

ARTICLE READER 3: FEMINISM
COMPILED BY DAMON LEO HANSEN
SISU SPRING 2017 ACADEMIC SKILLS

Does China Need a Feminism with Chinese Characteristics?

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Article details

PUBLICATION: [East-West Connections](#)

VOLUME/ISSUE: [Vol. 5, No. 1](#)

PUBLICATION DATE: Annual 2005

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Does China Need a Feminism with Chinese Characteristics?

Peterman, James, East-West Connections

In this essay, I will examine the crucial question of the limits of the influence western forms of feminism might have on feminism in China. I am specifically interested in the conceptual question of how far we can understand the western concept of gender roles and their critique in terms of ordinary Chinese motifs (Cummings, Chapter 6), derived from Confucianism, of 1) the relationality of the self, 2) social holism (groups are prior to individuals), and 3) the necessity for hierarchy as a means to promote harmony in groups. I will argue that standard Western concepts of gender and gender liberation are incompatible with these first two motifs. I will, however, propose a form that feminism might take if it is to have Chinese characteristics. Such a form of feminism, already in place in indigenous Chinese women's NGOs, would promote a non-hierarchical view of gender relations, not the overthrow of the system of gender.

I will take as my model for the western feminist theory of gender the essay, "The Traffic in Women," by Gayle Rubin. This essay, translated into Chinese, has been influential in both western and Chinese feminism. It is one of the first western feminist texts translated into Chinese. It also has played an influential role in western feminist critiques of gender roles--for example, in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*--but in addition presents what I will call a liberationist approach to gender. Rubin's account of gender identifies the system of gender as a system of a) differentiated and obligatory sexual roles that are b) forced by society on individuals, c) based solely on their sexual anatomy. These assignments d) cause individuals to repress innate bisexual impulses by making heterosexuality the only permissible option, and so arise out of e) unavoidable conflict, which leaves women unsatisfied and resentful. But f) these assignments can be resisted with the effect that individuals are g) permitted to become more whole as a person and achieve h) a more expansive and free expression of their sexuality.

This way of thinking of gender will not gain widespread and pervasive cultural force in China if this analysis is inappropriate for Chinese culture and Chinese women. (1) I will make my argument for this claim first of all by showing how this analysis of gender will not work in a culture committed to the motifs of a) social holism and b) a relational view of the self. For any experience and justified account of the oppression of women in any culture needs to arise out of that culture's conception of what it is to be a human being and what it is for a human being of any sort to be oppressed or liberated. Although I don't defend this general approach here, it rests on Michael Walzer's view that all effective moral critique arises from within a culture or tradition. In this essay, the burden of my argument will be to show how indigenous Chinese feminist accounts of the oppression of Chinese women will need to be both developed and limited by the predominant Chinese views (2) of what it is to be a human being. If this argument is successful, it will follow, as I will argue, that a Chinese feminist project of liberation, will have to

proceed, not by challenging systems of gender but rather by attacking hierarchy and gender inequality in the family.

In his influential sociological account of Chinese culture, *From the Soil*, (Xiangtu Zhongguo) Fei Xiaotong, argues that the mode of association and so social organization in China is differential (*chaxugeju*) as opposed to Western modes of association which are organizational (*tuantigeju*). Organizational associations take place between discreet individuals, who establish relations to others by becoming members of an organization. Relationships between such members are defined in terms of rights and responsibilities members hold by virtue of their membership. Differential modes of association are structured by appeal to what the Confucians refer to as *renlun*, ethical relationships, not in terms of membership. These *renlun* form a web of relationships centered on each particular person. A person is the unique person she is by inhabiting a unique set of relationships that make up her web. The web, however, is not chosen. It is preset, and each person is required to live up to the obligations built into the relationship, which is simultaneously factual and normative (Fei, 22). Moreover, the relationships are differential. To be in relation with another person is to occupy some distinct type of relation to that person: daughter, mother, little sister, and so forth.

This account of differential modes of association goes hand in hand with a particular conception of the morality of human relationships: There are no universal norms or rights governing behavior of individuals toward one another. Rather there are just specific norms attached to each mode of relationship. Fei argues that a clear pattern that emerges in the *Analects* conversations about *ren*, a central ethical concept of that work, is that it is impossible, with this differential account of association, to generate a single universal principle of ethics. Each type of relationship has its own character and requirements. So when Confucius is asked to clarify *ren*, he typically falls back into mentioning specific requirements relative to specific relationships: "the concept of *ren* is in fact only a logical synthesis, compilation of all the ethical qualities of private, personal relationships" (Fei, 75-6).

In the absence of abstract moral rules that transcend particular contexts, how is this form of morality transmitted? Fei argues that the transmission takes place through what he calls "the rule of ritual." Fei contrasts rule of ritual with rule by law. Whereas the rule of law is enforced by political power, rule of ritual is enforced by tradition through replication (Fei, 97). When learning takes place by replication of past behaviors based on examples handed down from previous generations, action takes on the form of ceremony (*li*). Rituals work through "the feeling of respect and obedience the people themselves have cultivated" (Fei, 99). These rituals are sustained by the cultivation of habits of behavior that makes following the rule the natural result of one's lifetime of cultivation and practice of ritual behavior. In this approach, individuals necessarily occupy gendered relationships, which they learn to fulfill by the rule of ritual. They become fully who they are by following ritual.

This account of the relationality of the self embedded in differential relationships is an instance of what I called earlier social holism. What is primary is the web of relationships extending outward to *tianxia*, everything under heaven. A person is nothing separate from her unique relationship to the whole web.

In contrast, Rubin holds that roles are forced on individuals with the result that a person's deeper, original desires are repressed. According to Rubin, the gendered individual is only half a person. The solution she proposes to this problem is to develop the sort of critical consciousness and revolutionary projects that would liberate individuals from gender roles. The underlying ideal is one of polymorphic androgyny that gives individuals the ability to find their own most fulfilling forms of sexual expression outside of any obligatory system of gender. Taken to its logical conclusion, Rubin's view entails that human beings can only become fully human outside of a system of gender differences.

If Fei is right, there is no intelligible notion of non gendered individual in Chinese culture. A person is the sum total of his or her primary relationships. And these primary relationships are, for the most part, gendered. But unlike gender roles, as understood by Rubin, these gendered relationships are not something one can take off. According to Fei, these relationships are both preset and cannot be given up. To "off" them would be to discard those specific relationships that define who one is, and to attempt to get rid of all gendered relationships would be to give up what makes one the unique human being who one is. It would be, in

short, to give up one's humanity. All one can do is either live up to them or fail to follow the norms governing them and become less than the person one should be.

Rubin's view also supposes a feminist version of the Freudian picture of the individual as growing up into a moral stance through conflict with parental figures over how best to satisfy her sexual desire. This particular view of the self as growing up conflicted and frustrated is, according to Cornell psychologist Qi Wang, a cultural phenomenon, not universal. Through a series of cross-cultural analyses of early childhood memories and autobiographical narratives, Wang has shown how young Chinese adults and children differ fundamentally from American children and young adults. Chinese young adults have later first memories, which tend to focus on situations of moral instruction and harmony in relationship to some key figure in her family. Unlike early memories of Americans, which do involve complex elaboration of emotions or presentation of the self as a hero engaged in a quest to satisfy her desires, the unelaborated memories of the Chinese tend to foster a sense of fitting into social contexts. Wang draws the following conclusion: "Autobiographical memories do not fulfill in all cultures the same psychological functions, namely to anchor the identity of a [discrete] individual in his or her past. No doubt, this form of the autobiographical process has become, for a variety of reasons, a central concept in the 'Freudian cultures' of the West" [my interpolation] (Wang and Brockmeier, 2002 59). China is not, however, a Freudian culture. That is, it is not a culture in which a person's sense of self is formed around the ability to construct stories of her past, which treat her as a central character, seeking satisfaction of her desires, in the face of forms of cultural repression. So Rubin's account of the conflict-ridden psychology of gender does not apply to Chinese culture. What, then, is a Chinese feminist to do?

