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by

HU Lidan

The thesis is submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

2015
DECLARATION

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Abstract

This thesis examines Chinese women’s cinema from 1981 to 1988, with an emphasis on their representation of women’s sexuality and subjectivity. During the period of economic growth in the 1980s, hitherto repressed discourses of individuality separated from the state ideology of collectivism which had long dominated the Chinese screen. Focusing on the various images of women created by female directors, this thesis aims to articulate how the interplay between gender consciousness and ubiquitous censorship inform and construct female directors’ ambivalent attitude in the face of love and sexuality, and how narratives of gender and nation are filtered through the repressive selves.

The thesis deploys feminist, narrative, psychoanalytic and semiotic theories together with film-studies-based theories to critically analyse the signifying subtexts of female directors’ films in relation to the repressive mechanisms acting on them. The bulk of the study discusses eight films made by six major female directors active in filmmaking in the 1980s. These directors were by no means a group that shared a uniform aesthetic pursuit. However, it is possible to see in them a shared concern with female sexuality and subjectivity, which are marked in their films despite having been neglected in studies on Chinese cinema. I compare and contrast their ways of dealing with gender consciousness, interrogating repression as a symptom haunting their female protagonists as well as the directors themselves. The films made by female directors in the 1980s, I will conclude, are the outcome of negotiation between an oppressive censorship upon cinema and the desire to bring to the screen women’s experience of sexuality and subjectivity.
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Conventions

1. Film titles are given in pinyin and Chinese characters when they first appear. Afterwards, only English translation and dates are given. A filmography that contains all the films mentioned is provided in Appendix 1.

2. For publications in English written by Chinese authors, I adopt the convention of citing the family name first in the main body of the text while complying with the Western style in the notes.
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Introduction

1. Main Focus of the Research

Sociologist Nina Yuval-Davis argues that “gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles as territories, markers and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities.”\(^1\) This observation applies to our understanding of film as well. Many studies have looked at images of women that appear in Chinese films made by male directors, exploring the representational mechanism that objectifies women on screen (whether as voyeuristic objects or tropes of national narrative) and promotes fantasies of their star images off screen among the audience. However, my thesis seeks to analyse how female directors portray female protagonists in films that take female sexuality and subjectivity as themes.

The decade between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, when the celebration of artistic innovation in China arose, saw the expansion of space for women’s filmmaking. There emerged more female directors in China than in any other country.\(^2\) The most influential female directors at this time include Zhang Nuanxin (1940-1994), Lu Xiaoya (1941-), Huang Shuqin (1939-), Wang Haowei (1940-), Shi Shujun (1939-), Shi Xiaohua (1941-), Liu Guoquan (1945-), Xiao Guiyun (1941-), Ling Zi (1941-), Wang Junzheng (1945-), Hu Mei (1958-), Liu Miaomiao (1962-), and Peng Xiaolian (1953-), etc. Having graduated from film academies and institutes

\(^{1}\) Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (New York: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), 23.

in the 1960s and 1980s, they pioneered new cinematic practices and helped diversify mainstream filmmaking in the 1980s. In spite of the variety of their filmic styles and range of subject matters, this group of women shared a concern for women’s issues that had been rarely touched upon in male directors’ treatment of women, such as women’s memories of love, their feelings about their sexual relationships, their pursuit of intellectual independence, and so forth. The dissident voices that women insert into the patriarchal discourse unfold narratives of subjectivity that promote dynamic interpretations of the Chinese cinema of the period. Their narratives carry a submerged undercurrent of gender consciousness.

While they brought fresh air to Chinese cinema, these female directors were forced to handle with discretion subjects that had hitherto been off-limits. The compromises they had to make to state censorship to a great extent had a negative impact on their artistic pursuit. At the same time, however, their films demonstrate a tension between conscious reflection and repression, a cinematic symptom that is perceptible in almost all their films related to sexuality. The repression embedded in their films is partly unconscious and partly consciously produced in order to avoid disturbing ideas.

2. Research Background and Research Questions

Chinese Women’s Cinema in Focus

In my thesis, I adopt the term “women’s cinema” to avoid the ambiguity of “feminist film” and “women’s film” both in the Western and Chinese contexts. Firstly, I do not agree that in the 1980s China had the so-called “feminist film” which carried an
explicit political appeal. According to B. Ruby Rich, there are two currents of feminist film work: “one made up of women who were feminists and thereby led to film, the other made up of us already working in film and led therein to feminism.”³ In contrast, the central character of Chinese women’s filmmaking in the 1980s is that no single female director or film by female director embraced feminism. On the other hand, the concept of “women’s film” is multi-faceted and obscure. Usually it refers to a Hollywood genre of emotional melodrama, which is, in Molly Haskell’s words, “founded on a mock-Aristotelian and politically conservative aesthetic whereby women spectators are moved, not by pity and fear but by self-pity and tears, to accept, rather than reject, their lot.”⁴ In Chinese context, it could mean a kind of film tailored for female spectatorship on the basis of a marketing strategy, for instance, romantic comedy or weepie. Besides, Western feminist cinema includes a branch of what E. Ann Kaplan calls “the avant-garde theory (political) film,”⁵ which is made by feminist critics themselves. This kind of film can hardly be made in China.

What I mean by “Chinese women’s cinema” in my thesis is a cinema that is defined based on the following rules: 1) directors are biologically female; 2) films should be restricted to those which address or are concerned with women’s issues; 3) female consciousness should be evident as a distinct feature of plot structure, characterisation, or style. Compared with films made in accordance with patriarchal


⁵ E. Ann Kaplan, Woman and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (London: Routledge, 1990), 87.
norms (whether made by male or female directors), “Chinese women’s cinema” in the 1980s, bearing certain features similar to Western feminist film, rebels against voyeuristic pleasures and refuses to be complicit with masochistic constructions of femininity.

**Why the 1980s and Why Female directors?**

The 1980s, an important period both for Chinese history and for the development of Chinese film, provides an interesting point of entry for an examination of film and gender culture. There were three major trends in the postsocialist Chinese cinema of the 1980s: 1) the conventional mainstream filmmaking that tallied with the political agenda (propagandist film); 2) the restoration of humanism that corresponded to the “Scar Literature”; 3) aesthetic experimentation with film language and cinematic style.

Chinese cinema began to be known in the West mainly from the middle to late 1980s when the Fifth Generation directors like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou created the fresh look of Chinese films and made them visible in the world cinema. However, the films made during the early 1980s have not been adequately addressed in the existing research. The Third and Fourth Generation directors had never been internationally celebrated as the Fifth Generation had, in spite of the fact that a few

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screenings of their films had been held in the West during the 1980s. They were inspired by the comparatively loose political atmosphere and excited by seeing the chance of connecting with the West after the implementation of the Reform and Open-Door Policy initiated in 1978.

Xie Jin, a veteran Chinese director, in an interview conducted by George S. Semsel in 1985 when he toured the United States with ten of his twenty features, confirmed that his films could be understood by American audiences because “a well-made film must deal with the basic human condition, and because of that, it must have universal appeal.” But he also realised the difficulties for his films to enter the commercial market in the US, commenting “[m]y films were shown mostly at art museums, colleges, and other academic institutions. A lot of painstaking effort must be made before Chinese films can be accepted in the States.”

Zhang Nuanxin, a representative female director active in the 1980s, also expressed her wish to attract an international audience: “One thing that interests me very much is how the international audience might respond to a film like Sacrificed Youth. I suspect it would do very well abroad because it’s refreshing even here in China. There is the beauty of the oriental character about it. You can even say that when I made this film, I had the Western audience in mind.” Despite the opportunities of screening films abroad in the mid-1980s, Chinese filmmakers could only reach a very limited number of international audiences at small film festivals and academic institutions.


8 Ibid, p113.

9 Ibid, p125.
Overseas scholars who did Chinese studies were mostly attracted by the Fifth Generation directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who were regarded as having initiated a new era of Chinese cinema.

The primary research interest of Chinese cinema of the 1980s is in issues of modernisation at the level of a nation-state. Topics about gender and sexuality remain marginal compared with the political and ideological themes. Post-1949 Chinese cinema has mainly gone through the following stylistic phases, as Zhu Ying summarised: “revolutionary propaganda cinema during Mao’s era from 1949 to 1976; critical realist cinema from the late 1970s to the early 1980s; the art cinema movement germinating in the late 1970s and blossoming in the mid-1980s with the arrival of the internationally acclaimed Chinese New Wave; and the entertainment wave reemerging since the mid-1980s.”

A revival of the fetishisation of women on screen was witnessed in the films made from the mid-1980s on when the Chinese film industry became increasingly commercialised. When Fifth Generation directors stepped onto the stage, the commercialisation of Chinese cinema—a result of economic reform and systematic transformation of film studios—required the reemployment of the commodity fetishisation of women. Zhang Yimou’s success can be attributed to a rediscovery of the conventions of fetishism that had been evident in early Chinese filmmaking but had been suspended for several decades under communist censorship. Rey Chow has pointed out that in most of Zhang’s films that won him international fame as the

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leading figure of Chinese filmmaking, the representation of women resembles the filmic tradition nurtured in the 1920s and 1930s, emphasising the material deprivation and social oppression that entrapped women.\(^{11}\) These images were typically dramatised on screen “with breathtakingly adorable female faces and bodies” that contradicted their situation in the miserable social milieu. Zhang’s presentational shots employed “opulent colours, costumes, architectural layouts, and screen designs” that appealed to a taste for spectacle.\(^{12}\) However, my study will show female images created by female directors are different from what Zhang Yimou has presented.

The films selected in my research were made from 1981 to 1988.\(^{13}\) This was a time period when gender issues that had previously mostly been invisible on the Chinese screen during the era of socialist cinema reappeared along with the emergence of humanism and Cultural Fever.\(^{14}\) For example, Cui Shuqin observed


\(^{12}\) Ibid.


\(^{14}\) Cultural Fever mainly refers to a cultural tendency in the mid-1980s. Jing Wang’s description seizes the central ideas of this phrase: “Of particular importance were 1985 and 1986, two memorable years that witnessed the intensification of the intellectuals’ ‘methodology fever’ on the nation’s cultural agenda, the massive propagation of the formula for a market economy, and the reiteration of the imperative that the Party discuss political reform. Excessive nationwide expectations of a more enlightened and wealthier future escalated dramatically.” See Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1.
that there was a “return of the repressed” in films made in the 1980s and early 1990s. Her main focus is on a restored masculinity in the new wave cinema by male directors.\textsuperscript{15} While chiefly discussing the repression of male fears and desires, Cui has also analysed how the “female image appears as a discursive emblem and visual trope” for a stifled masculinity. My research, however, focuses on films made by female directors who made films concerning women’s issues. The analysis starts from Zhang Nuanxin’s \textit{The Drive to Win}. The last film chosen was made in the 1988: Peng Xiaolian’s \textit{Women’s Story}. I will discuss how the characterisation of women and cinematic narratives adopted by female directors reflect tensions and dynamics between emancipation and repression.\textsuperscript{16} In addition to seven female directors mentioned in the thesis, some other veteran filmmaker, such as Yan Bili and Dong Kena, also remained active in filmmaking in the 1980s. Yan Bili’s film \textit{Aiqing a, ni xing shenmo?} (What Is Your Surname, Love? 1980) deals with themes of love and social transformation. Although it displays love stories among several couples, the film does not specifically centre on female characters; at the same time, the film language is conservative. Dong Kena’s \textit{Shui shi di san zhe?} (Who Is the Third Party? 1987) is a powerful film that features a love triangle: a young woman falls in love with her college supervisor who is married. The film sparkled controversy after its release, since it concerns the morality of modern marriage in contemporary China. Due to its inaccessibility, I am unable to discuss this film in this thesis.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 516.
The peripheral status of women in the film industry constantly obstructs the visibility of women’s filmmaking in Mainland China. Very little attention would have been paid to female directors and their films, were it not for the occasions they were awarded prizes in film festivals. Compared with the high visibility of images of women on screen, female directors have been long remained hidden in the Chinese film industry.

Although “equal rights” for men and women were decreed by party documents and laws made immediately after the establishment of New China, the outlook for women’s social positions might have remained far from bright. They might have functioned more as historical symbols for a modern China, instead of self-aware subjects. As Dai Jinhua has claimed, even though Chinese women had been emancipated from their plight under the old feudal society, “female consciousness at the individual and collective levels remains underdeveloped and separate from implemented social reforms.” She argues that that women’s liberation in China was not a grassroots, spontaneous movement but consistently responded to the established government policy after 1949.

In her book about Chinese feminism, Tani E. Barlow stated that many female writers (including Zhang Jie, Yu Luojin, Zongpu, Wang Anyi, Dai Houying, Zhu Lin,

17 In 1949,”The Common Programme” was passed at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The sixth item stated that “women share equal rights with men in the political, economic, culturally educational aspects of social life.” In 1954, “The Constitution of the People's Republic of China” was issued. It clearly regulated that “Women are equal with men in their political, economic, social and domestic life. Marital family, mother and children are protected by the law of the country.”


