

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

Where Movies and Music Come Alive!

WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH – SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

BOX OFFICE: 01324 506850 | HIPPFEST.CO.UK



Saturday 19 March | 16:00

Daybreak

Dir. Sun Yu | China | 1933 | 1h 55m | Recommended 12A

With: Li Lili, Gao Zhanfei, Yuan Congmei
Accompanied live by John Sweeney (piano)

Supported by the Confucius Institute for Scotland
and the University of Edinburgh

Screening material courtesy of Cinema Epoch

* *These programme notes contain spoilers*

Although the technology to make sound films had reached China by the start of the 1930s, the production of silent films continued for a number of years. *Daybreak*, one of the most renowned of these films, is a powerful political melodrama released in early 1933 by Shanghai's legendary Lianhua Film Studio. Set in the mid-1920s, when much of China was ruled by violent and competing warlord groups, it tells the gut-wrenching tale of Lingling, a beautiful and innocent rural lass, who flees the poverty-stricken and war-torn countryside in hope of finding a better life in the flashy Shanghai global metropolis.

Lingling and her boyfriend, Zhang, find factory work, but are soon surprised by the dark realities of the mean streets of Shanghai. Zhang is fired after he confronts a vicious foreman who has his eye on Lingling. Fearing for his life, Zhang takes a job as a deck-hand on an ocean-going vessel. Soon thereafter Lingling is raped by the sleazy owner of the factory and then sexually assaulted by his odious foreman. She runs into the night and is instantly tricked by slimy hustlers who deliver her to one of Shanghai's many brothels where she is forced to labour as a sex worker.

By the time *Daybreak* was released in 1933, the new and victorious Nationalist government had swung to the right politically and had purged its one-time Communist allies. Rightists considered *Daybreak* to be a "red movie" because it

continues overleaf



silentcinemafestival



@HippFestScot

glorified working people and portrayed the capitalist class as spiritually polluted and treasonous. But leftist critics were also displeased, in part because the film seemed to glorify the Nationalist army and because Lingling's complicated persona as a politically progressive prostitute seemed preposterous.

Nonetheless, *Daybreak* was successful at the box office and enjoys classic status these days for two reasons. First, the lead role of Lingling was played beautifully (and seductively) by the legendary starlet Li Lili, one of the top three or four actresses of the Chinese silent era. Second, the director/screenwriter, Sun Yu, was one of the most accomplished filmmakers in China in the early 1930s and enjoyed a mass following. *Daybreak* was visually compelling and successful not because it was "leftist" or "rightist," but because it was a tear-jerking melodrama. Indeed, Sun had studied theatre and film in the USA at the University of Wisconsin and Columbia in the 1920s. He understood the many appeals of Hollywood melodramas and their preoccupation with the titillating dynamics of sex and violence. Sun never intended to offer up realistic characters. Evil is not just evil, it must be sadistic and diabolical. And good is not just good, it must be selfless and even masochistic.

By Dr Xuelei Huang, Chancellor's Fellow and Dr Julian Ward, Senior Lecturer in Chinese. Asian Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures
University of Edinburgh



CONFUCIUS
INSTITUTE
FOR SCOTLAND