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Decorative or Detective? Recasting Female Agency across Multiple Versions of The Perils of Pauline in China

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Abstract

This article examines the changing representations of female agency through multiple versions of *The Perils of Pauline* and their reception in China. Focusing on the 1914, 1947, and 1967 versions, it explores how Pauline is variously constructed as a visual spectacle, an adventurous heroine, and an active agent within different cinematic and cultural contexts. Rather than treating these versions as straightforward repetitions of the same female character, the article approaches them as sites where femininity, action, mobility, and agency are continuously recast. Particular attention is given to the tension between Pauline as an object of visual pleasure and Pauline as a subject who acts, chooses, investigates, and drives the narrative. Drawing on historical Chinese newspapers, film advertisements, reviews, and other reception materials, the study further examines how Chinese audiences and cultural intermediaries interpreted and negotiated these changing representations in relation to contemporary ideas about women and femininity. Contemporary online film criticism is incorporated as supplementary evidence to illuminate the continuing reinterpretation of Pauline from a later perspective. By bringing film texts into dialogue with historical and contemporary reception, this article argues that female agency is not an inherent or stable quality of the character, but is continually produced through the interaction between cinematic representation, cultural discourse, and audience interpretation. Pauline thus provides a productive case through which to examine how the female adventure heroine can move between spectacle and agency, and how a transnational female image acquires changing meanings within Chinese film culture.

Keywords: Heroine; Female Spectatorship; Gender Discourse; Transnational Cinema; Reception History