If "offing" the gender system in the name of individual sexual satisfaction is not an intelligible option under the influence of Confucian motifs of selfhood, then Chinese feminists need to consider how to promote feminist liberation with Chinese characteristics. What would this be like? As I indicated above, I assume, following Walzer, that Chinese feminist criticisms and arguments for change demand an appeal to ideals internal to the Chinese moral tradition. I will focus on the family and gender relations. What moral ideal could bear the weight of such criticism if, as I have argued, some appeal to individual, liberation from gender systems will not work?

I would like to propose the fundamental moral notion of *hemu*, harmony, as the ideal upon which a feminist critique with Chinese characteristics could be mounted. Even though traditional Chinese appeals to harmony as an organizing ideal tended to reinforce the authority of fathers and the hierarchy of family relationships, there is no necessity that harmony be understood in this way. We can draw a distinction between false forms of harmony, which come about when those in a subordinate position are not allowed to voice legitimate concerns and complaints and genuine harmony, which emerges when subordinates play a role in producing agreement on a course of action. (3) Although this approach to harmony is a departure from the actual tradition of Chinese families, this appeal to a distinction between false and genuine forms of harmony has its basis in Confucius' *Analects*. (4)

An appeal to genuine harmony, understood as requiring free and open discussion and uncoerced agreement by family members would provide Chinese feminists with a powerful moral ideal as the basis for their critiques of gender inequality. This critique would have the hallmarks of other well-known, successful forms of moral critique in the West. For example, the moral basis of the abolition of slavery in the United States was an appeal to freedom and equality, which were already well-established ideals. But these ideals had not been applied to all human beings living within the United States. More and more, people came to recognize that there was no compelling reason to exclude slaves from the class of human beings protected by these ideals. While in one way revolutionary, this "revolution" was really conservative since it sought to defend the best understanding of already entrenched, ideals of freedom and equality. As a result, the appeal to these ideals had a moral force that a novel, "foreign" ideal would not have had. Similarly, the moral ideal of harmony, understood in the way I propose, would have radical consequences, even while at the same time appealing to an entrenched ideal. This appeal to an ideal of genuine harmony could be the basis for a feminism with Chinese characteristics.

I will argue that a distinctively Chinese form of feminist liberation could be pursued by eliminating the traditional role-related hierarchies in the Chinese family; fathers and husbands, for example, would not have special authority just because they are fathers or husbands. This approach would not, however, require eliminating gender relationships. For a person can be the unique person that she is through her gendered relations with members of her family, but her relationship with her husband need not be one of role-related subordination.

A similar view, but perhaps ultimately different, view has been put forth by Hall and Ames, who have argued that Confucianism can overcome its sexism by substituting qualitative hierarchy for the tradition's gendered hierarchy. They argue that harmony in any group requires some form of hierarchy, but that by substituting qualitative hierarchy for the traditional gendered hierarchy, harmony can be sustained and sexism avoided. Although they do not make it clear what a qualitative hierarchy might be, I imagine that they have in mind that the person with the best understanding and ability in some sphere of activity be the person to whom others will defer in that sphere. So if the husband knows best about autos, the wife defers to him. If the wife knows best about relations with the legal system, he defers to her. Even though this hierarchical arrangement might preserve family harmony, it is clearly not necessary for it.

In conversations I conducted in 2002 with Chinese university students at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou about what makes for a good family relationship, some students offered a different, and I take it, emerging model of relationships within some Chinese families. In this model, harmony is fostered by communication (jiaoliu), equality (pingdeng) and mutual respect (zunzhong). This model, which some students mentioned as an ideal and also as the governing model within their own family, produces harmony through negotiation. Such negotiation does not necessarily exclude deference to a respected figure of authority, but this person has a responsibility to consult and negotiate in making decisions significant to the family. One student reported that because his parents were not educated, they deferred to him to make decisions about his education and professional choices since he would best be able to determine what would be the best course of action. He was not, however, a liberal individual, deciding these matters for himself, for he was responsible for making what were group, family decisions about how best his education and work goals would serve the interests of the family. It is crucial, however, that the authority that this person has rests on it having been given to him by the family.

We can, however, imagine another possibility in which no one is designated the authoritative person. Every member of the family has his or her say and agreements arise as a result of respectful conversation and negotiation. Following such an approach, a father's view could be adopted and become the family's view, but in this case it would not become the family's view because it was the father's. Instead, it would become the family's view because it just so happened that the father's perspective is agreeable to all of the rest of the members of the family. Such families believe that the decisions they make are better than the ones they reject, but they do not base their decision on the authority of any specific person.

For the Chinese family to drop hierarchy altogether, these modes of negotiation would have to rise to the level of ritualized behaviors. Ritualized forms of expression of respect, and ritualized forms of allowing each person to express his or her own point of view, and ritualized forms of finalizing agreements, among others, would have to become key forms of practice within these families. This mode of harmonizing would also have to become part of the gender requirements of family members. Families in which a father refused such modes of negotiation would lose face under the gender rule that fathers must father (Analects 12.11). And being a father, or better yet, a parent, would require protecting these practices of negotiation, for parents maintain the good of the family through modes of decision making that strengthen relations within the family and benefit the family as a whole.

In order to become the sort of person capable of participating in this decision making process, participants would have to have learned the practice of articulating their own beliefs and desires when those deviate from the rest of the group. They would also have to be able to treat final group decisions as authoritative, even in those cases where they decided to compromise their own individual views for the benefit of the family as a whole. (5)

If the family were organized around this model of family relationships, how could it come to grips with the homosexuality of a daughter or son? In a situation in which there are rapid social-economic changes, families would need to find ways to adapt to such change. A family-centered culture will have an interest in maintaining the central role of the family as a mode of sustaining social stability. If, as seems to be the case in urban contexts, there is an increasing acceptance of homosexuality and an increasing number of social networks for homosexuals, families would have to find some way to accommodate this change.

But the model for the emerging family, which I have described above, would seem adequate for these purposes. For if the primary task of parents is to ensure that family interests are served through a process of communication and negotiation based on mutual respect and understanding, the primary role-related responsibility of both parents would be to promote these goals and related practices. The rest of their tasks as mother and father would be subject to negotiation. And the tasks of their children would be equally subject to negotiation.

Young children would be raised to respect the authority of the parents and family and would be expected to contribute to the well-being of the family, by preparing to help the family when they become adults and by contributing to the harmony of the family at every juncture. But parents would be required to acknowledge that the well-being of the family would depend on the well-being of its children. If it were clear that the well-being of a son or daughter would be best served by not getting married, by not having children, and so forth, then the family would have to address this issue. The family would have to find ways in which the well-being of the individuals in the family and the well-being of the family could be harmonized.

Sons and daughter might contribute to the well-being of the family in various ways. Beyond the traditional ways of marrying out or in and bearing children and supplying financial support to parents and contributing to the status of the family, they might also support the family financially and in terms of their own professional success, which reflects well on the family and provides it with financial benefits. A reformed approach to the family might even allow for gay couples to adopt and raise children, who would continue the family line. And while this approach to continue the family line might seem to violate the traditional notion that family be defined by blood relationships, more highly traditional marriage arrangements in rural Taiwan in the 1960s allowed for such adoptions (Wolf 24, 28). Men were adopted into families if the families had no sons. The men would take on the family name and responsibility to parents and family as if they had been born into the family. Families too poor to marry out their daughters would tolerate their daughters taking on the job of prostitute in the cities. These daughters were still good daughters if they maintained their familial ties and contributed to its financial well-being. Such prostitutes could even gain respect accorded to mothers by adopting daughters, who were raised to care for them in their old age. Such flexibility shows how even in an earlier time, families were able to be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances and challenges.