19 Ibid.
Zhang Xinxin, and Shen Rong) created “the first truly psychological fiction of the post-Maoist period” and proved that “the natural ‘gendered eye’ of feminism reasserted itself.”

In her discussion of women’s literature in the 1980s, Zhong Xueping argued, “[w]hile Western feminist scholars moved to critique the ‘postponed’ revolution in the CCP’s women’s liberation movement, women writers in China critiqued women’s liberation by expressing a strong desire to return to ‘womanhood’ or ‘femininity.’”

Meanwhile, some female critics agreed that compared to female writers’ work, “most female directors have not turned their gender position into the motivating force for their creative work.”

It seems that compared with 1980s female writers, female directors were generally less aware of gender consciousness. But is this really the case? A deeper examination of Chinese films in the 1980s will reveal that in fact female directors were concerned with exploring female identity through the medium of film.

**Why Sexuality?**

Within the changed economic, social and cultural context after 1978, Chinese media approaches to sexuality marked evident departures from the didactic uniformity of the previous three decades. Harriet Evans has noticed that “[o]ne significant distinction is the greater prominence of discussion about women’s sexual pleasure,”


especially in literature.\textsuperscript{23} While sexuality may not have been a completely taboo subject in the media from the establishment of CCP regime in 1949 to the early 1960s, the sexual discourse was certainly not present during the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976), and, overall, concerns about love and sexuality as bourgeois individualism barely appeared on the film screens. In the 1980s, female directors, like the female writers who became prolific around the same time, embarked on the exploration of gendered narrative.

The reappearance of love and sex on screen was seen in many films made in the early 1980s. As Chris Berry observed, “It is in 1980 and 1981 that romantic love takes over the screen in a big way.” Of the 41 films from those two years Berry considered in his study, \textit{Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution} (2008), no less than 34 involved some form of romantic love.\textsuperscript{24} At the same time Berry also argued that “[d]espite this change, sexual desire remains taboo throughout.” However, according to my study, this is not exactly the truth. For instance, even in the mainstream film like \textit{Legend of Tianyun Mountain} (\textit{Tianyunshan Chuanqi}, dir. Xie Jin, 1980), sex is expressed through the scene of kissing and the husband’s asking for sex from his wife. It remains the case, however, that cinematic representation was more stridently controlled by censorship than print media.

Although individual awareness could be expressed in the films made by female


directors, sexuality, a major theme of humanist concerns, was mostly bogged down in repression. Dru C. Gladney’s comments on sexuality in China are helpful for our understanding of this phenomenon: “If Foucault is correct that the ‘policing of sex’ is an important component in maintaining the unmitigated power of the central state, then China’s repressive prudishness is perhaps the best example of this endeavor.”

When critics were preoccupied with discussing the repressive desires mirrored in the major male directors, I find that women’s representation of female sexuality also succumbs to the repressive mechanisms of Chinese culture. But in many ways female representation differs from the representation of male sexuality. For these reasons, this study focuses on 1980s female directors’ works in order to shed light on this less explored world of female sexuality. I will demonstrate that this body of work reflects the negotiation between sexual/individual awareness and repression.

As the thesis is a close reading of film narratives, my analysis works on the level of female characters in the films. I hold that emphasis on sexual difference is necessary for film studies in the specific Chinese context of the 1980s. During this period, the transformation of social structures enabled people to step out from the Maoist collectivism of the previous three decades. Although the emerging individualism never dominated in the 1980s, the loosening political climate encouraged filmmakers to invest their personal interests in their filmmaking. The self-consciousness they manifested in their films was to a large degree connected to their gendered sense of individuality. In my discussion, female consciousness refers

to the way in which a female character is portrayed as perceiving herself as a gendered individual and the way in which gender-related sensitivities influence her interaction with others. This female consciousness constitutes one aspect of female subjectivity.

I also consider self-agency to be part of female subjectivity. In addition to the understanding of what it means to be female, the subjectivity of these female characters is also manifested in their power to act or to alter their restricted roles. In Peng Xiaolian’s film *Women's Story* (1988) for instance, female protagonists not only display the courage to rebel against the patriarchal norms imposed on women in the rural China, but also take the initiative to challenge their restrictions and to change their lives. In brief, the films that are chosen in this thesis reflect female subjectivity through emphasising female characters’ perspectives, experiences, and concerns and female agency through the portrayal of actions that go against imposed gender norms.

**Research Questions**

Female directors’ explorations of sexuality expounded two ambivalent attitudes: one defied the official attempts to maintain a didactic construction of sex on screen through self-conscious narration (it should be noted that this self-consciousness mainly refers to the awareness of individuality that combats collectivism, rather than feminist consciousness); the other subscribes to a dominant discourse sustained by official interests, thereby exhibiting sexual repression. Films like *Qingchun ji* (*Sacrificed Youth*, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1985), *The Girl in Red* (*Hongyi shaonü*, dir. Lu Xiaoya, 1985), *Army Nurse* (*Nüer lou*, dir. Hu Mei, 1985), and *Women on the
Long March (Mati shengsui, dir. Liu Miaomiao, 1987), might be easily identified as films made by women, because they express a tension that results from a convergence of the gendered perspective and the mainstream narrative mode which can hardly be found in films made by men. If male directors dominate the cinematic discourse and create women’s images on screen based on the needs of indoctrinatory utilitarianism or the commercial network of visual media, is there any possibility of finding an alternative discursive practice that women may command?

So far academic research on Chinese women’s cinema has mainly been grounded in the discussion of female consciousness. But how is this female consciousness enunciated in the films? How does it accommodate itself to the mainstream ideology? And in what ways is the repression articulated as the subtexts of women’s films? I will argue that the existing research lacks a systematic study of filmic narrative in the specific context of the 1980s. Current research has rarely perceived that female directors’ submissiveness to authority meant that their films were not at all feminist, but instead only testified to the sexual repression that persisted in Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s. The following section discusses the existing literature related to my topic. I will show how my study builds upon this literature and contributes to the understanding of women’s cinema in China.

3. Literature Review

Western Feminist Theories on Women’s Cinema

The substantial development of gender studies and its coalescence with film criticism in Western scholarship have contributed to the feminist interpretation of cinematic production. After the second wave of the feminist movement in the Western world
(roughly from the early 1960s to the early 1980s), many scholars began to re-examine the images of women in cinema as well as the roles of female directors in film history. Drawing on semiotics, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism, Western feminist film critics have sought alternative ways of interpreting films in order to challenge the patriarchal discourse embedded in mainstream cinema.

Feminist film theory first appeared in the West and reached its heyday during the 1970s and 1980s. British film critic Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” became a seminal text for its analysis of the positioning of women in cinema as objects for fetishisation and voyeuristic pleasure.26 In Woman and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (1990), E. Ann Kaplan argued that women’s images had always been fixed in an “eternal” status and “are repeated through the decades in their essentials.”27 Alison Butler suggested in her book Women’s Cinema: the Contested Screen that contemporary women’s cinema could be defined as “minor cinema,” a term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of a minor literature (the literature of a minority or marginalised group written in a “major” language).28

In her study of “women’s film” as a Hollywood genre of emotional melodrama, Haskell identified four categories of themes in the “woman’s film” whose heyday was in the 1930s and 1940s: “sacrifice,” “affliction,” “choice,” and “competition.” Haskell also charted in her book the shifts in images of women in Hollywood

filmmaking throughout the twentieth century: “‘idealized as the ‘feminine principle incarnate,’” “worshiped as ‘mother,’” “venerated as ‘earth goddess,’” ‘celebrated and feared as separate-but-equal.’” These Hollywood narrative models can also be applied to the interpretation of Chinese cinema. Images of women on the Chinese screen have long been adapted to all sorts of needs, especially in the socialist period from the 1950s to the late 1970s, during which the ideological and pedagogical functions of cinema were particularly foregrounded.

To a certain degree, “women’s film” carries negative implications, as if women’s issues were usually to be regarded as trivial. Yet Haskell sees “women’s film” as potentially subversive, noting that “its recurrent themes represent the closest thing to an expression of the collective drives, conscious and unconscious, of American women, of their avowed obligations and their unconscious resistance.” This argument is inspiring. It encourages a re-examination of film stereotypes imposed on women for decades. But how is the sign “woman” used within specific texts? What meaning does it bear within particular socio-historical contexts? Drawing on Haskell’s approach, my study will look at these questions.

In addition to the fruitful work of criticising phallocentrism in films made by male directors, feminist critics also conducted research on films made by female directors. The concept of “women’s cinema,” which refers to feminist films, emerged in film theory in the late 1960s. In her famous 1973 essay, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-cinema,” Claire Johnston puts forward a concept of “counter-cinema” that

29 Butler, Women’s Cinema: the Contested Screen, 11.

30 Ibid, 27.
resists patriarchal norms, maintaining that woman’s discourse can grow from within the ideological contradictions and heterogeneous discourses of mainstream Hollywood cinema. The image of women in Hollywood films has been largely petrified “as eternal and unchanging, except for modifications in terms of fashion, etc.”31 Women are always ahistoric and passive, deprived of subjectivity under the control of Hollywood myths. Johnston proposed an alternative perspective to analyse female directors’ works within the Hollywood system:

… it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected. In this respect, it is instructive to look at films made by women within the Hollywood system which attempted by formal means to bring about a dislocation between sexist ideology and the text of the film; such insights could provide useful guidelines for the emerging women’s cinema to draw on.32

Her approach of interrogating the ideological structure of mainstream discourse is instructive for the analysis of Chinese cinema, in spite of its different production mode and socio-historical background compared with the Hollywood system.

**Academic Research on “Women’s Film” in China**

Though Western critics have done extensive work on female directors and feminist films, in-depth studies exclusively on mainland Chinese female film directors are not

31 Haskell, “The Woman's Film,” 32.

abundant. A gender-based research perspective has emerged in Chinese academia since the 1980s, although it was not until the 1990s that feminist readings of films became established as a scholarly sub-discipline. There have been a good number of studies on specific characteristics of films made by different generations of female directors from the 1950s up to now. However, many of these studies repeatedly discuss feminist consciousness without giving solid discussion on how this consciousness works in films.

The studies of women’s cinema in Chinese-language roughly fall into two categories: 1) interviews conducted with female directors; and 2) academic papers or journal articles (no monograph has yet been published so far). An important example in the first category is the edited volume entitled *Tamen de shengyin: zhongguo nüdaoyan zishu* (*Their Voices: the Self-statement of Chinese Female Directors, 1996*). Edited by Yang Yuanying, a female professor at the Beijing Film Academy, the book focuses on ten female directors who began their directing career in the 1980s. Apart from the interviews, the book also includes articles written by the directors themselves about their own experiences during the process of filmmaking. Yang Yuanyin also co-edited with Wei Shiyu (a female associate professor at Lingnan University in Hong Kong) another book that collect interviews conducted with female directors: *Nüxing de dianying: duihua zhongri nüdaoyan* (*Women’s

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cinema: Dialogues with Chinese and Japanese Female Directors, 2009).\textsuperscript{34} This volume contains recent interviews conducted with female directors from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan.

One of the first Chinese scholars who addressed issues about feminism and women’s cinema in China, Yang Yuanying published an essay in 1990 called “Nüquan zhuyi yu zhongguo nüxing dianying” (feminism and Chinese women’s film).\textsuperscript{35} This article was ground-breaking for its broad historical vision and reflection upon Chinese patriarchal culture. Drawing on Western feminist theories, Yang points out the different socio-historical context in China and evaluates the validity of borrowing feminist perspectives in interpreting women’s positions in Chinese cinema. She also charts the trajectory of changing female consciousness in films made by female directors. Two years later, Pan Ruojian, who is also a female professor at the Beijing Film Academy, published an essay entitled “Zhongguo nüdaoyan yu nüxing dianying” (Chinese female directors and women’s film). She is aware of female directors’ collusion with patriarchal discourses by restricting women characters within the conventional moral norms: the value of a person’s life lies in her devotion to her country (Sha’ou, The Drive to Win, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1981); while the happiness of a woman’s life lies in having a perfect family (Jinse de zhijia, 1987).

\textsuperscript{34} Yang Yuanying and S. Louisa Wei, Nüxing de dianying: duihua zhongri nüdaoyan (Women’s cinema: Dialogues with Chinese and Japanese Female Directors, Shanghai: Huadong shifan chubanshe (East China Normal University), 2009.

\textsuperscript{35} Yuanying, “Nüquan zhuyi yu zhongguo nüxing dianying” (feminism and Chinese women’s cinema), Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Cinema), no. 3, 1990.
Both Yang and Pan agree in noting that some female directors imitated Chinese male directors by complying with mainstream narrative norms. The two scholars also shared the opinion that an ambiguous female consciousness can always be found in films made by women. My thesis seeks to use textual analysis in order to account for how this ambiguity is generated.

