

CRITICAL ASIAN CINEMAS



Yang Fan

# Chinese Women's Cinema Through a Feminist Lens

# Chinese Women's Cinema Through a Feminist Lens

Drawing on extensive research of 153 feature films by 65 female directors, this book examines the dislocation between Chinese women's cinema and Western feminist theories.

The author explores how local feminist discourses in China shape major feminist narratives in contemporary Chinese women's cinema and establishes "China as methodology" in Chinese cinema studies, offering interpretive paradigms rooted in China's history, culture and politics. The author introduces frameworks to decode Chinese women's cinema, including a model of socialist feminist legacies, a liberal feminism that critiques abstract female subjectivity, a consumerist pseudo-feminism characterized by double-distancing, a female homoeroticism that (dis)entangles an indigenous matrix of female bonding and a Western matrix of lesbian sexuality as well as the East Asian mother-daughter relationship underpinned by imperial power dynamics.

*Chinese Women's Cinema Through a Feminist Lens* is essential reading for scholars and students in gender studies, Chinese cinema and cultural studies.

**Yang Fan** is lecturer of Cultural Creativity and Meida at Hangzhou Normal University. Her research interests are women's cinema, feminism and sexuality on Chinese social media. Her recent publications are "Podcasting women's pleasure: Feminism and sexuality in the sonic space of China" and "Feminist podcasting: A new discursive intervention on gender in Mainland China."

# Critical Asian Cinemas

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*Critical Asian Cinemas* features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. “Asia” refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

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### **Chinese Women’s Cinema Through a Feminist Lens**

*Yang Fan*

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# Acknowledgements

I finished the final revisions of this book in the last days of the winter semester. Around the same time, I was informed that I would no longer be allowed to teach *Women's Cinema* in the coming term. No clear explanation was offered – only vague allusions to “escalating gender conflicts” and to Western forces said to lurk behind feminism. On the final day of *Women's Cinema*, former students returned to the classroom and sat with us once more, listening again to what many had called the most meaningful course of their university years. We passed around small stickers printed with women's poetry, planning to place them over the pornographic advertisements pasted on the city's shared bicycles. If only the work of undoing misogyny were that simple!

During my two years of teaching *Women's Cinema*, the comment I heard most often was, “I didn't realize that we have our own feminist history!” Each time, it took me back to my PhD years. I traveled to Auckland and Amsterdam to study Western feminism and, unexpectedly, discovered the history of Chinese socialist feminism. Wang Zheng's book *Finding Women in the State* (2017) struck me during my second year of doctoral study. I burst into tears in the middle of the night upon finding the cultural root of Chinese feminism as practiced by communist feminist predecessors, who lived and even sacrificed their lives for the faith of communism and feminism. They were flesh-and-blood women, driven by a fierce determination to realize gender equality, rather than the de-gendered symbols interpellated by the socialist dictatorship as dismissed in the mainstream knowledge production. Ironically, the Chinese translation of *Finding Women in the State* 寻找国家中的妇女, published in 2026 by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, couldn't be sold in mainland China—yet countless feminist books translated from abroad, detached from Chinese realities, circulate freely, safe in their foreignness.

This book is based on my PhD dissertation. Chapter 1, which focuses on socialist feminist cinema, went through multiple rounds of rewriting as my understanding of that historical period deepened. Throughout this process, my supervisor Misha Kavka fully supported and encouraged me to dig into the buried and stigmatized socialist history. Without her inspiration and push, this project would have been much less critical than it is now.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Misha. Your wisdom, best humor and strong sense of responsibility made you the best mentor in my life and my feminist idol. Thanks to Covid-19, Erasmus Park became our happy place during the lockdown. Walking through warm sunshine, damp shadow, barbecue smoke and lamp-less nights, we circled the park discussing feminism while shushing your naughty puppy and “burying” him in a bunch of crunchy fallen leaves. So feminism becomes crunchy and barks a bit in my memory. That was our time and our space, where wistaria hung and you held and smelled it. Then you have turned purple in my memory.

