

HU Die

Hú Dié 胡蝶

1907–1989 *Film actress*

“Butterfly” Hu was the most famous Chinese actress of the silent and early sound era. Like many contemporaries, she performed under a stage name, which followed her throughout a career that spanned four decades. Once an official representative of China’s film industry under the Nationalist Party, she founded her own production company before retiring in 1967.

Known during the 1930s as China’s “Film Queen,” “Butterfly” Hu’s personal name was Ruihua and her father a high-ranking customs inspector for the Beijing-Fengtian Railway. Moving with her family from Shanghai to numerous cities in northern China allowed Hu to acquire fluency in several Chinese dialects. Although a film actress from 1925 onward, these linguistic abilities proved extremely valuable in aiding Hu to successfully make the transition from silent films to “talkies.” She starred in the Shanghai film industry’s first partial-sound production (the film was recorded with a complete soundtrack, but this was played back on a separate disk which accompanied the feature), *The Singing Girl Red Peony* (1931), which also made her a figure in the burgeoning world of mass-produced popular music.

Hu Die entered the Zhonghua Film Academy in 1924. A year later, she appeared in her first film, *Victory* (1925), and steadily built a career as an actress for studios such as Youlian and Tianyi. During this early period Hu distinguished herself in both “modern” roles (wife, movie star) and those depicting mytho-historical female icons

(Meng Jiangnü, Madame White Snake, Zhu Yingtai, all of which are exemplary though “doomed” lovers in classical Chinese oral tradition and fiction). In 1928 she parlayed this success into a high-paying contract with the

Hu Die (1907–1989). “Butterfly,” as she was known to her adoring fans, reached won great acclaim for playing a pair of estranged twins..



Mingxing (Star) Film Company, whose veteran directors Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu abetted her rise by casting her as the female lead in the long-running serial *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (1928–1931), along with numerous other high-profile Mingxing productions.

As cinema became an increasingly widespread urban phenomenon during the 1930s, Hu Die's commercial successes brought her undeniable fame. Her performance as a pair of estranged twins in *Twin Sisters* (1934) was received as a marvel of both artistic and technological prowess in Chinese cinema at the time, and still considered an example of Hu at the peak of her acting powers. She appeared in the films of highly-regarded scriptwriters and directors, including relatively popular "leftist" social features such as *Wild Torrents*, *Salt Tide*, and *Cosmetics Market*, all released in 1933. This year also marked Hu's ascension to the title of "Film Queen" (*ying hou*), chosen by readers of the popular tabloid *Mingxing Daily* poll. The Oscars-like event constituted a victory of sorts over Hu's chief rival, former Mingxing Film Company actress and Lianhua (United) Film Company silent film star Ruan Lingyu. In 1935 Hu attended the Moscow and Berlin international film festivals as a representative of the Chinese film industry, and had her impressions of the trip published in numerous newspapers, magazines, and journals. That same year, subjected to increasing media scrutiny as a result of her failing marriage, Hu's rival Ruan committed suicide.

Hu's own career was not without controversy. The press published critical pieces concerning her ambiguous marital status, and questioned her devotion to her

country. During the early 1940s she was pressured by the powerful Chinese secret service "spymaster," Dai Li, to become his mistress. Their relationship did not end until Dai's death in 1946.

War between China and Japan dramatically transformed Hu Die's life and career in many ways. In 1937 she fled to Hong Kong and continued making movies until 1941, when Japanese invasion of the colony forced her to relocate to the hinterland "Free China" capital of Chongqing. Hu continued to act until the 1960s, appearing in several features while briefly running her own studio; her filmography includes over ninety titles. Ultimately retiring to Canada, Hu Die's autobiography was published by numerous Chinese-language presses during the late 1980s, a testament to her popularity as the emblem of several remarkable eras in film history.

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Further Reading

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- Zhang, Zhen. (2005). *An amorous history of the silver screen: Shanghai cinema, 1896–1937*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