This orientation would not, however, require the elimination of a system of gender, but requires that a system of gender differences be structured enough to maintain the web of relationships that make up a family, while maintaining enough flexibility so as to allow for variability in how those relationships are achieved. Being a good son would encompass a range of conditions, but the authority to determine which would fit a particular person would be the family in which he was a son. This approach would require the development of respectful communication and negotiation practices and acceptance of non-standard gender relations.

Even though there is no good reason to think that families would make these changes without some form of social pressure, there is historical evidence that such pressure can effect change. It is, however, important to understand that effective pressure will have to be pressure from within China itself, based on its own moral ideals. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century antfoot binding movement presents a case in point. Christian organizations within China had long pressed for elimination of foot binding. Although they met with some limited success, their views about foot binding did not catch on as long as these views were received as Western cultural impositions. The campaign carried out by the Natural Foot Society (tianzuhui), initially

through an international leadership, was eventually led exclusively by Chinese (Drucker 189). From 1890 until 1919, the percentage of women with bound feet in a small village south of Beijing fell from 99.2% to 0%. During that time, the natural foot movement had become increasingly sinicized. Alison Drucker describes the process as follows: "Not until [the efforts to turn opinion against foot binding] were perceived as Chinese phenomena in a nationalistic context did a majority of Chinese, at least those residing in urban areas open to educational and media influence, espouse them.... [T]he foreign and Christian roots of the anti-foot binding campaign had to be renounced in order for the victory to be achieved" (Drucker 199).

The moral of this story may be that by a sustained public education program run by Chinese and articulated in the way that appeals essentially to Chinese modes of ethical and political reflection will a reform movement have any chance of success. A feminist critique of gender articulated in terms of a western conception of liberation from gender roles makes little sense in the Chinese context. As a result, efforts to persuade Chinese to support westernized liberation from traditional gender roles is not likely to succeed. An approach to gender flexibility that retains the family as the central web of a person's defining relationships, however, provides a vehicle for feminist critique and reform that is distinctively Chinese. In fact, something closer to this sentiment has been expressed by Chen Yiyun of Beijing's Jinglun Family Center, who states that even though the Center defends notions of gender equality and liberation from the forms of traditional inequality that have harmed both men and women, it does not support some western perspectives:

Our perspective is not quite identical to a western feminist perspective in which there are some radical aspects that we might not be able to accept. There are attitudes towards divorce and women who do not want to marry in order to become slaves to men.

We do not agree with that. (Milwertz 73)

Chen goes on to argue that the Center's approach to lesbianism departs from what they themselves might say. If someone is biologically lesbian and chooses not to marry or to cohabit with a woman that is her choice, and there is nothing wrong with it. But if one's lesbianism is based on personal choice, such a choice is, Chen claims, pointless: "If you are not biologically homosexual, but you want to demonstrate your very special unique lifestyle, well, I think this is a pointless choice" (Milwertz 73). Even though there is no clear distinction between biological homosexuality and a purely chosen homosexual lifestyle, Chen's comments reflect feminism with Chinese characteristics: the defense of the family as a central institution, the need for individuals to find their place in families if they can, and tolerance of individual difference. But what Chen opposes as pointless is individual choice aimed to "demonstrate your very special unique lifestyle." Following Fei's formulation, Chinese culture is one in which one's primary responsibility as a person is "to achieve" those unchosen relationships that define one's unique identity. Choice against those relationships not "compelled biologically" violates one's primary responsibility, which is to control oneself so as to be able to "achieve" those relationships.

Even though this approach to homosexuality strikes western liberals as a violation of human rights, the notion of human rights that liberates individuals from their primary responsibilities as members of a family is likely to make no sense in a Chinese context--or to be nothing more than a formula for selfish behavior. I have argued that a Chinese feminist approach to gender will need to be couched in terms of the centrality of the web of gender relations that make up who each person is. In this framework, gender equality and tolerance for a variety of forms of gender relations is both possible and desirable as key requirements for genuine harmony within families.

Half the Sky, but Not Yet Equal: China's Feminist Movement

By Hu, Alice

Article details

PUBLICATION: [Harvard International Review](#)

VOLUME/ISSUE: [Vol. 37, No. 3](#)

PUBLICATION DATE: Spring 2016

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Half the Sky, but Not Yet Equal: China's Feminist Movement

Hu, Alice, Harvard International Review

The Chinese economic miracle has been one of the most publicized phenomena on the international stage. But what is often neglected in the news and in scholarship are China's domestic and social changes that are inseparable from the country's exponential economic growth. In particular, the Chinese women's rights movement, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, has played a crucial role in China's rapid development.

Unlike the Western feminism initiated by grassroots activists, modern Chinese feminism began as a state policy. Since the Communist Revolution of 1949, women's rights have been driven by the party ideology that women's equal participation in the economy and society was necessary to advance the nation. Despite numerous revolutions and China's ensuing transition to a capitalist market economy, this ideology remained the underpinning of women's rights in China.

In the past two decades, however, contemporary Chinese feminists have begun vocally challenging Marxist state feminism. The 2015 detainment of five Chinese feminist protesters before International Women's Day --and their subsequent release upon popular outcry--is emblematic of deeply seated public discontent toward state policy on women's rights and the influence such discontent can have on the ever watchful Chinese regime. Given both the domestic and international pressure at stake, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cannot afford to silence the country's feminist protest movement. It must treat women's rights as a priority in itself and not simply a prerequisite for its own economic advancement. Indeed, Chinese feminism has its own historic context different from that of the West, but an outdated vision on the issue will not only harm the citizens--it may destabilize the very balance the CCP has tried so hard to maintain.

Feminism and the Communist Revolution

While the Chinese Communist Revolution is known for its overhaul of the country's economic and political structures, it also initiated the modern Chinese women's rights movement. In fact, the first official act passed by the new government after the CCP won the revolution was the Marriage Reform Law. The government of the new People's Republic of China (PRC) believed family to be the key institution in society, and to strengthen the family meant emancipating women. Though the role of women evolved continuously with thousands of years of history and is a product of many traditions, women had generally been viewed as inferior to men in the traditional gender dichotomy. Women were socially and physically bounded by norms of femininity--they were restricted to a domestic role in the home and suffered from foot-binding, a mutilatory practice that made movement difficult.

The Marriage Reform Law was symbolic of the CCP's prioritizing of women's rights. Officially promulgated on May 1, 1950, the national law sought to address the most prominent issues faced by women in regard to marriage and family life. It abolished forced marriage, bride-price (money given by the groom's family for a bride), concubinage, and child betrothal (in which a young girl is raised by another family to become a designated bride). Besides protecting women and girls from feudal practices,

the law also extended the representation of women by guaranteeing women equal rights in the ownership and management of family property, as well as the equal right to petition for divorce. The law even went as far as guaranteeing women the right to keep their own family names--an act that would have been considered not only progressive, but radical by Western standards at the time.

However, it would be misleading to discuss progressive policies such as the Marriage Reform Law without taking into account the government's economic agenda. For one, the Marriage Reform Law was designated to create a "new democratic marriage," relieve patriarchal oppression, and construct a new image of women --so that women can more easily enter the workforce and that families would become more productive. Other reforms, including laws that guaranteed equal pay and equal education opportunities for women, also functioned to help women integrate into the labor economy. Mao Zedong, who had long envisioned the female liberation, believed that women had been a wasted reservoir of labor. Until China could obtain mechanical means of production, he believed that the shortage of labor in cooperatives and communes would be alleviated by women. In essence, the post-Revolution women's rights movement was not rooted in idealist beliefs of human rights but the realist considerations of economic development.