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The final year of my PhD marked a decisive shift in my political stance, from liberalism to socialism, as I came to see that socialist feminism, rather than the past tense, is and should be the present tense. This conviction was gradually shaped and strengthened through the feminist reading group I organized in May 2020, which has run every Saturday ever since. I am grateful to my leftist buddies and regular participants: Lin Fangfei, Liu Xi, Guan Zexu, Su Yihui, Meng Bingchun, Fu Zheng, Baimei Jiadai, Wang Ying, Chen Changwen, Penn Ip, Chris, Zhang Yinbai, Bao Han, Zhang Yu, Li Yajiao, Cynthia, Banban and Chen Qiuyang. Basic yet fundamental questions such as “who are the ‘people’” and “Western democracy or Chinese democracy” ignited tremendous passion for debates, which often lasted until midnight. Also, I would like to thank guests who attended reading group and brainstormed with us: Zhong Xueping, Wang Linzhen, Zhao Yuezhi, Ditu Jie, Li Jie, Wang Hongzhe, Yi Lianyuan and Zhang Qingyan. Their sharing of their own writing, critical thinking and academic experiences inspired and resonated with young scholars.

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I would like to thank my students who attended *Women’s Cinema* for their inspiring discussions in class. Their enthusiastic feedback has breathed life into this research; without them, it would remain little more than a self-entertaining academic game. It is for them that I find the courage to continue fighting for the right to teach *Women’s Cinema* in the near future.



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# Introduction

The orthodox method for studying Chinese cinema is historical periodization, which started by locating the fifth generation of directors, who had film debuts in the late 1980s, and counting back to reclaim generations from the first to the fourth. Explicitly, such a periodization is based on the legitimacy of the categorization of the fifth generation, which has been acclaimed as the Chinese New Wave for its particular aesthetics and film language as well as allegorical narratives. More importantly, its legitimacy was built and consolidated through a series of awards at the mainstream international film festivals or, to be more precise, through recognition in the West. Although the initial use of the term “the fifth generation” cannot be traced, the subsequent term “the sixth generation” was called for and shaped within the European film festival circuit, where the frequent question posed to Chinese directors and film scholars was whether the sixth generation had yet come into being (Dai 2016). The discursive power in the West to decide the legitimacy of Chinese cinema is also manifested in the “Oriental spectacle,” an exoticized pseudo-ethnicity removed from specific historical context and consciously presented by the fifth-generation directors for the cultural consumption of the West in the post-colonial order (Zhang 1993; Dai 2016). Few critiques were uttered against the West-based authorization of the fifth generation by local Chinese media or academia, the latter of which was struggling in the same period to apply film theories from the West (Zhang 1993).

The generational periodization in Chinese cinema scholarship, with its particular tribute to the fifth generation, may be problematic because of its Western-centrism but becomes even more problematic when examined through a gender lens. Did female directors share the glory of the fifth generation? Certainly not as a group. There are female directors, such as Huang Shuqin, Ning Ying and Li Shaohong, who statistically count as fifth-generation directors, but if their names appear at all, they usually appear as an addendum to the male representatives. Their works failed to resonate with the common features of the male-dominated fifth generation, nor did they gain the international reputation of their male counterparts, although Li was awarded the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1995. To female directors, the category of the fifth generation seems not to apply. Even worse, the

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fifth-generation male directors generated allegories of imprisoned women on screen and, for the first time since the leftist cinema movement in the 1930s, brought the female body under the male gaze. A decades-long tradition of representing women in terms of gender equality in socialist cinema was broken.

The Western-centrism and male dominance embedded in Chinese cinema scholarship by taking the fifth generation as the starting point now need to be revised. The primary approach I propose is to foreground female directors' films as a separate category which can be analyzed by its intrinsic logic of development rather than generational periodization. Further, within this category of feature films by female directors, it may be time to question the approach of liberal feminism, which dominates the relevant scholarship. Without decrying the validity of this framework, I would nonetheless like to question the conditions and erasures that brought it into being: How did liberal feminism reconfigure the scholarship of Chinese women's cinema, and how was its power established? How did this Western-derived theory map and evaluate Chinese women's cinema? How might Chinese women's cinema in the 21st century exceed the liberal-humanist parameters that were established by feminist scholarship of the 1990s? If we replace the liberal-humanist parameters with local discursive trajectories when studying films directed by women after 2000, what complexities of gender narratives, previously concealed, can be restored and how can they be revalorized?

As I will show in this book, the scholarship of Chinese women's cinema started with a cautious stance toward liberal feminism but developed into the hegemony of the latter, thus locating the breakthroughs of Chinese women's filmmaking within a Western theoretical framework while ignoring or stigmatizing certain histories specific to the local context. If we replace the Western filter with a perspective that is sensitive to a range of local histories, then recent Chinese women's cinema can be set within a more comprehensive landscape of feminist narratives, even if these narratives at times seem to conflict with each other. Based on such a landscape, I will argue that the major feminist narratives in contemporary Chinese women's cinema are in fact fed by local feminist discourses, which, on the basis of their internal logics and trajectories, overlap with and inflect those "Western" counterparts to which alternative feminist agendas seem "alien."