Dai Jinhua, a professor who once taught in the Beijing Film Academy, published an essay entitled “Invisible Women” in 1994, which has become the most influential work addressing women’s filmmaking in the Chinese context. In this essay, she named Ren·gui·qin (Woman, Demon, Human, dir. Huang Shuqin, 1987) as the sole Chinese feminist film. Many themes of her essay had been studied earlier by Yang Yuanying and Pan Ruojian, such as the fake equality between men and women, female directors’ masquerade as male, and women characters as empty signifiers on screen. Within a critical framework borrowed from semiotics, Dai decoded the signs

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36 Pan Ruojian, “Zhongguo nüdaoyan yu nüxing dianying” (Chinese Female directors and Women’s Cinema), Dianying yishu (Film Art), no.3 (1992): 28-34.


of women in socialist cinema, identifying them as female warriors, mothers, and empty signifiers/imaginary signifiers of male subjects. Meanwhile, she proposed three kinds of female directors: 1) those who perform as men, and whose films bear no difference from those made by men; 2) those who embrace a certain gender consciousness; and 3) those who have a clear consciousness of pursuing an alternative female style. Compared with Yang, Dai painted a more elaborate picture about how female directors developed a female consciousness in their filmmaking. Dai’s argument about “the shared horizons of women and individuals” is thought-provoking.39 She notes that women often adopted the strategy of “aligning their own narrative with the discourse of the individual.”40 In doing so, they attempted to break through the restrictions imposed by patriarchal discourse. I will argue that their individual discourse is mainly expressed through the representation of female bodies and sexuality. However, Dai’s discussions are mostly general, and she does not enter into detailed analysis of individual films.

Two research orientations can be easily noticed in the scholarship that followed in the footsteps of Yang and Dai: 1) a focus on the history of women’s filmmaking in China; and 2) suggestions on how to establish Chinese feminist cinema and criticism. For example, Zhang Han, in her Master’s thesis entitled “Lun dangdai nüxing dianying de fazhan gaikuang” (An overview of the development of contemporary Chinese women’s film), listed different stages of women’s filmmaking, mostly


40 Ibid.
repeating what was already stated in Yang and Dai’s essays.41 Zhan Cainü, in “Dianying yu hequ hecong de nüxing zhuyi” (Film and the Future of Feminism), suggested three ways to construct a feminist discourse on cinema in China: 1) to develop the feminist consciousness of film critics; 2) to develop radical feminist theories within the Chinese context; and 3) to call for feminist filmmaking.42 These statements sounded more like slogans than like pragmatic suggestions.

Academic Research Written in English


Women through the Lens does not exclusively centre on female directors and

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41 Zhang Han, “Lun dangdai nüxing dianying de fazhan gaikuang” (The Overview on the Development of Contemporary Chinese Women’s Cinema), a MA thesis of Hebei daxue (Hebei University), 2010.

42 Zhan Cainü, “Dianying yu hequ hecong de nüxing zhuyi” (Film and the Future of Feminism), Dianying wenxue (Movie Literature), no. 22 (2009). No page number provided.


44 Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, ed. Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Works of Dai Jinhua (London: Verso, 2002). To be noted, Cinema and Desire is a volume of the translation of Dai Jinhua’s major works that were published either as essays or book chapters in Chinese before.

their films. It covers women’s images appearing in the cinema from the Republic period to the early 1990s, many of which were directed by male directors. Cui discusses Hu Mei’s *Army Nurse* through analysing its narrative voice and Huang Shuqin’s *Women, Demon, Human* through investigating the narrative structure. Taking textual analysis as her basic methodology, she examines questions related to gender, nation and representation from a perspective of what she calls “transnational feminism.” Her employment of narrative theory is quite useful for unveiling the conflicts between personal narration and public discourse at the subtextual levels of films.

*Cinema and Desire* is a volume that contains translations of Dai Jinhua’s major works originally written or published either as essays or book chapters in Chinese. The themes span from patriarchal historicality, post-colonialism in films by the Fifth Generation directors, to women’s images as signifiers and a critique of mass culture. It is noteworthy that in this book published in 2002, Dai still regarded *Women, Demon, Human* as the single Chinese feminist film.

*Chinese Women’s Cinema* is an anthology of essays on women’s filmmaking against a transnational background. It discusses women’s cinema across “Cultural China” (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora), chiefly focusing on female authorship and agency. The authors of this edited volume include scholars from the academia of Greater China and the Chinese diaspora. The book includes essays on several important female directors from mainland China: Dong Kena, Huang Shuqin, Hu Mei, Xu Jinglei, Ning Ying, and Li Yu. The essay that is very useful for my study is “The Voice of History and the Voice of Women: A Study of Huang Shunqin’s Films,” an English translation of Li Xingyang’s earlier essay
written in Chinese.” Li finds “polyphony” in *Woman, Demon, Human* with the voice of history (a critical discourse upon Chinese culture) and the voice of women (female expression) forming a dialogue. Nevertheless, he contradictorily argues that in *Woman, Demon, Human* the female voice is subordinate to the voice of history which determines the major theme of the film. He is nonetheless insightful in pointing out the dynamics between two layers of discourses (public and personal). I would also note that a similar tension is manifested in many films made by women in the 1980s, which creates a peculiar situation of repression of personal desire.

In the field of Chinese film studies, issues relating to women’s sexuality and subjectivity are far from having been adequately explored. Chris Berry was among the first Western scholars who investigated Chinese “women’s cinema” (he means the films made by women) by interrogating female subjectivity. His starting point was to consider the study of “women’s cinema” as an entry into a study of the realm of ideology. Therefore his approach was to look at the socio-political operation of “consensus ideology”. He took *Sacrificed Youth, Army Nurse* and *Lian'ai de jijie* (*The Season for Love*, dir. Urshana, 1986) as examples of “psychological films” that pursued “psychological exploration” and hence “a significant new tendency” against the consensus ideology. He also found that individual subjectivity in these three films...
films was recognised and valorised in the consensus ideology. In other words, the subjectivity is constructed within consensus ideology without being in opposition to it. Berry’s argument concerning the relationship between individual discourse and consensus ideology is stimulating.

E. Ann Kaplan’s essay, “Problematizing Cross-Cultural Analysis: the Case of Women in the Recent Chinese Cinema,” published in 1989, focuses deliberately on questions of female desire, sexual difference and subjectivity. In this essay, she chiefly compares and contrasts two films made by a male director (*Tianyunshan Chunqi, The Legend of Tianyun Mountain*, dir. Xie Jin, 1979) and a female director (*Army Nurse*), concluding that the newer films made by female directors “manifest a new self-conscious split between an evident, but socially forbidden eroticism and romantic love, and the subjects’ interpellation by the state.”49 Echoing her argument, I suggest that a conflict or tension between female directors’ justification of female desire and the top-down supervision from state ideology persists in a number of films. The subjectivity constructed in any given film is a result of negotiation with the dominant discourse.

In her recent study of Wang Ping’s (1916-1990) career as a filmmaker active in socialist China, Wang Lingzhen bracketed her discussion within the framework of Chinese socialist feminism. In an effort to contest the prevailing view that female directors adopted asexual positions in their filmmaking, Wang sought to analyse a “neglected dynamics” between socialist cinema and gender consciousness. Instead

of assuming that socialist cinema espoused a monolithic value system, Wang claimed that socialist cinema played a significant role in “combating patriarchal conventions and promoting gender equality.”

Although I am not going to define Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s as a feminist cinema, I share Wang’s project of mapping a more dynamic picture of women’s filmmaking in China.

4. Methodology

In elaborating women’s cinema from 1981 to 1988, a span of intersectional research is involved: film theory, feminist theory, narratology, psychoanalysis and semiotics. The analysis of camera techniques is to be combined with the elaboration of narrative style, covering setting, camera shots, mise-en-scène, etc. The status quo of Chinese filmmaking differs from Western filmmaking in two important aspects: institutional and ideological. It is improper to copy Western feminist film theories when analysing Chinese women’s cinema. In the first chapter I will interrogate the feminist perspectives in women’s cinema during this period and explain the localisation and limitation when applying Western feminism to the Chinese context. In the following chapters, narratology is used in the analysis of narrators, narrative voice and point of view; and semiotics provides the means to illustrate the process of signification in the enunciation of films and cultural discourse. I have borrowed the Freudian and social psychological understandings of repression through interpreting it in relation to female directors’ social practice.

As Roland Barthes stated, narrative is universal, “present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s *Saint Ursula*), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation...Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative, is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply these, like life itself.”\(^{51}\) In other words, narrative is the way that human beings live—that is, in need of the coherence of our perception and the understanding of the world.

Teresa de Lauretis contributed perceptive arguments on the relationship between narrative and feminist cinema. She dismissed the cliché of criticising narrative theory as an ossified formalist text-based research and pointed out the pragmatic development of narrative theory as follows:

Today narrative theory is no longer or not primarily intent on establishing a logic, a grammar, or a formal rhetoric of narrative; what it seeks to understand is the nature of the structuring and destructuring, even destructive, processes at work in textual and semiotic production. It was again Barthes who, in his notion of the text, sketched out a new direction and a useful critical approach to the question of narrativity: “The work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse... or again, the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.”\(^{52}\)

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Narratology is a major tool in my research, since cinema relies heavily on the production of signs that are strung in narrative sequences. Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, defined thirty-one functions and eight broad character types in the folktales, while Yuri Lotman found simply two functions that “open at both ends and are thus endlessly repeatable: entry into a closed space, and emergence from it;” the characters, accordingly, can be divided into two types: the mobile and the immobile.\(^{53}\) De Lauretis borrowed this structure as a metonymy of opposition between men and women in the filmic narrative that rested on a specific assumption about sexual difference in film: men are the mobile who “enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space,” while women are immobile because they actually represent “a function of this space,” “because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb.”\(^{54}\) These categories as a result of a cultural accumulation are employed in all cultural texts, repeatedly and endlessly.

The notions of narrative and enunciation can be tightly linked to the expression of female experience, owing to their relevance to feminist issues of body, sexuality and identity. “Experience,” according to de Lauretis, on the one hand, refers to the individualistic and idiosyncratic sense that exclusively belongs to one person; on the other hand, it is a mobility which may help other social beings participate in the

\(^{53}\) De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, 168.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 168.
process of constructing their subjectivities. To experience is an enunciation, which involves a series of socio-cultural practices that ensure a historical subjectivity.

Personal and subjective engagement in practices and discourses is illuminated in the cinematic narratives that I will focus on in the following chapters. From the late 1950s Chinese films were made in response to the collectivisation movement. Although the state loosened its control over private space, the individualist discourse that sprouted in the 1980s never became dominant. It was impossible for film directors to openly rebel against the collective ideology since all the film studios at the time were still state-owned. However, several Chinese female directors attempted to embark on the creation of a narrative which waged war against the ideology of gender-biased socialisation.

It is not hard to observe that the films made by women in the late 1970s and early 1980s still followed the established mode of using women’s images as discursive codes and visual signs to indicate the emergence of a new social order. At the same time, female directors began engaging in the expression of their personal views. In other words, although the pedagogical discourse in mainstream cinema was not as monolithic as before, female authorship was embarked on a dynamic interaction in at least two directions: a reflection of historical changes in a society undergoing political, economic and cultural return, and an awakening of nascent female consciousness as a part of individualistic discourse.

In my analysis, I point out that films made by female directors exhibit features of repression in their representation of sexuality, as an inevitable result of their being

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55 De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 158.
enmeshed in the web of a patriarchal discourse reified in the form of a state censorship. I understand repression on the basis of an Althusserian theory of ideology and interpellation. My analysis centres on the tension that operates within the narratives of the films through the oppression of the characters by state and social norms. Although this thesis does not centre on how filmmakers were oppressed in the making of their films, I do discuss the way in which these filmmakers negotiated the various obstacles to their productions. I borrow mainly from interviews conducted with these filmmakers in which they talk about their interplay with state censorship in order to make their films ideologically acceptable. In other words, my thesis aims to discuss the textual symptom of repression in the films, which is a result of a negotiation between oppression by the state apparatus of censorship and the filmmakers’ innovative impulses.56

I place the discussion of female characters’ repression within an Althusserian theory of the Ideological State Apparatus which is “omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form.”57 Inspired by Jacques Lacan, Althusser claims that “ideology represents the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”58 Individuals become subjects through participating in the ideological apparatus, which is the material existence of ideology. The ideological apparatuses,
such as church, Party, family, and school, allow for hegemonic power to incorporate individuals into the power structure. Althusser identifies the interpellation process through which individuals are transformed into subjects: “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjections.” \(^{59}\) By responding to this summons, individuals recognise themselves as subjects.

Borrowing from Althusser the model of the relationship between coercive interpellation and the individual’s internalisation of ideology, this thesis analyses the repression of characters on screen and female filmmakers off screen under ubiquitous ideological control. Female directors have portrayed different kinds of roles for female characters in their films: educated youth, a volleyball player, and female soldiers, among others. In spite of the efforts of these female directors to represent new images of women on screen in the 1980s, the female characters were repressed by the roles they were expected to occupy. State censorship was part of the reason that led to the repressive treatment of female characters on screen. I argue that many female characters were endowed with the characteristics of the female directors themselves, such as Li Chun in *Sacrificed Youth*, An Ran in *The Girl in Red*, and Qiao Xiaoyu in *Army Nurse*.

