily pursuing his education and living comfortably with his new adoptive father.

The role of education in these children's lives is also determined by gender. In *Goddess*, education is something that is difficult to obtain, for both economic and social reasons, but which, in the end, is worth the struggle because of its connection with upward social mobility. It is tied closely to the hope in childhood for a better future. In

“Crescent Moon,” the family also experiences the economic burdens of providing a child an education. However, despite the daughter’s initial hopeful view of education, in the end, her education proves next to useless. Despite her schooling, she is unable to find a job to sustain herself. She too is forced into prostitution to live, just like her uneducated mother.

The mother-child relationships in these stories also diverge according to the gender of the child. The son in *Goddess* is portrayed as vulnerable and dependent. The relationship between mother and son is an example of what historian Jon Saari calls the “mother son partnership,” common in China by the beginning of the 20th century, in which the mother makes “bitter sacrifices” in order to provide her son with an education in hopes of him achieving a better future. (1990: 155) Furthermore, in *Goddess*, the son is portrayed as so innocent that he is capable, by his very nature, of transforming the prostitute into a “pure and sacred mother,” as the opening titles call her. The daughter in “Crescent Moon” has a more complicated relationship with her mother, experiencing a mix of shame, anger, loathing, pity, guilt, and finally understanding during various stages. Ultimately, the reader can trace her maturation from child to adult through her feelings toward her mother. After years of separation, the two are reunited near the end of the story. It is then that the protagonist fully acknowledges the cruelty of her and her mother’s fate, remarking, “When she raised me, she had to be a prostitute. Now it is my turn to care for her, and I must be one. A woman’s profession is inherited!” (Lao 1958 (1934): 150).

Despite the challenges of poverty and social stigma associated with his mother’s profession, the son in *Goddess* is still able to fulfill the role of hope for the future. His

mother's own life, with prostitution as her only means of survival, is comparable to the lives of mother and daughter in "Crescent Moon." The difference for the son is that due to his gender, as well as to the mother's dedication and the kind nature of the principal, the boy is able to escape this vicious cycle of poverty. The daughter in "Crescent Moon" is not, and her childhood offers only a brief escape from this ultimate fate. She acknowledges that, for someone who is hungry, society's morals have no meaning, that her education was useless in helping her find a new job, and that she and her mother have been driven to their fate by a society which has left them no other choice.

This analysis is able to provide the reader with an understanding of the authors' views on how girlhood and boyhood may be defined under a very specific set of conditions in which children grow up near to, but not necessarily participating in, the world of prostitution. As Hershatter has established, this was a very real concern during the time these stories were written. An analysis of these two works suggests that the effects of prostitution on childhood have the potential to manifest themselves differently for boys than for girls. Further study along the lines of Hershatter's historical analysis is needed to understand how these differences transpired in 1930's Chinese society.

In addition to the historical and societal implications of this literary analysis, comparing these two very different images of childhood offers another angle from which to view these two stories, and from which to view the questions of prostitution, poverty, and women's liberation that troubled early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals. Most of the existing studies about these two works have focused on the sympathetic way these works portray prostitutes as victims. A comparison of the mother in *Goddess* with the mother and daughter in "Crescent Moon" would lead the viewer to notice only the

similarities between these works. By introducing the element of childhood and comparing the son in *Goddess* to the daughter in “Crescent Moon,” the reader is able to understand one way in which these works differ in their portrayals of the effects of prostitution in 1930’s Chinese cities. This type of literary comparison could be expanded to other works portraying the interaction of prostitutes and children during the 1930’s. The timing of the publication of *Goddess* and “Crescent Moon” coincided with an increasing concern about prostitution, due to both increasing alarm at the physical and moral dangers to society and the way in which prostitution embodied the economic oppression of women. These works are only two examples dealing with these issues in the literary realm.

Furthermore, these works can be viewed as successors to collections of popular fiction from the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” literary movement of the late 1910’s depicting prostitutes through their family ties, which scholar of modern Chinese literature Perry Link describes as showing “how almost every family relationship was destroyed by prostitution” (1981: 176). A comparison of works from the 1930’s, like *Goddess* and “Crescent Moon,” with these types of works from the 1910’s would further illustrate to what extent *Goddess* and “Crescent Moon,” and the images of girlhood and boyhood that emerge within them, are a product of the particular concerns about poverty, prostitution, and women’s rights during the 1930’s.

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