To elaborate on these arguments, the book will investigate the development of scholarship about Chinese women's cinema from locally positioned to Western-centric discourses. The Western parameters are then remapped onto the local historical axis in order to redefine what feminism means in the Chinese context and suggest a genealogy of feminist narratives in Chinese women's cinema unseen by the Orientalist eye. Based on this genealogy, women's cinema in the 21st century, which itself is a mix of Western and local tropes, will be analyzed to reveal the cultural complexities and historical uniqueness of the feminist landscape in mainland China and its cinematic representations. The time frame of the 21st century is important, as the new century witnessed China's entering the World Trade Organization and thus a

deeper incorporation into global capitalism, alongside Hollywood industrialization and Western-dominated knowledge production. Hollywood currently exerts more influence on Chinese women's cinema than it did in the 1980s and 1990s, as testified by the fact that the mainstream cinematic genre dismissively called "chick flicks" was introduced to China from Hollywood as a replicable genre of commercial film favored by female directors. In this accelerated wave of globalization, it becomes critical for the universal applicability of liberal-humanist theories that are still dominant in academia to be balanced by cultural specificities shaped by local history, economy and politics.

Although I aim to query the dominant role of liberal feminism in the established scholarship of Chinese women's cinema, I do not intend to reproduce a binary opposition of China versus the West. Neither is it my intention to replace liberal feminism with a singular or exceptional Chinese feminism, since the existence of an indigenous feminism is doubtful given that Chinese feminism is a broad hybrid of local and global discourses. Rather, through challenging the authority of the liberal feminist parameter, I aim to create a more diverse and multi-layered space for the investigation of nuanced feminist discourses and their cinematic representations in mainland China. Of course, liberal feminist films will also be closely analyzed as a very important category in 21st-century Chinese women's cinema, but this is by no means the only category of women's filmmaking or imagined form of female empowerment. By committing "to detailed, locally specific" analysis, I strive to avoid "geopolitical binarism" and "methodological nationalism" in order to remain attuned to the "contradictions, ambivalences and connections" between China and the West (De Kloet et al. 2019, 250). While the local differences of Chinese women's cinema will be emphasized in this thesis to shed light on historical trajectories that have been neglected or underestimated, these trajectories are situated within, rather than outside of, an awareness of the flow of global feminist discourses.

### **Scholarship on Women's Cinema: Reflecting Western-centrism**

The term "women's cinema" (女性电影) was coined during a symposium called *A Review of Female Directors' Films in the New Era* held in Beijing in 1986, when over 30 female directors were making films that won almost half of the domestic film awards ("Female Directors" 1986, 111). With the connotations of "women's cinema" already disputed at the symposium, however, female directors and scholars cautioned against the Western-centrism of this terminology and tried to define it in terms of the local context. It was pointed out that women's cinema derived from the term "feminist cinema" in the capitalist West ("Female Directors" 1986, 114). With reference to Western feminist theories of the male gaze and anti-cinema prevalent in the 1970s, some discussants objected to the applicability of "women's cinema" in socialist China, since destroying men's visual pleasure, as exemplified by Chantal

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Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, was not necessary within a socialist cinematic apparatus that did not produce a male gaze ("Female Directors" 1986, 114). An agreement, albeit not unanimous, was made to define women's cinema as films with a "female consciousness," which is essentialized in the female sex and subverts the sexism of patriarchy and historical feudalism as well as its legacies ("Female Directors" 1986, 114). Female consciousness was a local discourse prevalent in the 1980s and early 1990s, widely used by scholars to locate the uniqueness of female authorship, women's experience and female identity in women's literature and women's cinema. Negating and replacing the widespread rhetoric of the socialist era that "men and women are the same," "female consciousness" penetrated into popular culture as well. While the connotations of female consciousness in public discussion tended to be contingent and random (Wang 1997), it had a more coherent understanding in academia regarding its implications for cultural and social structures beyond biological differences (Yue 1991). The symposium was among the early attempts to set up the framework of female consciousness and anchor women's cinema to films made by women with female consciousness.