One way in which film scholars in Mainland China have periodised Chinese cinema has been to divide filmmakers into different generations based on a chronological order. The periodisation of Chinese directors is tightly entangled with social and ideological transition. \(^{60}\) In spite of its inaccuracy, this use of a

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\(^{59}\) Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State,” 47.

\(^{60}\) Pan Tianqiang’s addresses the problems of periodisation of Chinese directors and shows how these directors made films that responded consistently to social, political and economic changes. He also
chronological ordering of “generations” of Chinese directors is widely accepted by scholars. It marks clearly the changes in film content and style of the directors who were active in the specific times. These directors generally shared certain social concerns. However, there hardly existed any inheritance between successive generations. The uniform interpretation of directors in groups tends to write off the differences among directors in terms of their aesthetic pursuits and characteristics. At the same time, this generalisation of film styles of male directors as individuals leads to an obliteration of subversive films by female directors. While the Fifth Generation directors were applauded for inaugurating a new era of Chinese cinema, the importance of the Fourth Generation has been underestimated. The female directors I have selected include those who have been categorised as belonging to the Fourth Generation—Zhang Nuanxin, Huang Shuqin, Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun, and those who have been listed in the Fifth Generation—Hu Mei, Peng Xiaolian, and Liu Miaomiao. Their work and practice demonstrate different characteristics that have not been adequately addressed in the discussion of generations of Chinese directors. Their films illuminate the nascent female consciousness that was inspired by a new “enlightenment” that happened in the 1980s. Most of these female directors have won domestic or international film (usually in some non-mainstream festivals) awards but now are rarely known by people in China and abroad.

In my thesis, I have grouped films made by female directors into four pairs
chiefly on the basis of their thematic concerns, with an aim to manifest a more diversified picture of women’s filmmaking in the 1980s: 1) Zhang Nuanxin’s two films made after she published “On the Modernisation of Film Language,” an essential article that urged the innovation of Chinese cinema (Sha’ou, The Drive to Win, 1981; and Sacrificed Youth); 2) two films that touch upon problems on adolescent sexuality and subjectivity (The Girl in Red, Hongyi shaonü, dir. Lu Xiaoya, 1985; and Shizong de nüzhongxuesheng, A Missing High School Girl, dir. Shi Shujun, 1986); 3) two films about women in the army (Nüer lou, Army Nurse, dir. Hu Mei, 1985; and Mati shengsui, Women on the Long March, dir. Liu Miaomiao, 1987); 4) and two films that depict women’s efforts to accommodate to modern life (Ren gui qing, Woman, Demon, Human, dir. Huang Shuqin, 1987; and Nüren de gushi, Women’s Story, dir. Peng Xiaolian, 1988). The first three groups can be seen as parallels, while the fourth group includes films which show female subjects who are obviously more self-aware and less repressed compared with those appear in previous films.

My research embraces the uniqueness of these directors’ cinematic styles and pays attention to the question of how women’s films produce meanings through different aesthetic strategies, thereby resisting uniform interpretation. The thesis also uses a number of quotations from the interviews conducted with female directors. The interviews are not used as evidence for my interpretation of the films, but as a testimony for the subjective positions of these directors in relation to the themes of

61 Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, “Lun dianying yuyan de xiandai hua” (On the Modernisation of Film Language), Dinying yishu (Film Art ), no. 03(1973): 40-52.
female experience that I am discussing.

5. Chapter Overview

Chapter One Breaking through the Collective Consciousness

The first chapter introduces the socio-historical background of the Chinese cinema in the 1980s in order to account for the new opportunities which enabled Chinese women’s cinema to flourish. The chapter will also illustrate the relationship between women’s cinema and Chinese cinema, foregrounding female directors’ thematic concerns on sexuality and subjectivity and cinematic styles in their ways of portraying women’s images.

The reform and opening-up policy introduced in 1978 broke the isolation of China’s economic development and resulted in the rapid growth of foreign trade, leading to a (re)introduction of Western thought and inspiring calls for democracy in Chinese society. At the same time there emerged an extensive critical and theoretical debate concerning the modernisation of Chinese cinema. Two articles published in 1979, Bai Jingsheng’s “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama,” and Zhang Nuanxin & Li Tuo’s “On the Modernisation of Film Language,” called into question the taken-for-granted convention of “drama over cinema,” marking the beginning of the modernisation of Chinese cinema. When Zhang Nuanxin made her voice heard in the initial stages of postsocialist filmmaking in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, female directors inaugurated the most fruitful years in their career as filmmakers. It was in the 1980s that Zhang Nuanxin, Lu Xiaoya, Huang Shuqin, Shi Shujun, Shi Xiaohua, Wang Haowei, Wang Junzheng, Hu Mei, Liu Miaomiao, and Peng Xiaolian, etc., all accomplished their first films.
Chapter Two From National Discourse to Personal Narrative

Chapter Two centres on Zhang Nuanxin’s early films, illustrating her initiation of new film languages in the modernisation of Chinese cinema. I will probe how Zhang’s films reflect the interaction between national discourse and personal expression.

In *The Drive to Win*, her first feature film, Zhang’s experiment with documentary-style aesthetics informs the whole process of filmmaking, making the film, in her own words, “an expression of auteurism and personal emotion.” Nevertheless, Zhang repeated a negation of the feminist perspective in interviews conducted with her, emphasising the importance of artistic neutrality. However, her expression of auteurism reveals a gender sensitivity that demarcates her films from other films that also feature women as protagonists. A poetic and auteurist style of female expression developed further in her most well-known film *Sacrificed Youth*. Insisting on the importance of personal feelings, her films are concordant with the humanism popular in the early and middle 1980s.

Chapter Three Body and Sexuality: Passages to Individual Discourse

Chapter Three is divided into two parts, discussing two films made respectively by Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun, addressing the issues of young girls in their adolescence. This chapter shows how female directors developed the discourse on sexuality and female subjectivity in the Chinese context, and on the other hand, how their

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62 Zhang and Li, “Lun dianying yuyan de xiandai hua” (On the Modernisation of Film Language), 40.
repression prevents their further exploration.

Lu Xiaoya’s *The Girl in Red* expresses an exalted confidence in individuality and self-consciousness in its portrayal of an independent-minded girl, while Shi Shujun’s *A Missing High School Girl* has more to say on adolescent sexuality. Regarding *The Girl in Red*, I will analyse: 1) a digressive filmic narration that contributes to a unique narrative feature, serving the characterisation of the female protagonist who does not seek to comply with any traditional or newly fashioned images of women; 2) the juxtaposition of two discourses: Western civilisation and Chinese patriotism. Moreover, although tolerance of sexual discourse was seen in the public discourse in the mid-1980s, Shi Shujun still faced opposition over making a film about the sexual education of high school students, a topic which remained off-limits in the Chinese cinema. *A Missing High School Girl* is composed of two clearly demarcated stories: one aims to represent a romantic imagery to idealise love, with sexuality as an explicit narrative, implicating an emphasis on individual feelings; the other shifts to a didactic narration, coming to terms with the state ideology regarding the sexual education of teenagers.

**Chapter 4 Accommodating Female Desire in Heroic Narrative**

Chapter Four examines two films that give voice to female desire in the army: Hu Mei’s *Army Nurse* (1985) and Liu Miaomiao’s *Women on the Long March* (1987). Both mark evident departures from the uniformity of war film narration by manifesting female desire in a restricted environment.

*Army Nurse* almost metaphorises the situation of Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s: the cinema of repression. The extensive use of voice-over in *Army Nurse*
constitutes not only an essential narrative structure, but also the expression of female desire. The repression is ubiquitously indicated, however, not only through the inconsistent first-person narration, but also the spatial design. Liu Miaomiao’s practice of innovative film language went further than Zhang Nuanxin, Lu Xiaoya, Shi Shujun and Hu Mei. Her experimental compositional style is suggestive of the film style of the later 1980s. As an exploration of an erased memory in the historical discourse, Women on the Long March shows sympathy for women soldiers whose experience had been regularly removed from the mainstream narrative in the Long March films.

Chapter Five Quest for More Self-aware Female Subjects

Focusing on two films made in the late 1980s, Chapter Five discusses the quest for more self-aware female subjects. It unravels the change witnessed in the late 1980s, when “bourgeois liberalisation” was approaching its zenith and, following the continued development of the economy, women gained more freedom to command their own fate.

Formerly underestimated in Chinese film history, Huang Shuqin’s film Woman, Demon, Human (1987) is one of the most important films made in the 1980s. Though the feminist significance of the film has received much attention, scholars neglect its aesthetic value, which marks it as a great film made in a time when people were busy celebrating the emergence of China’s biggest film talents of the Fifth Generation. A comparison of Woman, Demon, Human and Chen Kaige’s Farewell My Concubine (1993) will be conducted in terms of their adoption of opera performance and representation of gender identity.
The last film in my research list, Peng Xiaolian’s *Women’s Story* (1988) demonstrates a broader view on the changes affecting women in China when it was undergoing social, political and economic transformation. The film portrays three women involved in this process and empowers them with the agency to command their own fate. Zhou Xiaowen’s film *Ermo* (1994) is mentioned as a comparison. While both films show rural women and their participation in social change, Ermo visualises political history and cultural transformation instead of enlarging personal discourse. *Women’s Story*, in contrast, with a similar stepping-out-to-the-city plot, lays emphasis on women’s role and agency that build on an emancipation from the restricted rural space.
Chapter One Breaking through the Collective Consciousness

1.1 Socio-historical Background of the 1980s

After 1949, socialist mainland China enjoyed ten years of stability, ushering in a new era of Chinese cinema, which was placed wholly under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. The decade of the Cultural Revolution since the mid-1960s was disastrous to the modernisation of China in the 20th century. During this period, only a handful of films was made and censorship was unprecedentedly strident. It was only in the late 1970s that the state embarked on the revitalisation of Chinese society. As Peter R. Moody, Jr. noted in his study of Chinese politics immediately after the Cultural Revolution, “The initial impetus for loosening the controls on intellectual activity and increasing the wealth and status of intellectuals themselves was, of course, the regime’s desire for modernization.” The desire for reform was particularly marked with the launching, in 1977, of the Four Modernisations, which had first been proposed by Prime Minister Zhou Enlai as early as 1964. The Four Modernisations project was officially endorsed by the state constitution at the Fifth National People’s Congress on March 5, 1978. In December 1978, at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee the Chinese government implemented the Reform and Open-Door Policy which facilitated the

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2 The Four Modernisations were agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence.

(re)introduction of Western science and technology. This policy not only led to the rapid growth of foreign trade and the (re)importation of Western thoughts, but its influence was also extended into the cultural field, resulting in a movement for spiritual liberation that inspired the call for democracy in Chinese society. ⁴

During the Cultural Revolution only a small number of revolutionary films had been available to the mass audience. These were mostly based on the eight “model dramas” with revolutionary themes. The immediate post-Cultural Revolution period of the late 1970s saw the recovery of the Chinese film industry, following the drastic political, social, and economic change. As summarised by Paul G. Pickowicz, more films were produced after Mao’s death (1976) and box-office receipts soared to new heights; however, these films “broke very little fresh political ground.”⁵ After 1977, an extensive critical and theoretical debate took place concerning the modernisation of Chinese cinema. Many directors whose career had been curtailed in the past decade got opportunities to make films, while journals that had suspended publication re-emerged and began to disseminate articles with contending views on the revival of Chinese cinema.

The Third Generation filmmakers who returned to filmmaking dominated the post-Cultural Revolution Chinese cinema. During this period, many films—national films and dubbed films from the West—that had been previously banned

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⁴ Zhu, Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform, 41.

were (re)released to the public. When they went on to restore conventional socialist realism in the films they made after the Cultural Revolution, there was a call from younger directors for a reformation of the film industry.

As Fengyuan Ji writes in her discussion of the shift of political discourse in post-socialist China, “The relaxation of totalitarian controls facilitated changes that underpinned the Chinese people’s new-found freedoms and encouraged the proliferation of discourses uncontrolled by the state.” Within such a relatively lax environment, the drive to modernise Chinese cinema was shared by many Fourth Generation directors who committed to searching for an alternative Chinese cinema and cherished ambitions to make their own films, free of the need to labor as assistant directors for the older generation before spreading their own wings.

Echoing the Four Modernisations project, the modernisation of Chinese cinema began with a critical reevaluation of the established norms, notably, as Zhu Ying has pointed out, the concept of “shadowplay” (ying xi). Shadowplay, the core concept of Chinese cinematic theory, took its shape in the 1920s. The theory of “shadowplay” regards “play” as “the soul of a film,” emphasising the plot of a story; while

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6 The Third Generation directors mainly refer to the directors who began their career since the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949. They had the longest career of making films that went through four decades until the late 1980s. Representative directors include: Cheng Yin, Xie Jin, Xie Tieli, Shuhua, Cui Wei, Wang Ping, Ling Zifeng, and Ling Nong, etc.


8 The previous pattern had been for filmmakers to work first as assistants for established directors, before being given the opportunity to make their own films.


