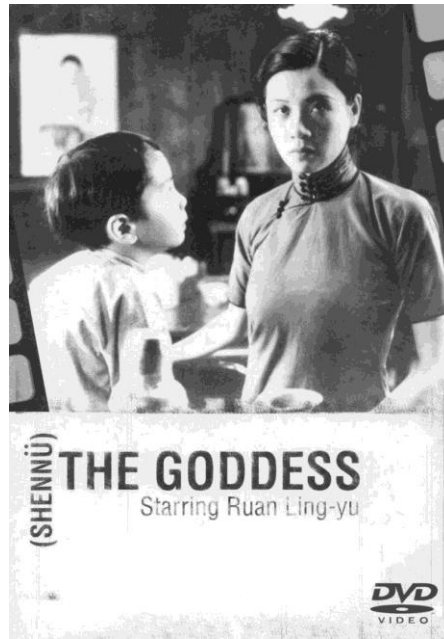




***Shennü (The Goddess)* is a 1934 silent Chinese film on dvd that will be coming soon to a Ligonier, Pennsylvania library as an LVCA donation. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Lianhua Film Company production.**

China 1934 black-and-white 75 minutes (dvd runtime)

live action silent drama with sporadic English intertitles

Lianhua Film Company (United China Film Company) Producer: Luo Mingyou

Key: *indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) designates a juvenile performer

13 of a possible 20 points = *1/2 = above-average film**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Wu Yonggang***
- 1 Editing**
- 1 Cinematography: Hong Weilie**
- 1 Lighting**
- 0 Intertitles: Wu Yonggang**
- 1 Art Direction: Wu Yonggang**
- 1 Music (non-original): Kevin Purrone**
- 2 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

2 Dramatic Tension

13 total points

Cast: Ruan Ling-yu (The Mother a.k.a. The “Goddess”), Zhang Zhizhi (The Boss), Li Keng (j)(The Son), Li Junpan (The Principal), Tang Huaiqiu, Jian Tian, others

Probably the best Chinese silent film, *Shennü* (*The Goddess*) relates a sordid tale of streetwalker existence in 1930s Depression Shanghai, where approximately thirteen percent of the female population survived financially through prostitution. Here one such individual is played by twenty-four-year-old leading lady Ruan Ling-yu, who would commit suicide the following year. Ruan, like the character she portrayed, was an unmarried female living with a man when this film was made. Thus her emotions mirror those of its abused, undereducated heroine. In *Shennü*, however, a protagonist mom scorned by society for violating its moral code doubles as lady of the night, attempting to raise her legally unrecognized child with the assistance of a benign neighbor from the same tenement building.

This doesn’t completely succeed. Because one evening a police sweep of her working area compels the titular “goddess” to frantically seek shelter from authorities. As a last resort, she enters the lair of a bestial criminal known generically as “The Boss” by minions and cowed locals. He makes a deal: protection in return for sexual favors. She reluctantly agrees, a fatal decision on her part.

Secretly following her home the next day, “The Boss” browbeats his victim into agreeing to surrender earnings to him, money which he then gambles foolishly away at night. She “works” while he plays: an intriguingly patriarchal set-up keeping both parties mired in poverty. Knowing this arrangement to be futile as well as morally wrong, the female half of it tries decamping without giving notice. What happens next is somewhat sketchy, as approximately five minutes of footage has been either lost or damaged so severely as to be incomprehensible to viewers. Apparently the gangster’s associates track his chief fundraiser to her new residence, kidnap the infant inside while its parent is out working, then blackmail a desperate mother into returning to abandoned haunts and accustomed payouts. If, that is, she wants her child back. “The Boss” even cruelly taunts Miss Runaway with a claim to have sold her kid to a well-heeled buyer. That turns out not to be true. But such a possibility, once raised,

stays lodged in memory, serving as constant reminder of what could happen if “The Goddess” chooses to rebel again.

Fortunate discovery of a loose brick enables the film’s heroine to begin furtively stockpiling private funds. These enable eventual enrollment of an extroverted son in a private neighborhood kindergarten where he soon establishes himself as a diligent scholar, much to the chagrin of “The Boss” who believes education, unlike gaming, simply wastes money.

Still, the wages of sin pursue an anonymous pay to play veteran. Obedient schoolchildren shun the child of a despised woman sunk in moral turpitude. Puritanical parents threaten transfer of their own youngsters to an institution of loftier social standards. Though a sympathetic principal attempts to overcome such ill-advised prejudice, he’s outvoted by staff and compelled to resign, paving the way for expulsion of The Goddess’s beloved.

Back at home, the gang leader chances to unearth his cash machine’s secret stash.

Caught between private leech and public degradation, can a relentlessly harassed mother somehow turn the tables? In a conservative Confucian society?

Opting for a decidedly non-Hollywood resolution, *Shennü* establishes itself as more akin to German demimonde features such as Gerhard Lamprecht’s *Die Verrufenen* (*The Outcasts*) from 1925. Like its reform-minded European counterpart, *The Goddess* intended to solicit sympathy for underdogs of society. That it most triumphantly does.

What sets *Shennü* apart and above most similar visual pleas for social change is the acting of lead Ruan Ling-yu, who drew upon personal experience with poverty, shame, and abusive male partners to create a heroine impossible to forget. Mostly underplaying her role, Ruan employs a commendable restraint which has worn well over time. Unlike conventional silent film performers, she doesn’t rely on exaggerated makeup, overwrought muggings, or convulsive transports to express turbulent interior emotions. Simple, limited reconfigurations of lips and eyebrows, sagging mouth muscles and jaw, miniscule drooping of one or both shoulders accomplish all communication necessary to unite her feelings with those of the audience.

Montage transitional sequences, alas, suffer from blurry dissolves. They satisfy far less than close-ups of male and female leads conveying unexpected potency by stretching out dramatic scenes, allowing them to be savored, not

merely observed. This happens too infrequently in cinema and when it does should be cherished like a rare treat.

Simple, uncluttered art direction manages to be consistently effective in distilling the essence of lower-class Chinese urban life in the mid-1930s.

It's difficult to properly evaluate lighting due to the amount of damage accumulated on available prints of this film. Indications suggest original illumination had been masterfully handled. However, accumulated smears, streaks, blurs, and blots have rendered scenes all too frequently obscure, spotty, or nebulous. Especially when dissolves occur at transition points.

Kevin Purrone's music score unhappily recalls James Horner's soundtrack to Steven Zaillian's 2006 color remake of *All the King's Men*. Despite Parrone's themes taking chronological precedence, those of the latter benefit from richer, fuller orchestration and a truly tragic accompanying screen story, something not present to an equivalent degree in *Shennü*.

With its story line of prostitution, gambling, prejudice, and murder, *The Goddess* doesn't qualify as fit entertainment for teens or children. As adult fare, the film is positively mesmerizing, mostly thanks to Ruan.

An inserted mini-booklet contains information about silent movie music, an overview of Ruan's life, a compact history of early 20th Century Shanghai, several still photos from Yonggang's film, and a page of DVD Credits.

Both NTSC and PAL versions are offered in this release, each occupying one side of a digital disc. The PAL version renders scenes with slightly higher resolution than its NTSC parallel.

Another special feature is brief audio commentary highlighting three distinct topics: 1. restoration of the film's surviving print, 2. Ruan Ling-Yu's life, and 3. *Shennü*'s sonics. This third area covers elements of score composition and development in addition to decisions about optimal recording of Kevin Purrone's music.