The significance of this symposium lies in its explicit demonstration that those female directors, often accused of lacking a feminist perspective by subsequent scholars, had knowledge of feminist cinematic theory and practice in the West as early as the 1980s. With this knowledge, they reflected on the differences between socialist and capitalist systems, cinematic apparatuses and theoretical frameworks, specifically on differences between socialist cine-feminism and Western feminism based in "Freud's psycho-analysis and structuralism" ("Female Directors" 1986, 114). Without exploring in detail why this form of feminism was understood in China to be Western, I would stress that the female directors and scholars at the 1986 symposium decided that the concept of feminist cinema was not appropriate to Chinese cinema. Instead of transplanting liberal feminist cinema to China, they drew on the inherited local discourse of female consciousness and tried to theorize it in relation to sexual, social and historical structures. The power relations in social and historical structures were aligned with "patriarchy" (父权), which was used to refer, apart from feudalism, to exploitative cultural institutions, such as Confucianism, the clan family system and sexism ("Female Directors" 1986, 114). This political aspect was neglected in the article that rationalizes the superiority of the concept of gender over female consciousness (Wang 1997, 17). One is correct to point out the confusing uses of the term "female consciousness," especially its inclusion of biological difference which tends to conflate the biological with cultural femininity; however, reducing female consciousness to mere "self-discovery" without a critical or political edge fails to capture its full complexity (Wang 1997, 17).

The initial conceptualization of women's cinema as films by female directors with female consciousness did not last long, because, on the one hand, its multi-faceted inclusiveness left its boundaries too flexible and, on the

other hand, the notion of female consciousness has been gradually abandoned since the 1990s by scholars more enthusiastic about liberal feminism. Subsequent Chinese feminist film scholarship tends to extend the definition of women's cinema as films by female directors with female consciousness to all films made by women, sometimes including male-directed films written by female screenwriters (Wang 2011), especially those that take women as their subject. Inheriting such a practice, I use women's cinema in this book to refer to films that are made *by* women and that present narratives *about* women, from which feminist rubrics can be distilled on the basis of specific usages of feminism in the Chinese context.

The 1986 symposium on women's cinema was reviewed two years later by Chris Berry in his article "China's New 'Women's Cinema'" (1988), one of the first articles on Chinese women's cinema in English-language scholarship. This article brought Chinese women's cinema to the Western eye for the first time. Based on his attendance of the symposium and the Chinese-language report of the symposium published in *Contemporary Cinema* (当代电影) in 1986, Berry selectively translated and annotated the Chinese report, complaining substantially about the consensus ideology (that is, the pressure for unanimous agreement) at the symposium and "discovering" a couple of films relevant to women's cinema in the Western sense. An explicit difference could be observed between the original report and Berry's review regarding the valorization of Chinese women's cinema. In the original report, women's cinema was loosely categorized into two forms, namely "social participation" and "psychological expression" ("Female Directors" 1986, 112). These two categories could be traced back to the tradition of women's literature in Chinese history, matching the "rebellion" and "boudoir" genres, respectively ("Female Directors" 1986, 112). With an emphasis either on the rebellious female image or on female subjectivity, these two categories were valued equally as alternatives to men's cinema ("Female Directors" 1986, 113). However, in Berry's article, the category of social participation, although present in the translation, was paid little attention. His interest lay in the other category, namely that of psychological expression, which he analyzed for expressions of individual subjectivity, women's voice-over and personal resistance against consensus ideology. These attributes are more immediately attributable to liberal feminism than to narratives of women overcoming the gender division of labor in the social sphere, such as to head a factory, a village or a team of truck drivers, in the films of "social participation," which are better positioned as a legacy of socialist feminist cinema.

After selecting the potential Western counterparts from Chinese women's cinema, Berry valorized these psychological films as pioneers of an awakening interest in subjectivity, in marked distinction from men's cinema of the fifth generation. He pointed out that male directors lacked first-person voice-over to convey "men's consciousness" (Berry 1988, 15). What Berry failed to recognize was that the relative absence of "men's consciousness" (a term much less in use than the term "female consciousness") was not because it

failed to take shape but because it was already omnipresent. Men's consciousness was disguised as human consciousness in the narratives of fifth-generation cinema in the 1980s, which did not necessitate a first-person voiceover to convey it.