10 Ibid.
“shadow” only serves as the means of presentation. Filmmakers of the 1920s assumed that shadowplay was a kind of drama, and this concept continued to inform the basic understanding of film until the 1980s. Initiated in the late 1970s, the argument against this filmic convention centred on the criticism of making drama as the essence of motion picture, that is, highlighting the theatrical quality of film narrative.

Two of the most distinguished articles among the publications at the time, “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama” and “On the Modernisation of Film Language,” questioned the deep-seated convention of “drama over cinema.” These two articles, by accentuating film form and advocating more cinematic approaches, announced the commencement of the modernisation of Chinese cinema. The further step of reformation was witnessed through Chinese New Wave in the mid-1980s. The two articles shared the goal of rectifying the myth of “film” as an appendage of drama and emphasising it as an independent art form. On the whole, the articles or directing notes authored by film critics or directors in the early era of reviving Chinese cinema are of theoretical and practical significance for breaking through the impasse of Chinese filmmaking.

“Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama” was written by Bai Jingsheng in


12 Ibid.

13 Bai Jingsheng, “Diudiao xiju de guaizhang” (Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama), *Dianying yishu caikao ziliao* (Reference for Film Art), no. 01(1979). No page number provided.

1979. Bai Jingsheng was a former dubbing actor for Western dubbed films imported to China since 1949 (mostly films made in the Soviet Union). From 1957 onwards, he was the editor of the film journal *Film Art (Dianying yishu)*, and then a professor in the Beijing Film Academy. He was among the first people to call for an innovation of Chinese cinema after the Cultural Revolution. As some film critics and directors asserted in the late 1970s, Chinese filmmaking’s complete submission to other art forms, especially literature and drama, “suppressed the exploration of film as an autonomous medium.” \(^\text{15}\) Bai’s article expressed similar worries and advocated the separation of film from the constraints of drama. He pointed out that films in China had long been based on the conventions of drama which underscored character-driven conflicts, whereas this emphasis was at odds with a cinematic presentation that valued pictorial quality.

Bai Jingsheng argued for the necessity of seeing cinema as a more synthetic art that went beyond drama (which was only one form used in cinema). He discussed a pictorial approach that would allow “unmotivated scenes” and events to signify within cinematic representation. \(^\text{16}\) Further, he emphasised the special characteristics of cinema, embracing elements of painting, prose, poetry and music, thereby introducing the possibilities of films with different styles achieved through experimentation with different forms, such as prosaic film (*sanwen dianying*) or poetic film (*shi dianying*). Bai Jingsheng also noticed that film was distinguished from drama in terms of time and space which allowed greater flexibility in

\(^{15}\) Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform*, 44.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
representation, exemplifying certain cinematic devices such as fast/slow motion of camera, freeze-frame, and change of colours and shooting angles. The last part of his article focused on the different use of dialogues in drama and film, advocating the use of montage that combined sound and picture. Bai Jingsheng therefore attempted to clarify the cinematic possibilities of filmmaking. His article suggests that socialist realism is in internal conflict with cinematic aesthetics and therefore needs to be reconsidered as a standard of filmmaking.

Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo’s “On the Modernisation of Film Language,” an article infused with the spirit of the Four Modernisations, has been regarded as a kind of manifesto of the modernisation of Chinese cinema. Zhang Nuanxin graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1962 and then taught filmmaking there. The Cultural Revolution prevented her early career as a film director, and it was not until the middle 1970s that she got opportunities to help in making films with Sang Hu (Di’er ge chuntian, The Second Spring, 1974) and Xie Jin (Chunmiao, Spring's Seedling, 1975). She became one of the Fourth Generation directors who began their career in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Li Tuo is a writer and literary critic who married Zhang Nuanxin in 1962. It should be noted that although they called for a reformation of Chinese cinema, their formulation was carefully chosen to legitimise their proposal by adapting to the orthodox discourse used by the CCP on “modernisation” and by criticising the Gang of Four and quoting Mao’s words on learning from other cultures.

“Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama” and “On the Modernisation of Film Language” converged in their de-emphasis of dramatisation and encouragement of diversity of devices in cinematic representation. Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, in
challenging Chinese cinema’s theatricality and its shackling to a programme of indoctrination, proposed an art film narration. Zhang and Li did not plan to become entangled by political and economic issues in their discussion but focused specifically on the question of cinematic forms with an aim to free cinema from its subordination to state ideology and politics. Giving a detailed illustration of the development and reformation of world cinema, they concluded that the isolation and self-complacency of Chinese cinema raised discontent among the mass audience. Their major reference points among achievements in world cinema were Italian Neorealism and French New Wave, which set the trend for the postwar European art cinemas. Zhang and Li considered that those films manifested more cinematic approaches, declaring the rupture with theatrical conventions, which, to a large degree, supported the argument in their article. Furthermore, the notion of photographic realism was foregrounded by emphasising the independence of film from other art forms—like drama, the novel and poetry, and the photographic quality of light, color and motion which contributed to cinematic representation. This article also introduced André Bazin’s theoretical contribution to the study of the long take that renders "true continuity" through mise-en-scène.

Like Bai Jingsheng, Zhang and Li also affirmed the function of montage combining sound and image—which is fully illustrated in Zhang Nuanxin’s first film, *The Drive to Win* (1981). The innovation of film language enlarged the field of expression, creating efficient methods to explore the human psyche and individual emotion, both of which had long been ignored in the culture of Chinese cinema. Avoiding making this article a manifesto of westernised Chinese cinema, they also underlined the necessity of nationalisation when borrowing from the West the
modern film language.

“On the Modernisation of Film Language” pointed out that the tendency in the development of world cinema was to de-dramatise the narrative pattern so as to render a film more cinematic. Zhang Xudong, a scholar of cultural studies, commented that “In a sense they set the tone for the theories and practices in the modernisation of Chinese cinematic language for the years to come (the Fifth Generation).”17 His words seem to deny the existence of the modernisation of film language in the practice of directors before the voices of the Fifth Generation directors were heard. In other words, Zhang Xudong, who considered the Fourth Generation directors’ exploration of cinematic innovation to be “aimless”, believed it was the Fifth Generation who eventually touched the “utter underdevelopment of the medium itself.”18 However, I would argue that many elements noted in films made by the Fifth Generation can also be found in Zhang Nuanxin’s films (as will be discussed later in Chapter Two).

The publication of “On the Modernisation of Film Language” in 1979 sparked comprehensive discussion and interest in the Chinese film community. In order to expand communication, the Film Art editorial office organised two conferences in September and October 1979 and invited many film workers to attend, including directors like Shui Hua, Zhang Nuanxin and Huang Jianzhong as well as critics like Bai Jingsheng, Zhou Chuanji and Shao Mujun. Some people harbored different attitudes towards the “modernisation” of film language, arguing that the proposal


should be accurately articulated as “making films more cinematic.”19 The concept of “metabolism” (xinchen daixie) used in the article was also questioned for its inaccurate disavowal of the heritage and “circulation” of film history. As to the rejection of drama as the essence of film, some protested by referring to the popularity of classic melodramas, while others endorsed the argument in the article that film should keep its own characteristics as an independent art form without solely relying on dramatic conflicts around plot or characters. The relationship between content and form also became a topic in this conference. Some insisted that “content dominates form,” which was a very conservative view that abided by the traditional Chinese way of thinking, while others emphasised the importance of form in determining the further development of filmmaking. On the whole, the conference was successful because it enabled the subsequent discussion on the reformation of film language to flourish. Shao Mujun’s “Modernisation and Modernist,” Lin Bin’s “Discussion of Borrowing and Innovation: on the Filmic Structure” and Zheng Xuelai’s “Argumentation on the Cinematic Aesthetics” were published in Film Art immediately after “On the Modernisation of Film Language,” resulting in a second conference that aimed to encourage further research into the theoretical exploration of filmmaking.20

The second conference involved more directors and film critics, including Xie

19 Anon. “Benkan zhaokai dianying yuyan xiandaihua wenti zuotanhui” (Forum Summary: on the Modernisation of Film Language), Dianying yishu (Film Art), no. 05 (1979): 52.

Jin, Xie Fei, Zheng Dongtian, Cheng Jihua, and Zheng Xuelai, all of whom played significant roles in Chinese film history. Many aspects that had been mentioned in the first conference provoked in-depth discussion among these film workers. Most attendees agreed that the rigidity of film research was gradually being broken in 1979, with a revival of enthusiastic discussion of theoretical issues in the Chinese film community. Aiming to promote the establishment of different schools of filmmaking, Li Tuo and Lin Hongtong urged the construction of Chinese film aesthetics. As for the concept of “metabolism” in the development of film language, many held opposing opinions on the concept of “circulation” by agreeing on the ongoing changes. Li Tuo did not approve the necessity of turning to modernism that was considered by some people to be the consequence of the modernisation of film language; meanwhile he denied the feasibility of establishing modernism in China because of the country’s different socio-historical conditions compared with the West. Shao Mujun, who addressed the topic of modernism in his essay, argued that “On the Modernisation of Film Language” had already listed the modernist features in its discussion of European modernist cinema, and the suggestions for the renovation of Chinese films given by Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo were obviously related to western modernism.

1.2 Feminist Power Bounded

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, late Qing intellectuals introduced Western ideas about women’s emancipation to China together with a wide range of ideas
about modernity that initiated an era of Chinese Enlightenment. Women’s emancipation went along with the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist discourse of male intellectuals and reached its acme during the May Fourth period (1915-1921). After the CCP’s rise to power in 1949, socialist state feminism was appropriated for the political agendas of the PRC for a long period, while other categories, such as anarchical, liberal and psychoanalytic feminisms, were confined within an elite circle. The liberal and psychoanalytic feminisms were rejected in socialist China because they were condemned for being relevant only to individual and bourgeois practices. It was not until the postsocialist 1980s that these different feminisms were rediscovered by Chinese scholars who engaged in gender issues that had been rarely touched on before.

In talking about Chinese feminism, many may argue that it emerged from a “state feminism” that is administered by the CCP. It seems that Chinese feminism will always “be linked to state.” Feminism, a term first coined by the French utopian socialist philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837, is now adopted as a concept that means a collection of ideologies and movements aiming at supporting and defending women’s equal political, economic, and social rights with men. There exist many branches of feminism, including liberal feminism, anarchical feminism,

21 Xia Xiaohong, Wangxing nüxing yu jindai zhongguo (Women in the Late Qing and Modern China) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe (Beijing University Publishing House, 2004).


23 Ibid, 545.

radical feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, and ecofeminism, etc. Most influential feminist theories originated from France, the United Kingdom and the United States, where feminists exposed the injustice of capitalist society, therefore, the analysis of the situation in socialist countries should not depend fully on the Western theoretical basis but requires a reconfiguration. In China, “women’s emancipation” is endorsed and led by the Communist Party which promoted women’s equality with men.

According to Wang Zheng, a feminist historian, the term "state feminism" has expanded from its early use in the Scandinavian context to refer to institutionalised feminism in states belonging to various political and economic systems.25 Sharon Wesoky described the relationship of Chinese women's movement to the state as “symbiotic,” embracing elements of both autonomy and dependence.26 Since the Republican period women’s emancipation had been included in the project of Chinese modernity and erected into a criterion for the achievement of modernity, especially in urban China. This concept of modern woman was imported from the Western world when intellectuals advocated the westernisation of China. Mao Zedong, who joined the communist organisation in the early 1920s, also promoted women’s emancipation after the establishment of the Soviet Government in Jiangxi in 1931 and the People’s Republic of China in 1949. But the outlook for gender equality in a real sense in China was far from optimistic. Socialist state feminism, which did not emphasise the male-female binary, especially in the Mao period, had made it difficult for women to assert independence from a male state machinery,

25 Wang, “‘State feminism’? Gender and socialist state formation in Maoist China,” 519.
since the very category of “woman” was no longer salient.

In the Maoist era the Women's Federation was the solely legitimate women's organisation specifically dealing with women's issues. The guidelines of Women's Federation’s work were tightly attached to or subordinated to national projects. In an essay about Chinese state feminism in the 1950s with field work research on Shanghai Women’s Federation in local communities, Wang Zheng expounded the subversive and constructive feminist side of the local women’s organisation that “helps to reveal the complexity of power relations in the formation of the party-state and to reconsider the meanings of CCP feminists' practices.” ²⁷ She affirmed the work that the Federation had done to carry on their responsibility for helping with women’s problems and understood the dilemma of the Federation who “find themselves walking a fine line between advocating women's interests and being named ‘bourgeois feminists’ for seeming to insist on the primacy of gender issues.” ²⁸ She concluded, the Federation’s work was always obliged to follow the change of political ideology, and its efficiency was highly problematic under the shade of bureaucracy. ²⁹

The recent turn of the Federation’s work has been declared by the new generation leaders of the CCP (2013), addressing the importance of women’s roles in nurturing Chinese family virtues and constructing family moral value within the domestic space. Appeals to women to go back home, however, are in conflict with

²⁷ Wang, “‘State Feminism?’ Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” 545.
²⁸ Ibid, 543.
the ideas that many “grass roots” feminists or feminist groups have held in recent years. The gap between state discourse and nongovernmental discursive practice makes feminism in China an ambiguous concept. This ambiguity has also been evident in Chinese filmmaking. Although women were granted the chance to direct films since the reformation of the film industry in the 1950s, it was not until the mid-1980s that women intellectuals got access to “bourgeois feminist” theories and engaged in research of gender issues.