Nevertheless, the new state policies elevated the economic and social status of women in a scale previously unseen within and outside China. This translated into women having a greater voice in decision-making in both the private and the public spheres. Women exercised political authority in local governments and served in high-ranking offices. Many organizations championing women's representation also formed, such as the National Women's Federation. Most importantly, the women's rights movement permanently altered the national psyche in regard to the role of women, and its legacy remains entrenched in society to this day. Women, Mao was famously quoted, began to hold up "half the sky."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Conflicts with State-Sponsored Feminism

While emancipatory in many respects, state feminism functioned as a form of social control. Women's organizations such as National Women's Federation were dependent upon the government and exercised little actual authority. Additionally, any trend that in any way jeopardized the central government's power was immediately quashed. For example, the women's rights movement had led to increased sexual freedom, as "among the poor peasantry, triangular and multilateral relationships are almost universal." The liberalization of female sexuality caused resentment among the more conservative peasants, mostly men. Concerned about backlash and about the image of the party, the government abandoned the Marriage Reform Law in 1953, three years after its introduction.

On a higher level, the party sought to override traditional patriarchal authority with its own authority. It sought to transform family life so that commitment to the party exceeded all other ties. Between the breakdown of the old commitments and the consolidation of new loyalty, however, there was an "intermediate stage of hedonism." During this stage, the government made clear its intention was to solidify collective adherence to the party ideology rather than promote any individual thinking or decision. Women's equality and full participation was promoted so long as it benefited the party and it strengthened its coercive apparatus.

The introduction of the market reforms by Deng Xiaoping, China's de facto paramount leader from 1972 to 1992, complicated the role of women in Chinese society. Once guaranteed a job in the state-controlled economy, women now had to compete with their male counterparts and faced severe discrimination in the market. They were more likely to get laid off, be forced to retire at a younger age, or receive less social support after a lay-off, and were less likely to find re-employment. This regression in women's economic position was accompanied by a worsening of social issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and sex trafficking. More so than ever, this Marxist state feminism seemed obsolete and insufficient to Chinese feminists.

Culmination of Contemporary Feminist Movement

The underlying feminist discontent that had simmered since the 1970s peaked at the 1995 Fourth United Nations Conference on Women, held in Beijing. The conference proved to be a crucial opportunity for feminist activists to access transnational networks as well as build "conceptual frameworks [...] to break away from or transform a Marxist theory of 'equality between men and women.'" Chinese feminists had been in contact with feminist activists from other countries since the 1980s and had been working on developing independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for women's rights. The UN Conference on Women came at an opportune time in which Chinese feminists were able to gather outside support for their causes as well as gain understanding of new concepts such as "women-centered sustainable development" and "mainstreaming gender." These

concepts helped explain the discontent that the Chinese feminists had lacked the language to describe and further encouraged them to imagine gender equality beyond the Marxist framework.

Despite the agreements made during the UN Conference in Beijing, in which Hillary Clinton famously declared "women's rights are human rights," feminist activists in the country have continued to face police crackdowns and government threats. Yet the new Chinese feminist movement has not only remained alive, but has gained traction among much of the younger generation. The younger generation, born years after the Cultural Revolution, feels little allegiance to the Marxist state feminism that had dominated social discourse. The post-1980-ers are well-connected with the outside world, open to foreign ideas, and more willing than their predecessors to challenge the status quo.

The most recent notable case of state suppression involved the detainment of five feminist activists who had planned a peaceful protest against domestic abuse on International Women's Day on March 8, 2015. The police originally arrested nine activists who were involved in planning the protest in their respective cities--Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou--but later released four of them. The five women who remained in detention were Wu Rongrong, Zheng Churan, Li Tingting, Wang Man, and Wei Tingting.

The activists are core members of China's Women's Rights Action Group--a symbol of new Chinese feminism. They are known for their creative stunts and eye-catching costumes during protests, earning them the title "guerilla feminists." Li Tingting, a better known as Li Maizi, has taken part in the protest campaign "Occupy the Men's Toilets," which sought to raise awareness about the inadequacy and indignities of public bathroom facilities for women. In one demonstration, Li Maizi and Wei Tingting donned bloody wedding gowns and fake bruises on their faces. They marched down one of the busiest streets in the nation's capital holding signs with statements such as "Violence is next to you, yet you remain silent?!" and "Love, not an excuse for violence."

Their activism has not gone unnoticed. According to the government, the five women activists were detained for "picking quarrels"--what has become a catch-all justification for the suppression of any dissident. The group was reportedly planning to distribute materials critical of the police on International Women's Day, including stickers that state "Police: go arrest those who committed sexual harassment." However, unlike most cases involving protesters, the activists were criminally detained rather than informally held by the police. This meant that they could be charged and convicted, without a trial.

However, in the process of their detention, something remarkable occurred. Immediately after the arrests, flyers featuring the faces of the five activists with an image of Rosie the Riveter--a popular symbol of female empowerment in the West--spread across Chinese social media. Though the state-controlled news media made no mention of the arrests and detention, informal news channels rapidly publicized the news to the international community.

The response from outside the country was incredible. One Billion Rising, an international movement against rape and sexual violence against women, demanded the release of "our activist feminist sisters," while its members in China provided on-the-ground updates of the conditions of the detainees. On Twitter, which is banned in China, "free the five" became a trending hashtag. Thousands of groups and individuals also spoke out against the government detention, including US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power and US Secretary of State John Kerry, who declared, "We strongly support the efforts of these activists to make progress on these challenging issues, and we believe that Chinese authorities should also support them, not silence them."

On April 13, 2015, the detainees were released--undoubtedly a result of intense international pressure. Yet such an immediate and widespread response would have been unimaginable a decade ago. The growth of informal media and the increasing interconnectedness of the world have made suppressing information difficult. Whereas in the past Chinese activist groups were mostly cut off from the outside world, now, the women's rights activists in China have close ties with supporters and feminist groups from around the world. The Chinese feminist activists themselves may not be able to speak freely on the streets of Shanghai or Guiyang, but their voices can now be heard in the streets of Sao Paulo and Greenwich. For the first time in history, the term "global feminism" may be close to a reality.

What does this mean for the leadership of China? It means continuous suppression of feminist activists, including the raiding of women's rights NGOs and monitoring of the five released detainees, will not gain the government any supporters on a domestic or international level. On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the milestone UN Conference on Women in Beijing, the CCP had appeared to be making progress on women's rights with the introduction of the long-awaited first anti-domestic violence law. Yet, given the arrest and detention of the peaceful feminist activists--and that being only one of the numerous cases of state suppression of women's activism--any state reforms seem to be only words on paper. The anti-domestic violence law may be simply another Marriage Reform Law--convenient for the government, insufficient for the people.

The Chinese government cannot afford to keep repeating incidents like the March 8 detentions. Not only will it lose ground with the international community, but it will also draw attention to already existing concerns domestically. The most rational and most forward-looking decision would be to cooperate with feminist groups instead of criminalizing them.

Feminist organizations such as China's Women's Rights Action Group are not arising out of nowhere. Their causes reflect the commonplace concerns of the domestic population. While they share ideologies with feminist movements in other parts of the world, they function within their unique cultural context. Feminist activist groups are cautious about not appearing to be too "radical" and alienate the larger population. Though women's rights have gained traction in the generation, the widespread stereotype of feminists as threatening extremists is ever present in China. As emphasized by Ye Jinghuan, a friend of the detainees and fellow activist, "Those five kids are so moderate ... They were never radical or violent."

Indeed, their proposals are "moderate" and practical. Building more public bathroom facilities for women, addressing domestic violence, and other related causes seem more like common sense than revolutionary sentiment. As stated by Feng Yuan, a women's rights activist, "We cannot understand why the authorities are so tough this time. What the activists want is exactly what state policy on women says: that women should be equal."