Discovering Chinese women's cinema according to the liberal parameter of individual agency, Berry nevertheless revealed the gap between these psychological films and feminist films in the West. According to Berry, female subjectivity in Chinese women's cinema was built mainly on the framework of individuality versus consensus ideology, with little acknowledgement of the female-male opposition that grounded feminist approaches in the West (Berry 1988, 14). Thus, Berry failed to accept any film in Chinese women's cinema as feminist. Even *Women Demon Human* (人鬼情, 1987), a liberal feminist film emphasizing the subversion of gender norms, slipped his notice. To Berry, individualism was far from being fully developed in China, which in turn provided insufficient soil for feminist cinema. However, the naturalized link between individualism and feminism remained outside the scope of reflection in his article, which led to his dismissal of women's liberation in socialist China as merely representative of consensus ideology, hence a failure (Berry 1988, 9). His conviction about the superiority of individualism, marginal resistance and liberal feminism seemed to require no explanation, but 30 years later we are in a better position to understand how these characteristics have been unabashedly universalized by the discursive power of Western hegemony.

The parameters of liberal feminism in the analysis of Chinese women's cinema, as initiated by Berry, were inherited by subsequent researchers in both Chinese- and English-language scholarship. Heavily reliant on a liberal theoretical framework, Chinese scholars internalized the Orientalist eye and sought potential Western counterparts in Chinese cinema while devaluing socialist feminist cinema and turning a blind eye to the feminist representations in women's films of social participation in the 1980s and 1990s. This academic practice occurred in tandem with the gradual spread of Western knowledge facilitated by the global flow of capital and China's incorporation into global neoliberal capitalism (Wang 2015). The Western-centric knowledge claims about universal humanity, modernity and academic disciplines obscured the diversity and heterogeneity of Chinese local discourses, among which socialist women's liberation and its political legacies were the most heavily stigmatized and erased (Wang 2015, 112). Skepticism about the women's agency at work in "socialist women's liberation" (妇女解放), a term widely used by both official and ordinary people to refer to movements in support of gender equality, was the major critique used by Chinese scholars who experimented with poststructuralist theories of subjectivity.

The widely quoted article "Invisible Women: Women and Women's Cinema in Contemporary Chinese Cinema" (1994) by film scholar Dai Jinhua is among the first to disavow the agency of female directors in socialist cinema. According to Dai, an explicitly female-conscious narrative appeared

only in the 1980s and 1990s, whereas female directors in the socialist era participated in the film industry but with their female identity disguised (1994). The masquerade of female directors, argued Dai, was representative of the gender-neutral politics of socialist women's liberation, in which a woman was visible only when wearing a masculine masquerade, as femininity was either erased or devalued (Dai 1994). Such a disavowal of feminist progressiveness in socialist cinema was further articulated in Dai's book *Gendering China* (2006). In the chapter "Women's Stories," Dai admits that the male gaze intrinsic to Hollywood cinema disappeared from the socialist screen, but she argues that it was superseded by a variant of patriarchy, namely the authoritative gaze of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (2006). Under such an authoritative gaze, sexual difference was blurred and thus the potential narrative of female subjectivity was replaced by women's loyalty to the CCP.

The CCP is often conveniently simplified as a mere variant of patriarchy and the shift in the gaze as a relay of patriarchal power, but this can occur only if one does not situate the CCP in the socialist era so as to specify the Party's political agenda. While the patriarchy of the CCP was rationalized in that core power was controlled by male cadres, it should not be forgotten that the CCP in the socialist era was a progressive party which pushed forward a series of radical policies benefiting women. The most important impetus behind promulgating and implementing these policies was the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), the governmental organization led by then communist feminists, which operated at the level of central government, municipalities, counties and villages. Applying the politics of concealment, namely "concealing the actual agents who were actively and discreetly maneuvering behind the scenes" (Wang 2017, 50), the ACWF formulated and implemented laws to protect women's freedom of marriage and divorce as well as equal participation in work and equal pay; moreover, at the time, it provided education to numerous illiterate rural women and health care to women living in poverty (Wang 2017). Overlooking the ACWF's active participation in women's liberation, Dai presented the CCP as monolithic and patriarchal. But by expecting and failing to find a narrative of women's resistance against a party that, at that time, spoke for their interests and pushed for feminist agendas, Dai actually transplanted the liberal feminist model into the Chinese context. The liberal feminist model highlights individual feminists fighting from the margins and the grassroots against the dominant patriarchal institution. Fighting outside of the official system, however, is geopolitically specific, given the fact that US feminists did not build a functional women's federation nationwide during the second wave, as did the ACWF in China. The difference of political system, social structure and culture between China and the US should be examined closely before any claims to cross-boundary adoption of a specific feminist model can be made.

Based on such liberal parameters, Dai not only accused the CCP that provided institutional support for women of having a male gaze but also