In the post-Mao era when China’s political elites have embraced the global capitalist economic system and intellectual elites have borrowed Western culture as means of overturning the Maoist course, feminism, as a by-product of this process, has resurfaced along with the emergence of women’s studies since the 1980s. Like their male colleagues, women intellectuals criticised the “iron ladies” who were typically produced by Mao’s discourse.

Although feminist theories were gradually (re)transmitted to mainland China, Western feminism never became widely accepted among Chinese academia and only entered mass culture over the last twenty years. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) was only published in Chinese translation in 1986, while Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) did not appear till 1988. It was also only in the late 1980s that a small number of Chinese women intellectuals, among whom Li Xiaojiang was best known, began producing a localised version of women’s studies.  

Female directors who engaged in filmmaking in the early 1980s, therefore,  

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seldom had any access to Western feminist theories, and were thus unlikely to have been inspired by gender theory. Besides, the Western feminist theories addressing film studies were first translated into Chinese in the 1990s and the problems of gender representation on screen began to attract attention afterwards.

In my view, there exists no genuine “feminist consciousness” in Chinese women’s cinema. Having been integrated into the government bureaucracy, Chinese “state feminism,” to a large extent, rejects the multiplicity of voices from the grass-root levels. Although most Chinese women have gradually acquired a sense of individual rights, they cannot accept feminism owing to a misunderstanding deep-rooted in their knowledge structure. This misunderstanding is well exemplified in the films made by female directors in the 1980s and the images they created on the screen, manifesting the ambiguity of a self-awareness that sometimes goes beyond the limitations of state feminism while inevitably remaining attached to political ideology. At the same time, their practice cannot be completely interpreted by western feminist standards. I am inclined to talk about “female consciousness” as unintended messages embedded in their films or a narrative strategy they adopted in order to realise a self-expression.

Female consciousness encompasses a variety of aspects, but what will be central to my argument is sexuality, which emerged largely in the public media in the 1980s. As Evans observed, “An enormous amount of narrative material has been produced about sexual attitudes and behavior in China since the early 1980s. Women’s autobiographical writings, fiction and film, academic research and the media have approached issues of sexuality in ways that signify a radical departure from the
premises of the 1950s discourse.”

The representation of female sexuality in the films cannot all be qualified as daring; however, keeping in mind the social and political environment for filmmaking at that period, and the restraints on what to shoot and how to shoot, it will be surprising to find the outspoken attitude of female directors in their self-expression, differing from the imaginary representation of women by men. Sexuality is a key site of the construction of gender differences and of the hierarchies inscribed in them.

If women writers, as early as the 1920s, began to express a sensitive and daring sexual consciousness in their work, e.g. Ding Ling’s “Dairy of Miss Shafei” (1927), more than fifty years later, female directors were only able to visualise a much more reserved version of sexuality. In general, the discourse on women is always modified in accordance with the changes in central policy emphasis. The touch of sexuality becomes a means for the tentative establishment of subjectivity by female directors, and at the same time the hesitancy around this topic refracts the long-time collective repression of sexuality in China, with women always positioned at the bottom of this discourse.

In her research on women and sexuality in China, Harriet Evans says, “In a social and moral culture which seemed to share little with orientations of the 1950s and 1960s, the decentred structures of editorial authority that began to emerge in the mid-1980s contributed to a diversity of representations about sexuality unprecedented in the People’s Republic.” This echoed with the representation of

31 Evans, Women and Sexuality in China, 30.
32 Evans, Women and Sexuality in China, 14.
women’s sexuality on screen in which we can see women of different ages and different social backgrounds finding their voice of expression. This thesis partakes of a critical attitude toward filmic representations of women, especially those by male directors. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the representation of women in films made by women is absolutely genuine. The contribution of female directors to the development of Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s lies in their careful insertion of a private discourse that made it possible to match the requirement set by the state censorship. In other words, their filmmaking practice enables us to see both the delicate fabrication of self-consciousness and the crude possessive individualism that underwent a negotiation with mainstream discourse (which is especially indicated by the carefully crafted images they made of Party members and certain thematic concerns that usually legitimate the CCP directly). The films made by women seem to avoid politics, but it is the political undertone that actually affects their cinematic representation of women’s sexuality and subjectivity.

No research can be carried out without taking account of concrete historical situations in order to avoid reducing the subject to a single and fixed position. The study of women’s filmmaking in China requires a protest against the discursive suppression that manipulates women only as symbols of masculine modernity and an ahistoric other. As Linzhen Wang has proposed, it is important for studies of Chinese women’s cinema “to focus on women’s active involvements in Chinese film production,” “to examine their historical and subjective negotiations with various forces,” “to reveal their diverse manners and styles,” and “to assess the different
significations of their cinematic practices.” 33 In line with her suggestions, my thesis seeks to reveal the cinematic narratives within a pluralistic Chinese society.

1.3 Cinematic Styles of Chinese Cinema in the 1980s

From the early stages of Chinese cinema, the most prominent style was melodrama. Pickowicz comments, “Melodrama was not the only genre that existed in the 1930s, but it was by far the most dominant. And it was a genre especially well suited to the task of popularizing and dramatizing basic Marxist ideas.” 34 Given the early associations with the idea of “shadowplay,” it is perhaps not surprising that melodrama became the dominant genre in Chinese cinema. Melodrama values narrative over visual stimulation through developing clear story plot and patterned editing. In the Chinese context, since its early development of film industry in the 1920s and 1930s narrative efficiency had often been underscored out of a pedagogical purpose. This tendency was especially perceptible in the left-wing films made in the 1930s and the socialist period after the CCP came to power.

The revival of melodrama in postsocialist China has been explained by Pickowicz as an adaptation to the visual habits of Chinese audience at the time: “the most significant trend of the 1980s was the amazing revival of May Fourth melodramas. This conclusion is based in part on the behavior of the film audience … Melodrama, more than any other genre, positioned itself to meet the psychological


34 Pickowicz, China on Film, 81.
needs of an emotionally drained and politically battered urban film audience.”

Therefore, according to Pickowicz, the popularity of the melodrama films in the late 1970s and early 1980s could be ascribed to the need for sentimentality after the traumatic historical events. The phenomenon also resonated with the aesthetic function of “Scar Literature,” a literary genre that emerged in the late 1970s which allowed Chinese people to express their emotions on seeing the depiction of suffering during the Cultural Revolution. As Pickowicz has noted, the cathartic function of melodrama worked well with people who had suffered from political or social tragedy, as also happened in the period after WWII in China or America. At the same time, as many Chinese directors were used to the cinematic tradition inherited from the 1930s and 1940s, they probably found it easy to handle the melodramatic genre which enabled the audience to identify with the victims of injustice.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the Third Generation directors, notably Xie Jin, were one of the main forces in filmmaking. Xie’s *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1979) was the most representative melodrama based on the intellectuals’ sufferings in the years of the Cultural Revolution, adeptly combining cinematic skills and political contents that were craved for by the mass audience. Meanwhile the Fourth Generation stepped on the stage. Their work, on the one hand, also shows the inheritance from the melodrama tradition and the so-called socialist realism; on the other hand, by experimenting with new film languages and styles, some of their films

35 Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 89.

36 Ibid.
demonstrate the directors’ ambition in their aesthetic originality.

Most of the Fourth Generation directors received formal film training in the late 1950s and early 1960s under the socialist educational system. The films made by members of this “transitional generation” (as the Chinese film critic Ni Zhen termed it) were eclectic in style, overlapping with and competing with films by both older and younger filmmakers. 37 Zhu Ying has noted the thematic and stylistic heterogeneity of films in the 1980s, a period of Chinese film history marked by “confusion and confrontation” and encompassing a wide range of genres.38 Zhang Xudong shows a more negative view towards The Fourth Generation, asserting that “The Fourth Generation obtained its group identity only after the arrival of the Fifth Generation, the generation of filmmakers coming of age during the Cultural Revolution.”39 He was suggesting that because there were too many overlaps over thematic concerns between works made by the Fourth Generation and the Third Generation, demarcation would only be possible by having the Fifth Generation as barometer. However, I would argue in my thesis that the films made by the Fourth Generation have not received the critical attention they deserve in spite of having demonstrated elements that would later appear in the work of the Fifth Generation’s filmmakers.

Some scholars, as mentioned before, regarded the diversity of film genres in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a confusion that lacks stylistic clarity. While most

37 Zhang, Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms, 223.
38 Zhu, Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform, 49.
39 Ibid, 7.
directors, both Third Generation and Fourth Generation, attempted to revive the stagnant Chinese cinema, some still abided by the powerful melodrama tradition, while others tried to expand the possibilities of Chinese cinema by employing cinematic practices learned from Postwar European art-house cinema. But it should be borne in mind that, although film does not contribute directly to national power in the way that scientific work and economic development do, it can certainly be manipulated as political propaganda medium. Therefore the radical liberalisation of cinematic representation was difficult, especially in the early postsocialist era, when directors could still be haunted by the political climate of the Cultural Revolution. Just before the Fifth Generation attracted international attention for its rebellious attitude against the established norms of Chinese cinema, the Fourth Generation directors dominated a brief moment. Their films needed to follow state discourse, especially that of the Four Modernisations.

Compared with the Third Generation who were praised for their contribution to the cinema of the socialist period, and the Fifth Generation, represented by major film directors as Cheng Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who waged war against the restriction of film innovation, the social and cultural importance of the emergence of the Fourth Generation tends to be underestimated. Though most scholars neglected the early period of the 1980s in their elation over the young talent of the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yingjin’s words express what my research aims to confirm: “The shared interest in avant-garde filmmaking, although taken up at different historical junctures, compels us not to attribute aesthetic innovations exclusively to one generation (i.e. the Fifth) while ignoring similar attempts in other
Not a small number of scholars studying Chinese cinema hold negative views on the Fourth Generation directors. Paul Clark writes, “Much of their work looked more like the continuation of an artistic and political tradition of film realism than a new beginning. Just as they were getting into their stride, often with film adaptations of the post-Cultural Revolution ‘scar literature’ about suffering during those years, along came the fifth generation to redefine Chinese cinema.”

Zhang Xudong, who apparently agreed with Clark’s assertion, wrote: “Sure of nothing yet sticking to something they had already secretly or openly questioned, the fourth-generation directors nevertheless made their appearance as nostalgic searchers for the true, the good, and the beautiful in the socialist past that had shaped their experience.”

Zhang’s conclusion seems to be hasty. It is true that many films made by the Fourth Generation demonstrated the ambiguity between inclining to the orthodox indoctrination tradition and an attempt to embrace modernity; however, their conscious experiments with film language paved the way for future developments, and the ambiguous narratives generated gaps and contending ideologies in the filmic texts, especially that of the gender discourse which had long been buried in collectivism.

While taking for granted that artistic works in a totalitarian society (even though

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41 Paul Clark, Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 188.

42 Zhang, Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms, 223.
China entered a post-Mao period after the Cultural Revolution) are tightly monitored and hence subordinate to political agendas, I must emphasise that Chinese cinema in the 1980s had various stylistic subtrends and countertrends existed in spite of strict censorship. Women’s cinema was one of these subtrends. Films made by female directors at the time were remarkable not so much for their message or content, but for “the explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious, positions they [made] available” in the male-dominated film industry.\(^\text{43}\) I will detect gaps and silences embedded in their filmic narration that might be more important than expressions explicit in the narrative.

Although Li Tuo denied the possibility of growing modernism in China, it is not difficult to perceive the sprouts of modernist elements in films such as Teng Wenji’s *The Thrill of Life (Shenghuo de chanyin, 1979)*, Yang Yanjin’s *Troubled Laughter (Kunaoren de xiao, 1989)* and *Narrow Street (Xiaojie, 1981)*, all of which combine modernist cinematic experiments with severe criticism of the Cultural Revolution. Apart from those films probing the tragic stories of the Cultural Revolution and the longing and passion for realising the Four Modernisations, an attempt to rehabilitate humanism was ongoing.

Humanism, as the guiding ideology in the literary field, became the dominant thematic concern in the films. Moreover, in most of the films made during the early and middle 1980s humanism aimed to provoke political introspection. Ma Ning summarised the humanistic features of the early postsocialist cinema as:

Abstract concepts such as truth, virtue, and beauty are the criteria by which activities of the cultural revolution are evaluated in direct opposition to critical practices developed in the cinema during that period when political criteria were the measure for everything. Such use of idealist abstraction indicates that the critical stance these directors adopt is the humanism that formed the theoretic underpinning of the left-wing film movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and thus it is no surprise that some see themselves as a continuation of this tradition.  