Yet moving toward true gender equality requires nothing short of a small revolution in the attitude of the CCP. It needs to end police suppression as its foremost policy and begin to prioritize local and national cooperation and communication with the feminist groups. The activists themselves are aware that they cannot realize their goals without the support of the state and are open to such a partnership. The state should seize this opportunity rather than punish those who believe in it.

Not too long ago, the women of China helped transform the country from an impoverished, rural society to a global economic powerhouse. But it has come time to realize that the rights of half of the population hold importance beyond the state development agenda. If women are half the sky, the Chinese government must start holding up its part.

staff writer

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ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLE *CineAction*

Identity and the Politics of (Self) Representation: Women in Chinese Cinema 1985-2015

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Article details

PUBLICATION: [CineAction](#)

VOLUME/ISSUE: [No. 98](#)

PUBLICATION DATE: Spring 2016

CONTRIBUTORS:

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Identity and the Politics of (Self) Representation: Women in Chinese Cinema 1985-2015

Li, Jinhua, *CineAction*

The question of women has remained a central concern in the cinematic imagination of Chinese consciousness and sociopolitical discourse on gender identity since the inception of commercial Chinese cinema in the mid-1980s, when the landscape of Chinese society, culture, and economy underwent fundamental transformations. In the three decades between 1985 and 2015, cinematic representation of women and female identity has become a contested site where national political exigencies, globalizing market consumerism, and renegotiation of female gender identity intersect. As Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu

rightfully observes, "womanhood is often a trope for the nation, a national allegory." (1) Chinese cinematic representation of women is both reminiscent of her socialist political conceptualization within the grand masculine narrative of nation (rebuilding, and also powerfully symptomatic of the projected imagination of her contribution and potentials in the nation's postsocialist future. In other words, the cinematic reconfiguration of woman is always contextualized by a negotiation between two opposing yet symbiotic forces--one that is retrospective and normative, and the other prospective and regulative.

The complex interplay between these two forces serves as a crucial yet overlooked undercurrent that illuminates the gender politics and identity discourse that simultaneously delimit and inspire women's cinematic representation in the past three decades. This article critically examines filmic representations of women in this transformative period and engages them as a prism to refract the trajectory of Chinese cinematic feminism as it underwent several stages, experimenting and exploring gender expression and identity politics. This article argues that socialist cinematic (re)imagination of women displaces feminist dilemma with national predicaments and political crisis, thereby dissolving the urgency and particularity of Chinese women's identity and gender consciousness. In other words, when women's struggles are mediated as national challenges and her predicaments as collective issues, such representation purposefully subjugates women's gender subjectivity to the masculine emancipatory discourse and the grand narrative of nation-building and economic globalization. Investigating representative films that significantly reshape the representation of women as Chinese feminist cinema in this transitional period moves from socialist feminism to postsocialist postfeminism, (2) this article further argues that an emerging feminist cinema in the last three decades potentializes an alternative representation of self-authorized female subjectivity that reinscribes desire, sexuality, and agency.

It must be noted that this article does not intend to be a comprehensive investigation of women's cinema in China in the last three decades; nor is it a systematic study of major works and filmmakers in feminist cinema. Rather, it is an attempt to (re)engage the critical discourses on women and nation in Chinese feminist cinema from a historicized and alternative vantage point that accentuates not only the dynamics of their symbiotic yet centrifugal interplay, but more significantly the trajectory of the cinematic representation of women in contemporary China as a result of such complex intersectionalities between women and nation as narrative frameworks, politicized tropes, and visualized subjects. Thus, the periodization becomes a crucial element that provides transitional context for the current discussion, because it is during the last three decades that feminist Chinese cinema has re-examined the representation of women vis-a-vis the nation-state, problematizes the subjugation of gender discourse to narratives and narrations of the nation, and begins to obtain national, critical, artistic, sociopolitical, and cultural independence.

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Identity, Crisis, and Desire: The New Woman in Post-Mao Cinema

As China entered its postsocialist era in the 1980s, the cinematic representation of women demonstrated cautious but earnest efforts to re-examine the concept of female gender identity and challenge the politicized imagination in post-Mao socialist cinema. (3) Historicized by critics as "the cinematic New Wave of the 1980s and 1990s in China", (4) the first decade may be characterized by the encounters between China and the West in almost every aspect of its sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and intellectual development. While China's economic development and liberal political atmosphere exposed Chinese filmmakers to Western cinematic feminist theories and critiques in the 1980s since the government adopted the 'Reform and Open-up' policy, (5) these imported critical theoretical apparatuses were only "adopted piecemeal," (6) and were "not readily applicable to the Chinese context and cases." (7) This incompatibility between Western cinematic feminist theories and Chinese films was a result of intricate and politically-charged interactions among many issues, including the differences of geopolitical locality, historical contexts, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic development, etc. But one of the most significant dissimilarities between Chinese women and their Western counterparts is the former's lack of gendered sexuality and consequently the absence of a visual language of its representation. Women in socialist Chinese cinema were genderless, sexless, and difference-less, in the sense that they were "not looked upon as an object of male desire and pleasure" but instead "viewed as a sister in revolutionary struggles, a comrade in the socialist cause." (8) Thus, unlike their Western counterparts in the second-wave of feminism, who occupied a politically empowering vantage point by exploiting their marginalized position and objectified sexualization to disrupt the normative dichotomy of "men do the looking/women are looked at" in classical Hollywood cinema, women in socialist Chinese cinema were confronted with the exigent crisis of the lack of gender identity.

In filmic narratives, an ardent attempt to reinscribe female sexuality and women's desire in feminist cinema became a dominant concern among the first generation of women filmmakers in postsocialist China. They endeavored to address the ontological questions that define Chinese feminism in that they recognize its social, political, cultural, and ideological specificities. What does it mean to be a woman in China? How should women seek to express their desires and construct their identity? What are the challenges specific to Chinese women? And above all, how can cinematic texts be employed to problematize the de-

sexualized, subjugating, and normative representation of women in socialist cinema? Among films about women in the decade between 1985 and 1994 that experiment with an alternative portrayal of women and explore new filmic language for feminine gender expressions, Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human* (1987) and Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (1994) merit close critical examination as each employs innovative gender narrative rhetoric and engages poignant politicized discourses on women's self-representation and introspective identity-formation. These two films epitomize the two distinctive foci in cinematic feminism as both attempt to remap women's identity vis-a-vis a changing social reality. While *Woman Demon Human* potentializes the establishment of female agency and subjectivity as performative, transgressive, and disruptive in a dichotomous masculine society, *Ermo*'s director, Zhou Xiaowen chooses to point his camera at rural women and boldly positions women's sexuality at the center of his narrative framework both as an empowering subject-position and as a provocative identity expression/formation.

Huang Shuqin, one of the most significant female directors of the Fourth Generation Chinese filmmakers, allegorizes theatrical performance in *Woman Demon Human*, her daring portrayal of a successful female opera artist to explore women's socio-gender identity and artistic expressions of the dynamics between the self and society. The layered narrative structure and its highly complex psychological inquiry into women's gender consciousness earned the film the fame of being "the only women's film" in China. (9)

Woman Demon Human's pronounced inquiry into women's gender identity and its problematization of socialist feminism is symptomatic of the keenly felt identity crisis among the new generation of filmmakers who recognized the incompatibility between contemporary social, political, cultural, and historical realities in China's early stage of postsocialism in the late 1980s and the revolutionary discourse of feminist representation. This crisis underlines the film's urgent search for an alternative feminism that begins with philosophical investigations of femininity and women's self-discovery. *Woman Demon Human* portrays the life and art of actress Qiu Yun (Xu Shouli), whose character is based on the real life opera actress Pei Yanling, and traces Qiu's attempt to define her own layered and mercurial gender identity that is closely contextualized by her onstage persona/mirrored Self/gendered Other Zhong Kui, a fictionalized historical man who caught and killed demons and vicious ghosts in ancient Chinese folk tales. In other words, Qiu Yun's portrayal of Zhong Kui both serves as the film's narrative framework and refracts her own performative gender reconceptualization. Specifically, as a woman portraying a man whose story is essentially the encounter with the Other and the constant assertion and justification of the self by negotiating with the Other, Qiu Yun employs her artistic characterization of Zhong Kui to obtain a transgressive gender agency that disrupts the dominating patriarchal gender discourse.