As he has described, humanism set the tone for the films made during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Women’s cinema from this era was no exception, and Zhang Nuanxin’s early films were good examples. As I mentioned before, Zhang Xudong suggested that the experience of the Fourth generation directors did not entail a different set of possibilities, and their work was overshadowed by the new wave that was launched by the younger generation. His macro perspectives impeded a further exploration of the films made by the Fourth Generation or films made around the mid-1980s by the so-called Fifth Generation directors whose filmic styles differed from those that Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang generally represented. In the following section, I will introduce female directors who created an alternative way of telling women’s stories during the years of social upheaval.

1.4 Chinese Female directors

Before the founding of the socialist state in 1949, only one female director was

44 Ma, “Notes on the New Filmmakers,” 64.
recorded: Xie Caizhen, who made her single film, *An Orphan’s Cry* (*Guchu beisheng*), in 1925.\(^45\) Unfortunately this film is no longer available to watch. The enforcement of equality after 1949 by the CCP ensured women’s participation in the film industry. During the 1950s and 1960s, female directors, like Wang Ping, Wang Shaoyan (1923-), Yan Bili (1928-86) and Dong Kena (1930-), received institutional endorsement from state film studios and contributed reputable mainstream films that have been granted the honor of classic works in Chinese film history: *The Story of Liubao* (*Liubao de gushi*, dir. Wang Ping, 1959), *The Eternal Wave* (*Yongbu xiaoshi de dianbo*, dir. Wang Ping, 1959), and *A Grass on Kunlun Mountain* (*Kunlun shanxia yike cao*, dir. Dong Kena, 1958), and so forth.\(^46\) All those films were made to extol the PLA soldiers and Party members.

As the first female director in Socialist China, Wang Ping had been designated as the vice-director of the PLA August 1\(^{st}\) Film Studio. She was best known for her revolutionary films. All these films represented the propaganda required for political aims, and they earned her credit as a director whose name is still remembered for making Red Classic revolutionary films. Her successful career and the emphasis on her gender identity in publications seemed to prove that women could direct revolutionary films as well as men (or even better). On the one hand, she was a typical example that illustrated the endorsement of the equality advocated by the CCP at the time; on the other hand, she could only make herself visible by adapting

\(^{45}\) There is very little information recorded about Xie Caizhen’s life experience and her filmmaking career. See Wang, “Introduction: Transnational Feminist Reconfiguration of Film Discourse and Women’s Cinema,” 27.

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 28.
to the rules. The political aesthetics in her films denote the orthodox Party ideology. For instance, the gender relationship in *The Eternal Wave* expounds the substitution of sexuality with comradeship between men and women. The fake marriage of the main characters, Li Xia and He Lanfang, is first made as a cover for the convenience of Li Xia’s underground revolutionary work, then it changes to be a real marriage after the CCP representative comes to tell them that ‘the Party organisation authorised your marriage.” The premise and purpose of their marriage, namely to better serve the revolutionary cause, never change. The de-sexualisation of marriage life, the avoidance of representing sexuality, and the affirmation of a “big family” with revolutionary comrades over small family reflected a pedagogical mode of socialist cinema.

Female directors who came after Wang Ping were mostly born in the 1940s and educated in film academies in Beijing and Shanghai after the establishment of PRC in the 1950s and 1960s. Along with other male directors, they are called the Fourth Generation. These female directors were educated to devote themselves to socialist construction on the basis of the official slogans of equality between men and women. Before managing to make their own films, many of them had worked for established directors as assistants. Directors like Lu Xiaoya and Shi Xiaohua were actresses or had performing experience before their directing career. In general, they were generally influenced by three forces: their knowledge-structure constructed under the education of “revolutionary idealism,” their cinematic perception formed with the

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guidance of established directors who espoused the tenets of socialist realism, and their aesthetic enlightenment acquired through learning from European cinema.

However, the Cultural Revolution made female directors of the Fourth Generation unable to pursue their filmmaking career until the late 1970s. By that time they were around forty years old. Younger female directors (the Fifth Generation) who embarked on filmmaking in the 1980s were mostly educated in the directing departments. Along with the renaissance of Chinese cinema that commenced its new artistic turn since the late 1970s, women’s filmmaking experienced a general development.

At a time when female directors were hardly mentioned in Chinese film history, Zhang Nuanxin’s contribution to the debate on the modernisation of film language in the 1980s contained double layers of meaning. From the start of the socialist period after 1949, Chinese cinema became a state-run institution, with both filmmaking and film criticism under the control of Party ideology. The submission of cinematic aesthetics to the propaganda purpose and indoctrination reduced film to an instrument. The films made during the early 1960s witnessed a boom in aesthetic pursuit, but with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese cinema entered into stagnation. Subsequent recognition of the pathetic situation of Chinese film paved the way for a renewal in cinematic practice. Zhang Nuanxin’s call for modernisation formally initiated the theoretical debates after having her article “On the Modernisation of Film Language” published; meanwhile, she practiced the manifesto in which she elaborated her suggestions on the modernisation of film language, as a way of emphasising her own perspective in filmmaking, even though she did not completely abandon the clichéd narrative mode of socialist cinema, as is especially...
clear in her first film.

Zhang Nuanxin’s feature debut, *The Drive to Win* (1981), tells a story of a woman who devotes herself to the honour of her country. Although the film remains linked to the standard ideology in its call for selfless individual devotion, the director audaciously practiced the theory she had acquired from the postwar European art-house cinema, chiefly French New Wave and Italian neorealism. The heroine of the film, Sha’ou, also demonstrated an unprecedented degree of agency.

When Zhang Nuanxin made her voice heard in the initial stage of postsocialist filmmaking in the late 1970s and early 1980s, female directors ushered in the most fruitful years in their careers as filmmakers. Among many female directors, Lu Xiaoya, Huang Shuqin, Shi Shujun, Shi Xiaohua, Wang Haowei, Wang Junzheng, Hu Mei, Liu Miaomiao, and Peng Xiaolian, each made their first film in this period. Beyond the mainstream films they made that bore little difference with films made by men, the alternative narration they provided reflected the interesting juncture of gender consciousness and state ideology in the transitional period of the 1980s. The films I am working on were made by female directors of both generations who were allocated to state film studios. In terms of artistic styles, I do not see much discrepancy or a more profound experiment of film language, but the cinematic narration with a gender consciousness was witnessed in their films. While Zhang Nuanxin has been acknowledged as one of the representatives in the Fourth Generation, Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun are comparatively less well-known; compared with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou who led the Fifth Generation, Hu Mei, Liu Miaomiao and Peng Xiaolian’s filmmaking never matched their novel style.

Most films made in the early 1980s echoed the need for political dramas that
celebrated the victims of the previous decade, while many films made by male directors in the transitional period portrayed women as the bearers of traumatic memory. These films include such works as *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1979), *Narrow Street* (1981), *A Good Woman* (*Liàngjiā fúnǚ*, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1985) and *A Girl from Hunan* (*Xiāngnǚ xiǎoxiāo*, dir. Xie Fei & Wu Lan, 1986). Films made by female directors at this time provided more diversified pictures, with portrayals of women positioned in varied historical contexts: the dedicated athlete Sha’ou in Zhang Nuanxin’s *The Drive to Win* (1981); the young student An Ran in Lu Xiaoya’s *The Girl in Red* (1985); and a group of women soldiers in the Second Revolutionary Civil War in Liu Miaomiao’s *Women on the Long March* (1986). Zhang Nuanxin was an exceptional figure who pioneered the renovation of film language and practiced her theory in filmmaking, since most of the other female directors did not share her passion for experimental film language and concerned themselves for the most part with thematic choices.

All in all, cinematic practice of female directors of the Fifth Generation, together with the works of their predecessors like Zhang Nuanxin, Lu Xiaoya and Huang Shuqin, etc., allows for: 1) the possibility of examining the existence of a counter-voice that opposes the dominant patriarchal discourse in China, and 2) a site to “(re)write women’s history/story, (re)construct women’s speeches/voice, and/or (re) map women’s space/place.”

48 I emphasise that their filmmaking manifests a conflicted interaction between declaiming personal narrative within mainstream

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discourse and compromising with institutional filmic censorship. The next section will provide an illustration of scholarly criticism on gender discourse.

1.5 Critical Aspects on Gender Discourse

It was after the appearance of the first films made by the Fifth Generation filmmakers, One and Eight (Yige he baige, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983) and Yellow Earth (Huang tudi, dir. Chen Kaige, 1985), that Western scholars and Chinese scholars residing in the West began to interprete Chinese cinema adopting theories related to identity and gender. At the same time, research on female directors was relatively low in number and quality. As for these female directors themselves, they seldom broke away from the mainstream ideology by creating filmic norms that could easily be differentiated from those of male directors; meanwhile the alternative perspective they demonstrated was, on occasions, too ambiguous to be perceived. Not only were women powerless in this male dominated field, but the lack of gender consciousness in their filmmaking also weakened their work. Many female directors admitted that they seldom thought about feminism, which was a western import that they could barely approach until the late 1980s. Their lack of interest in feminism can be explained by their belief that what Western feminists fought for in terms of gender equality had already been bestowed by the Party.

The sensitive topic of sexuality had long been avoided on screen since the commencement of socialist filmmaking in which almost everything was subordinate to the depiction of revolution and class struggle. In some films made by female directors, under the surface of mainstream narrative, gaps in the narration were
created. A good example is Hu Mei’s *Army Nurse* (1985), in which the inconsistent first-person female narration exposes the irreconcilability of individual and ideological discourse. It is this submerged information or unintended narration that offers an interpretative possibility to learn about women’s self-representation that is otherwise so easily neglected.

Chinese cinema has regularly represented women who participate in social changes. The examination of images of women on screen was initiated by Western feminist critics who discreetly decoded the power relations embedded in the positions of shots on women in Hollywood films. Rey Chow has described the contribution of Western feminist film theorists as “groundbreaking” and its impact on interpreting Chinese cinema:

In film theory, one of the groundbreaking events is the critique, made collectively in the 1970s and 1980s by feminists of the Anglo-American world, of the conventional modes of objectifying women in cinema. In the decades since, few scholars who write in English on the question of women in cinema have been able to bypass this critique. Those who study women and gender politics in the relatively new subfield of Chinese cinema are no exception: whether or not authors explicitly acknowledge the influence of Anglophone feminist film theory, they fully partake of a generally skeptical attitude toward filmic representations of women, especially those by male directors.

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49 According to Edward Branigan, “narrative” refers to “a way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end that embodies a judgment about the nature of the events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events.” “Narration”, as he defines, “is concerned with how an event is presented, how it happens, rather than what is presented or what happens.” See *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, Routledge, London, 1992, 3, 65.

What she mentioned as an important outcome of the Anglo-American feminist
criticism includes one renowned essay that can hardly be bypassed when scrutinising
the representation of women: “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which was
written by British critic Laura Mulvey in 1975.\(^5\) Rey Chow, in her discussion of
“Woman” in the Chinese cinema, noted approvingly that Mulvey “deconstructs the
 cinematic image by making explicit in it a hidden narrative” and “in the case of
classic Hollywood melodrama at least, it is, she writes, masculinist scopophilia that
motivates and empowers the act of gazing, while women are cast as passive,
fetishized objects, as mere pretty images to be looked at.”\(^5\) The exploration of a
 hidden narrative exposed the connection between gaze and patriarchy—gendered and
ideological processes that determine the representation of women’s images.

In her essay “Fetish Power Unbounded: A Small History of ‘Woman’ in Chinese
Cinema,” Rey Chow termed the representation of women as a diachronic history of
fetishisation. Prefacing her remarks with reference to the early Chinese film The
Goddess (Shennü, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1934), she sharply observed that in a film that
focused on women “the spotlight it gives to a prostitute amplifies in a unique manner
the epistemic contradiction that accompanies the status of woman in film.”\(^5\) This
contradiction of “presenting socially debased subject matters or characters in a
cultural form whose effects tend to be spectacular and glamorous” seems to be a

\(^5\) Ibid, 492.
narrative mode that goes along with the commercialisation of women at the time.\textsuperscript{54}

In contrast, the conventional pattern of socialist film narrative after the 1950s unfolded a revolutionary propaganda purpose by emphasising a collective identity that transcends gender differences. Various women’s images on screen that suited purposes of indoctrination have been revisited constantly. A number of feminist literary and film critics have pointed out how, in socialist Chinese cinema, the tendency reflected in the cultural field was to downplay the gendered or sexualised specifics of women’s agency, so that differences and tensions between women and men became consistently negligible, under a genderless collectivism. The narrative in many socialist films was driven by the indoctrination that calls for individual devotion to the revolutionary cause for the sake of denoting a hopeful future. Meanwhile, class struggle was emphasised in order to justify the superiority of the proletariat under the leadership of the CCP. Rey Chow further argues that “communist films, in accordance with the direction laid down by early Maoist film classics such as The White-Haired Girl (Bai maonü 白毛女，1950) and The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun 红色娘子军，1961), tended instead to depict women as determined subjects with wills and voice—even as the latter were redirected and reincorporated in the social and communal fabric.”\textsuperscript{55} This narrative of defetishising, according to Rey Chow’s reinterpretation of the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, focused on reconfiguring feminine images. To avoid the representation of spectacle and splendor that characterised the commercial discursive

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

practice of the films made in China in the 1920s and the 1930s, these films offered purposeful narratives of social revolution and class struggle, which deny sexuality as the motivation of narrative, thereby resulting in the loss of the woman (or man)’s positions in the filmic representation as “self-sufficient ontological entities.” This cancels the masculinist scopophilia that Laura Mulvey described in her analysis of Hollywood films. As Rey Chow suggests, “If anything was being fetishised, it was the (self-generative potency and permanence of the) Chinese Communist Party itself.”