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Qiu Yun's gender transgression interweaves with her encounters with the Other both in her personal maturation as a woman and in her performing career portraying Zhong Kui onstage, and it is precisely by constantly challenging the boundaries between the self and the Other that Qiu Yun defines her gender identity and thereby gains subjective agency. The desire for marital harmony, social normalcy, and emotional happiness contextualizes Qiu Yun's trans-gendered characterization of Zhong Kui, and ultimately allows her to articulate a female subjectivity that is simple yet ambivalent. In a conversation with her father after he hosts a big feast to celebrate the daughter's belated homecoming and her international success as an opera artist, Qiu Yun expresses her understanding of Zhong Kui and concludes, "Zhong Kui is good at one thing. He is a matchmaker and wants to find good husbands for women. I think women should marry well." Despite this unambiguous longing for happy marriage and love, Qiu Yun nevertheless remains silent about her definition of a good marriage and how one achieves this goal.

Qiu Yun's declaration of women's desire and goal is layered with nuanced gender discourses that disrupt normalizing masculine gender dynamics. While Qiu Yun effectively re-constructs Zhong Kui's character as a helper for women in marriages, she rejects the traditional interpretation of Zhong Kui as a man with power and agency and thereby subverts the gender hierarchy by centralizing women's desire and pursuit as the motif of the opera. Thus, Qiu Yun is ultimately able to speak in her own voice not because she is disguised as a man, but in spite of it. Qiu Yun's conscious self-reflexive expression of desire reveals the film's endeavor to represent the New Woman by reinscribing subject intent into the formation of a gender identity. In other words, Qiu Yun's awakening to her gender consciousness and autonomous identity is always circumscribed with determining what she wants. This underlying narrative motif is perfectly revealed in the film's Chinese title *Ren gui qing* [TEXT NOT REPRODUCIBLE IN ASCII] literally "human, ghosts, feelings." While the juxtaposition of human and ghosts suggests an equilibrium between the two domains in Qiu Yun's performance and allegorizes a hierarchized gender dynamic, her emotions and desires are ultimately what enables her to bridge these two separate and potentially antithetical worlds. In addition, by adding "feelings" as the third part of the trivector, the film creates a third realm of identification that is neither human (the self) nor ghosts (the Other), but an alternative cognitive space that both transcends and disrupts the binary structure of the self and the Other. Such boundary-crossing serves as a subtle yet daring analogy for the film's remapping of female gender consciousness through the lens of her desires.

The efforts to re-center feminine desires as an essential component in women's identity formation are visualized in female libidinal pursuits in rural China in Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo*. The eponymous hero of this film *Ermo* (Ai Liya) is a hard-working, head-strong, and resourceful woman whose husband used to be the village chief but now is an invalid and impotent. Having to shoulder financial and familial responsibilities all by herself, *Ermo* decides that she wants nothing else than a 29 inch color television set and works tirelessly so that she can save enough money to buy it, the biggest TV in her village. The allegorical significance of *Ermo*'s story is quite apparent, as many critics are quick to observe: *Ermo*'s obsession with material goods is symptomatic of China's increasingly rapid globalization and consumerism, and as a result of which rural areas suffer from an uneven economic development and an incomplete modernization. (10) Such critiques crystalize the masculine cultural discourse that renders women the bearer of the burden of national economic hardships, turning her dilemma into a collective struggle. While the cultural politics certainly rings true in problematizing postsocialist China's economic globalization, it does not fully recognize the significance of *Ermo*'s gender dynamics and its attempt to legitimize and celebrate women's sexuality and their libidinal desire.

Ermo reimagines a New Woman in China's vast rural area who is financially independent, sexually-liberated, and psychologically sophisticated. *Ermo*'s encounter with urbanity as she takes frequent trips to a nearby city to sell her noodles not only allows her to support an entire family when women in rural areas have extremely limited access to well-paying jobs, but more significantly transforms her identity and enables her to satisfy long-suppressed sexual desire. But it is her unabashed and unburdened pursuit of bodily pleasure that is ultimately liberating and transformative. *Ermo* strategically displaces the debilitating male gaze and thereby effectively dissolves the hierarchized gender visual politics by mediating *Ermo*'s sexuality through her highly eroticized noodle-making scene. As the camera positions *Ermo*'s laboring body and subtly sexualizes her movements with carefully punctuated close-ups and trailing sound tracks, the metaphorical suturing of commodified labor and female libidinal release gives *Ermo* a total autonomy of her economic and sexual being.

Ermo ends on an ambivalent note when *Ermo* stares blankly at the fetishized object of her desire--the 29 inch color television set--prominently placed at the center of the frame showing nothing but static screen. While her infatuation with material consumerism epitomizes the dilemma of socioeconomic imbalance that characterizes the early stage of postsocialist China, *Ermo*'s "awakened sexuality and economic productivity both figure as markers of a newfound autonomy and interiority that contrast with the previously heteronomous and quite public organization of resources, meaning, and subjectivity." (11) Thus, *Ermo* employs female sexual desire and libidinal satisfaction as a counter-narrative to the previous de-genderized feminist discourses in the Maoist era.

The Politics of (Self) Representation: Subjectivity in Polyphony

The exploration of gender identity and female sexuality that was manifested as the central focus in the first decade of the New Wave in postsocialist feminist Chinese cinema was liberating, but it is reflexive of a conscious reaction against masculine narratives of nation and the debilitating discourses of socialist gender politics, which rendered women's cinema in this period derivative and ideologically circumscribed by the very visual and narrative rhetoric it sought to disrupt. In order to recognize the limitations of this binary opposition and the hegemony of a single authoritative gender discourse, women's cinema in the "post-New Era" (12) at the turn of the century needed to rethink how gender autonomy could be (self)represented and to develop polyphonic cinematic languages that would be compatible with diversified visualizations of female consciousness. While women's cinema in the decade of 1995 to 2004 demonstrates a greater diversity in its experimentation on cinematic representations of women's subjectivity and gender agency, such efforts appear to be discursive, polycentric, and even fragmented, partly as a result of the challenges brought about by the radical changes in Chinese cinema in the era of commercialization. As "China changed from a nation-state to a transnational-state with a market economy," (13) the film industry became completely commercialized in the marketization of studio systems, and box office revenue served as the single most important factor in the profit-oriented popular entertainment business.

Confronted with this new reality of a Darwinian competition for investment, talents, actors, and even showing schedules in theaters, feminist cinema responds to media globalization and an uneven distribution of resources by sourcing transnational financiers, strategizing independent filmmaking outside the studio system, and attracting major demographics with star actors. As exemplified by many female filmmakers whose films attract both critical attention and commercial success, the combination of flexible investment mode (private, cooperation, overseas), independent production outside of state-sponsored studios (thus less "mainstream"), and a conscious peripheral positioning as low-budget, art-house productions provides feminist cinema a political vantage point of being marginalized and underprivileged. Thus, women's subjectivity can be visualized not as a counter-narrative, but as cinematic discourses of difference, a polyphony of identity articulations that foregrounds the diversity and hybridity within women's identity formation.

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This period of new artistic expressive approach and flexible production mode is epitomized in two films by female directors: *Baober in Love*, (2004) by Li Shaohong and *Letter from An Unknown Woman* (2004) by Xu Jinglei. Their cinematic representations of women's subjectivity and gender agency are characterized by transnational intertextuality, experimental avant-garde visuality, and a conscious de-politicization of feminist discourses. While Li Shaohong is one of the most commercially successful female filmmakers among the Fifth Generation directors, maintaining high popularity and visibility as both a filmmaker and TV producer/director throughout her career, Xu Jinglei is herself a top-tier actress turned independent director/producer/screenplay writer, who has obtained trans-regional recognition in East and Southeast Asia. Although Li and Xu may share little in common in their historical consciousness, educational background, artistic style, cinematic modes, public persona, and visual gender rhetoric, they are both central to the significant momentum of women's cinema in the wake of Chinese cinema's cultural globalization and internationalized entertainment business in several aspects. First, both succeeded in achieving a delicately maintained equilibrium between a pronounced yet non-threatening cinema-feminism that taps into the emotional core of urban women, and a sustainable high box office revenue that produces a high investment yield in commercial cinema. Second, both tactfully negotiate the mercurial cultural spaces triangulated by government censorship, popular media market economy, and social critiques. Specifically, while Li Shaohong exemplifies how the Fifth Generation directors navigate the changing landscapes of feminist cinema, Xu Jinglei demonstrates the emerging trend of boundary-crossing in the film industry both in production and consumption of commercial films. Thus, together they shape a social discourse and acclimate a new generation of audience that are receptive to a nascent cinematic postfeminism, or, "feminism with Chinese characteristics." (14)

Baober in Love embeds a carefully situated feminist narrative of desire, subjectivity, and consciousness in the story of a schizophrenic and hypochondriac woman's pursuit of love and happiness. The film's eponymous protagonist Baober (Zhou Xun) is traumatized by the sudden demolition of her home when she is very young, and develops an alter ego with a carefree and uninhibited personality whenever she runs away from home. Baober becomes infatuated with Liu Zhi (Huangjue), who records his private thoughts about his life and marriage on a VHS tape, which is found and watched by Baober by chance. Visualized in a surrealist art-house cinematic aesthetics, *Baober in Love* adopts a narrative style that is reflexive of a "new formalism" in Chinese cinema that serves as "an embodiment of the new ideology of capitalism, insofar as form itself appears as a globalized commodity." (15) In other words, this unconventional visual rhetoric is symptomatic of a transnational strategy that employs a new cinematic language that is fluid and flexible. In addition, this new style creates a fresh spectatorial experience that subtly reconditions audience's expectations for a romantic love story. Just as director Li Shaohong proclaimed, this film demands that its audience "abandon previous aesthetics of film viewing" in order to be surprised. (16)

The film's hybrid imagination of the blurring of boundaries between reality and imagination, love and fantasy, and physical and psychological realms creates a space where Baober's female gender consciousness obtains agency and subjective autonomy without engendering a dichotomous dynamics with a dominating masculine sociopolitical discourse. Instead, Baober's gender identity formation takes shape in an imaginary space, an allegorical social vacuum where she is unburdened by patriarchal and masculine gender discourses. This non-confrontational gender politics is effectively established at the beginning of the film: although Baober's "abnormality" is clearly a result of a hegemonic urbanization process when the young Baober screams in horror as CGI images of the rapid mushrooming high-rising buildings (themselves visual metaphors of masculinity and phallic power) overpowers her, her psychological regression into a simpler social environment is represented as empowering and liberating, in the sense that she re-creates an idealized identity and achieves emotional fulfilment and becomes socially integrated. Thus, Baober's gender identity is both participatory and performative inasmuch as she maintains social functionality and normalcy by playing, albeit unconsciously, an imaginary character conjured up to counter-act her traumatic childhood memory.

Baober in Love carefully de-politicizes Baober's traumatization so that the film does not actively assumes the antithetical position of social criticism against the erasing urbanization process and by extension, the grand political narrative of national economic globalization. The film's conscious de-politicization of its gender commentary in turn accentuates Baober's subject autonomy and her fearless articulation of her emotional desires and unfettered expressions of selfhood, upon which Baober's identity-formation is predicated. It is significant to emphasize that the film represents a far more normal and functional Baober while she assumes this imaginary identity than when she regains her "normal" consciousness. This representational strategy embeds a subtle yet compelling gender politics that problematizes social conventions of normalcy, disrupts the homogeneity of cultural normative, and ultimately legitimizes an alternative (self)representation of identity that is not confined by the hierarchized binary oppositions of self/other, man/woman, normal/abnormal.

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If Baober in Love reflects a centrifugal tendency in its de-stabilization of feminist gender identity formation and visualization, Xu Jinglei's Letter from an Unknown Woman serves as the other half of a cinematic diptych that illustrates the polyphony of feminist discourses on subjectivity, desire, and agency. Adapted from Stefan Zweig's novella of the same title, Xu's film transplants the location from turn-of-the-last century Vienna to 1930s Beijing, thereby de-exoticizing the original story for her own feminist agenda. Zweig's novella, a story about unrequited love, features an unnamed woman who writes a letter to her 'lover' as she is dying. In it, she informs him of her lifelong devotion to him even though the man never knew about it, despite the fact that they had spent two nights together. While Xu's film adaptation stays quite close to Zweig's original text, it employs spectatorial positioning and mise en scene to change the patriarchal power dynamics of the original narrative. Specifically, Xu does not seek a feminist reversal or overturn the gender hierarchy dominated by men just to replace it with a similarly structured feminist one. Instead, her adaptation foregrounds the prototype of the new women in the dawning postfeminist era as emotionally strong, independent, intelligent, and consciously seeking gender agency.

Letter from, an Unknown Woman gives back to the female protagonist, Miss Jiang (Xu Jinglei) the agency which Zweig's novella had denied. Xu's film adopts Jiang's female voice-over as a narrative structure, which allows Jiang to control her own narrative by positioning the male protagonist Mr. Xu (Jiang Wen) as only a listener to her letter, a powerless audience who does not participate in the recounting of her life story. The film further disempowers Mr. Xu in cinematic terms as it discourages masculine spectatorial identification from the very beginning through the visual dominance of the letter. The opening sequence relentlessly exploits close-ups and extreme close-ups to trace the letter as it travels through the postal service where it is stamped, sorted, delivered, and finally handed to Mr. Xu. Thus, the visual significance of the letter metonymically signals Jiang's feminine dominance. By contrast to the dominance of the feminine letter, Mr. Xu's visual oblivion in this scene crystallizes his powerlessness: he is never the center of the frame as the film begins, and always manifests a fragmented visuality, seen only as a pair of gloved hands, in long back shots, and speaks in a disembodied voice. Mr. Xu's visual fragmentation metaphorizes his narrative non-presence and a disintegrated subjectivity. Faceless, voiceless, and clueless, Mr. Xu surrenders his masculine and patriarchal agency to Jiang's narrative voice.

Xu Jinglei's localized adaptation of a text that lends itself to patriarchal interpretation reveals her own brand of Chinese feminism, whose trajectory changes from traditional passive feminism to affirmative postfeminist gender politics. This alternative feminism knows better than to engage in an aggressive battle against gender hegemony and patriarchy. On the contrary, a re-imagined feminism shrewdly subverts gender roles and proactively seeks autonomy and independence, both emotionally and ideologically. This feminist spirit is perfectly captured and eloquently articulated in a sentence in the advertisement of her film: "I love you, and that does not concern you." Therefore, the pronounced claim of subjective agency becomes the fundamental signifier to woman's self-representation and gender identity construction.

Woman Warrior and Migrant Worker: Gendered Tropes of Nation and the Body Politics of Postfeminism

The pronounced postfeminist proclamation manifest in Xu Jinglei's film inspired an even more vigorous experimentation on feminist commercial cinema and exploration for alternative representation of women that reflects the changing sociopolitical realities in the decade between 2005 and 2015. While the search for a cinematic feminism with Chinese characteristics continues, two thematic trends emerge in this most diversified and polycentric era in Chinese women's cinema in the postsocialist period. One is characterized by a politicized re-configuration of women as a gendered trope embedded in the grand narrative of nation-building and the official discourses of economic and social globalization, and the other intends to further problematize the heterogeneity of Chinese women in terms of socioeconomic status, class, educational backgrounds, sexual orientation, and most significantly, the radically widening gap between urban and rural living environments. Two salient types of female characters prove to be particularly illuminating as we examine these two thematic foci: Hua Mulan and the rural-based drifting migrant women as urban laborers. On surface level, these two may have little, if at all, in common; nevertheless, both are re-imagined genderized tropes of nation in the post-socialist China. When juxtaposed, therefore, these two character types embody an introspective and retrospective tendency to re-imagine the nation both past and present.

When the characterization of women and the cultural consciousness of nation intersect, Hua Mulan is arguably the most visualized and mediated female persona in the history of China's gender imagination as paradigmatic of feminine virtue and proper conducts. Thanks to the globally popular Disney feature animation Mulan (1998), the story of Hua Mulan now obtains transnational cultural currency. Despite relatively minor textual deviations, the Mulan narrative portrays Hua Mulan, a young girl in sixth century China who bravely fights against invaders on the battlefield in her father's stead while disguises as a man. Through centuries of retelling and rewriting, Mulan becomes the paragon of dutiful daughter, patriotic citizen, brave soldier, and good wife, embodying impossibly the perfect combination imaginable in the Confucian traditions of China. Because of such narrative malleability and historiographical versatility, Mulan's story is constantly invoked in a variety of artistic and expressive forms during different moments in Chinese history to serve as tropes of national unity, cultural integrity, ethnic harmony, and gender role model. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jingle Ma's live action film Hua Mulan (2009), made at the

dawn of China's deep integration into a transnationalized global community, is politically embedded and demands a historicized decoding.

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Hua Mulan showcases an attempt to align postfeminist gender discourse with the grand narrative of the nation and national unity so that women may not always be "a victim [sic] of class oppression" or become "a narrative site for the projection of national trauma and collective memory", as they were in previous decades. (18) As I have argued in a comparative reading of the transnationalization of the Mulan narrative, "the portrayal of a remarkably feminized Hua Mulan in *Hua Mulan* also situates itself within the postfeminist cinematic representation of a new generation of female lead characters." (19) Thus, this film carefully orchestrates a re-configured woman warrior who negotiates her gender identity and gains female agency as a woman before she becomes the trope of the nation. Specifically, *Hua Mulan*'s unmistakable feminization foregrounds a gender consciousness that precedes and predetermines her future encounters with the masculine and patriarchal Other and an otherwise transgressive boundary-crossing.

This narrative and representational focus on Mulan's femininity significantly changes the defining element in the re-molding of a national hero: while most previous visualizations of Mulan emphasize her masculine disguise in the army to show a diminished female identity or even an internalization of patriarchal gender politics, Ma's *Hua Mulan* employs her exterior masculinization in the army as a necessary stage of her identity-formation, a critical formative moment when *Hua Mulan* realizes that she must acknowledge her emotional, psychological, sociopolitical, and biological qualities and traits as a woman to survive the war and achieves personal and social maturity. If *Hua Mulan* only spontaneously demonstrates her unwomanly passion for martial arts and tactical military strategies before she joins the army, her daily interactions with other soldiers while disguised as a man necessitates a conscious solidification of her female subjective agency. Thus, *Hua Mulan* mediates *Hua Mulan*'s story as a gendered trope of national solidarity, transforming women from stigmatized victims, powerless and waiting to be saved by men, into strong warrior women, who save the nation and sustain national unity.

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While *Hua Mulan*'s postfeminism is allegorized and historicized, films that portray non-urban women commonly known as migrant workers in the city employ an especially provoking postfeminist discourse in their unadorned expose of the inadequacy of cinematic focus on urban women. Positioned under the spotlight, these women migrant workers are represented as even more otherized than their urban counterparts, in the sense that they are underprivileged, not well educated, and socially isolated with little upward mobility. Films portraying such female characters typically adopt cinema verite style realism for visual authenticity and narrative transparency, so that their life and struggles in the city gain political currency as social critique and gender discourse. Thus, non-urban women's cinema further accentuates the heterogeneity of women's cinema and problematizes the grand narrative of nation-building that emphasizes urban office ladies in the postsocialist globalized workforce.

Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007) exemplifies this non-urban women's cinema's commercial potential and gender critique. Capitalizing on a star-studded trans-regional cast and daring sexual portrayal, *Lost in Beijing*'s controversial reception becomes an entertainment sensation of the year, attracting both critical attention and public discussion on the conditions and issues surrounding lives of migrant workers, especially female, in an alienating yet alluring urban environment. This film portrays a young migrant worker Liu Pingguo's (Fan Bingbing) disillusioned "Beijing Dream" through a series of dramatic and convoluted events, which lead to Liu's rape by her employer, giving her son up for adoption to her rapist, fighting for parental rights, and a hinted final departure from the city. Such a politicized rendition of Liu Pingguo as an eroticized objectification of male desire and essentialized female body as reproductive mechanism reinforces the socialist gender politics that renders women the allegorized victims who are made to suffer the uneven economic development and radically increasing gaps between urbanity and rurality that characterize contemporary Chinese society. In other words, *Lost in Beijing*, despite its bold treatment of female sexuality and fearless exposure of the debilitating masculine official narrative of industrial growth and economic globalization, ultimately reiterates a dichotomous gender discourse that precludes female agency when it positions women on the opposite side of that which is powerful and liberating.

From the transgressive woman warrior to the disenfranchised female migrant worker, Chinese women's cinema in the past decade has striven to attract a wider audience in contemporary China's quickly stratified popular entertainment economy where niche-marketing and branding determine every aspect of a film's production and consumption. As a result, another highly visible and commercialized urban feminist cinematic trend has surfaced that is powerfully reminiscent of the chick flick sub-genre in the Hollywood tradition. Because of its expressive postfeminist gender politics that typically is predicated upon the "recognition of women's significance in contemporary culture," (20) girl power, and consumerism, the chick flick sub-genre provides a preferred framework within which a postfeminist Chinese cinema becomes highly synchronized with an increasingly integrated

production and marketing strategies. (21) To new Chinese women attempting to disassociate themselves from previous, totalitarian feminist traditions, consumers of chick flicks are "a third-wave feminist or postfeminist generation" who have "rejected or at least questioned some of the central tenets of feminist thought" and re-appropriated and re-visioned these previous terms to "refashion their identity." ' By re-embracing what was unacceptable and diminishing to their predecessors, the new Chinese postfeminist women proactively legitimize their femininity and sexuality and explore new ways to (self)represent their subjectivity and identity as a different generation of the New Woman, whose economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological aspirations are inseparable from the dominating postsocialist national politics.

As women's cinema becomes more polycentric and polyphonous in its gender articulations than ever before, it is impossible to classify each trend and file them in neatly organized categories. Notwithstanding, identity formation and self-representation that are circumscribed by the interplay between women and nation provides an essential critical lens through which significant momenta can be analyzed and historicized critiques become possible and meaningful. As Chinese women's cinema continues to negotiate the complex dynamics of gender politics and identity expression in a society with rapidly changing variables, perhaps only one thing remains constant: female identity, as informed and shaped by an imagined collective national consciousness, will always be in flux.