The mid-1980s witnessed a return of fetishising women in the mass media, which resulted in the reemergence of women as both good mothers and seductive objects. The degendering strategy adopted in the socialist period was denounced; strong and sensual women reappeared in fashion magazines, commercial advertisements and on screen. Meanwhile, a dispute took place over the female essence and how to define and represent the "real woman."

In the 1980s, according to Zhong Xueping, rather than emphasising the nature of women as social and communal beings, Chinese female intellectuals were concerned with “real women” emerging in history. This trend led to, as Zhong suggested, women’s being trapped in the ambivalence that was caused by the return to an appeal to the “female essence,” in the ignorance of the socio-cultural background. The

56 Ibid.
ambivalence, she argued, stemmed from the contradiction that while women were calling for an authentic female identity that had been disqualified by the CCP’s political discourse, they also insisted on “the importance of the women’s liberation movement under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” She further concluded that women’s searching for “female essence” was “accompanied by the return of a bourgeois feminine imaginary and the return of a sexist ideology, along with sexist practices in socio-economic and cultural domains, based precisely on the assumed sexual differences between men and women.”

Zhong Xueping’s argument denies the necessity of sexual difference as the basis for defining female identity and seems to suggest that a search for “female essence” inevitably means subservience to sexist ideology which had been fiercely criticised by feminists. She also downplays the importance of women’s return to femininity and equates “re-feminising” and “re-sexualising” women with searching for “nüxing tezheng (female characteristics) and nüxing qizhi (female essence/femininity).” For her, the social and political frame should be emphasised in order to avoid the essentialist interpretation of women. However, to examine female experience only under the grand discourse results in a loss of corporeal basis of argument. The discussion of female subjectivity, I argue, starts from the observation of the sense of self that has been routinely trivialised in the historical narrative and bears an inevitable relevance to biological experience.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p234.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, p235.}\]

Chapter Two From National Discourse to Personal Narrative

“You want to be pretty, but you just hide your true nature; you love a man, a young boy, but you say emphatically NO! That’s something we Chinese women share in common.”

Zhang Nuanxin

2.1 Introduction

Zhang Nuanxin, one of the female directors who were encouraged by the new political atmosphere in China, is renowned for her desire to modernise film language. As one of the representative figures in Chinese cinema of the first half of the 1980s when the Fourth Generation was at their peak of filmmaking, she is most acknowledged for her documentary style exemplified in her use of long takes, a de-dramatised structure, and non-professional actresses and actors.

In her audacious essay “On the Modernisation of Film Language” (1979), Zhang Nuanxin unprecedentedly advocated innovation in Chinese cinema, following its stagnation during the Cultural Revolution and the increasing gap with the development of world cinema. The pioneering spirit of this essay sparked continuous debate among film critics in the 1980s, especially after the release of The Drive to Win (1981), in which she endeavoured to put into practice her theory of a

1 Zhang Nuanxin, interviews by George S. Semsel, Chinese Film, 124.
new film language. In the essay, she criticised the impurity of film in China and how
it had long been manipulated as a tool of political propaganda in the so-called
socialist realist tradition or as a mouthpiece for the author’s “worldview.” These
tendencies, on the whole, had made film a vehicle that served only ideological
content, thus depriving it of its role as an art form. Driven by the desire to combat the
convention of “drama over cinema,” Zhang drew inspiration mainly from Italian neo-
realism, French New Wave, and Andre Bazin’s theory of the long take.

Tony Rayns considered Chen Kaige’s Yellow Earth as standing alone in the mid-
1980s for its “refreshingly clear account of the traps that await Chinese women” and
embraced the hope for “a more radical feminism in the work of Chen Kaige’s
contemporaries.” At the same time, Rayns, who was apparently unaware of the
versatility female directors showed in their portrayals of women in the 1980s,
regretted that China’s few female directors were inclined to make films about men or
family. Zhang Nuanxin was one of those female directors who portrayed distinct
images of women earlier than Chen Kaige. However, neither Zhang Nuanxin nor the
younger generation of female directors in China developed the “full feminist
consciousness in Chinese cinema” that Rayns expected would emerge.

The denial and suppression of gender difference among Chinese female directors
is a general phenomenon that has been noticed by a number of feminist critics, such


5 Ibid, 197.
as Dai Jinhua and Cui Shuqin, who addressed this problem in their discussion of women in Chinese cinema since the socialist period. Consciously or unconsciously subordinated to the male discourse and patriarchal norms, most of the films in the socialist period reflect the predicament of developing feminist cinema. Cui Shuqin has pointed out the tendency to downplay the gendered or sexualised specifics of women in the careers of female directors in the following way:

Generally speaking, in filmmaking a female director primarily establishes herself as an author. She assumes the position of one who writes with the pen or films with the camera. In order to “hold the pen” as a man, female filmmakers have to degender themselves, so to speak, to claim that “I can make films as my male colleagues do.” The ambition to enter the male-dominated mainstream of film production leads female directors to make films with a covert gender consciousness.  

Such tendencies, as described by Cui Shuqin, can be ascribed to Zhang Nuanxin, who refused the tag of “female director.” However, if Cui claims that female directors’ ambition to enter the male-dominated film industry resulted in “a covert gender consciousness,” that suggests that female directors had cultivated a consciousness before their repressing of this consciousness. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the circumstances that predetermined their choice to degender themselves in their film career.

Paradoxically, however, as is shown in many films made by female directors in the 1980s, the filmic texts deliver messages that go against the directors’ denial of

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6 Cui, Women through the Lens, 215.
female perspectives. Furthermore, these perspectives, of which most directors are apparently unaware, are, nevertheless, closely related to the authorship they emphasised repeatedly. Zhang Nuanxin’s early films, *The Drive to Win* and her more mature *Sacrificed Youth* (1985), not only prove her mastery of an aesthetics of documentary style, but also highlight a gender consciousness. In each of these two films, a woman is the protagonist, the subject of narration, and the centre of the narrative perspective; moreover, in *Sacrificed Youth*, a more poetic and refined quality proclaims a feminine visual style.

This chapter discusses two representative films made by Zhang Nuanxin early in her career, accentuating the distinctive features of her filmic aesthetics and charting the trajectory of an expression of a female consciousness embedded in both films as well as the repressive influences that affected her. In order to illustrate her auteurist style, I will analyse her use of a film language unique in the spectrum of Chinese realist filmmaking. *Sacrificed Youth* is the focus in this chapter, in which I will discuss the core of Zhang’s filmic style and the ambiguity of her expression of female subjectivity.

2.2 The Drive to Win: An Integration of Female Consciousness and Nationalism

*The Drive to Win* received the “Best Film award from the Ministry of Culture in 1981” and “a special award at the China GRA (Golden Rooster Awards 1982).” In

this film, Zhang Nuanxin’s experiment with aesthetics of a documentary style is evident throughout the whole process of filmmaking, making the film, in her own words, “an expression of auteurism and personal emotion.”8 The innovative practices enumerated by Zhang Yingjin in A Companion to Chinese Cinema, include “mise-en-scene, variation within a single take, color contrast, pace or tempo, split screens, and audiovisual counterpoint.”9

The film, whose script is authored by Zhang and her husband Li Tuo, tells the story of a national women’s volleyball player called Sha’ou. In spite of being injured shortly before an international competition with Japan, she insists on participating in strenuous training and endures the painful process of therapy. Unfortunately, her team loses the game, and she is immediately informed that her fiancé (Dawei) has died in a rock-climbing accident. Stricken by this double blow, she runs to the Yuanmingyuan Garden where she finds inspiration and forces herself to face up to the frustrations in her life. She chooses to devote herself to coaching the new generation of women’s volleyball players. Although paralysed by overwork afterwards, she is gratified because of witnessing the final victory of China.

The two authors of the script explain that, "What we are talking about here is the story of a female volleyball player. In real life, she could be a female scientist, a female teacher, a female agronomist, a female textile worker, or even, someone just

8 Ibid, 40.
9 Zhang and Xiao, A Companion to Chinese Cinema, 63.
like you.”

But why is “female” accentuated? If “you” were actually a man, does it make sense to claim that “she could be you?” Their statement owes nothing to feminist ideas, instead, it designates woman as an abstract sign for all human beings regardless of gender.

It is understandable that Zhang Nuanxin consciously denied a feminist standpoint. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the foremost goal, for many female directors, was to proclaim an individuality which had nothing to do with gender. Cui Shuqin has provided a clear illustration of Zhang Nuanxin’s attitude towards feminist issues:

Zhang also declares that “I’ve never reminded myself that I’m a woman director and never have the intention of establishing a woman’s perspective when I’m shooting a film.” She further explains that “a woman’s text should be first and foremost personal rather than feminine….As a female director, I speak as an artist, not as a woman. Art conceives no gender difference.”

Despite Zhang Nuanxin’s denial of the gendered identity reflected in her films, *The Drive to Win* embodies an individualised female subjectivity in the figure of the protagonist. The film centres on the struggles of volleyball player Sha’ou, who, after experiencing the disappointment of failing to win a gold medal and being informed of the death of her fiancé, finally persists in her determination to devote herself to her

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10 Zhao Ming, “Xinren, xinzuo, xinshouhuo — Tan yingpian sha’ou de yishu chengjiu ji qita” (New Director, New Film, New Harvest: on the Art Achievement and Other Aspects of The Drive to Win), *Dianying xinzuo* (New Films), no.05(1981): 88.

11 Cui, *Women through the Lens*, 188.
country with the growing maturity of her character. The film explicitly announces its break from the stereotype of a collective view on gender in the latter part of the film, through the words of a sports commentator (who is also a professional commentator in real life), “in this Chinese women’s volleyball team, everyone has her own way of expression and her unique personality.”

My discussion of this film will focus on Zhang Nuanxin’s cinematic style which embodies her understanding of new film language, the coalescence between female agency and nationalism, and the narrative space in which Sha’ou is portrayed as a national model.

### 2.2.1 An Initiation of Auteurist Style

*The Drive to Win*, by combining a documentary style and a fictional narrative, distinguished itself from other films made in the early 1980s that still valued storytelling over cinematic features.

The point-of-view shot is used rarely in this film, which is a way to avoid dramatic representation and to practice Zhang’s documentary style; while the female voice-over does appear, but only sporadically. To be accurate, this voice-over is heard only twice: first at the beginning of the film when Sha’ou’s voice is added in the scene of the sports ground where girls are doing exercise, explaining that they are preparing for a long awaited chance for an international volleyball competition. Sha’ou’s words, such as “I did not expect I would have such a heavy price to pay (03’36” into the film)” indicate a retrospective filmic narration; the film ends with her voice-over expressing her unchanging determination to devote herself to a sports
career, thereby asserting the value of her self-sacrifice in order to serve the public.

The extensive use of long takes and close-ups is the most prominent stylistic feature in *The Drive to Win*. The film opens with a long take that lasts approximately for two minutes, showing a group of women in red sportswear walking toward the camera, exuding the potency of youth. This sequence easily calls to mind a scene that appears at the beginning of *Stand up, Sisters (Jiejie meimei zhanqilai)*, dir. Chen Xihe, 1951, in which several women (former prostitutes) walk hand in hand as their silhouettes fade into the distance. While metaphorically the scene in *Stand up, Sisters* signifies the fading away of an old society in which women were persecuted as prostitutes, the view of young women volleyball players approaching the camera in *The Drive to Win* suggests the arrival of a vigorous new era. The film ends the same way but with a group of a new generation of women volleyball players, echoing the beginning and signifying a continuous rebirth of vitality. The contrasting of similar shots that appear in a film made in the era of socialist China with a film made in the postsocialist era suggests at least two points: Zhang’s development of a new film language did not announce a decisive break with former socialist tradition; if prostitutes were still passive victims who could only wait to be rescued by the Party, female volleyball players who are portrayed in a new context have been endowed with agency of self-actualisation, as is especially manifest in Sha’ou’s case.
The movement of “walking” is repeatedly emphasised in the long take shots. The full-length shots of women are taken from different angles in an observational documentary style. The beginning of the film almost invokes a feeling of seeing a documentary about female athletes. The shots follow them entering the playground, showing their actions and the movements of warming up and training with fast
camera movement. When Sha’ou runs to get her fiancé’s letter from a girl who has let slip that she has a boyfriend, a tracking shot is used to follow Sha’ou, only stopping when she eventually gets the letter, which she then stands alone to read. These devices had not been frequently seen in Chinese feature films before. For instance, in Xie Jin’s *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (*Nülan, wuhao*, 1957), the first colour sports film in China, camera movement anticipates the actions of the characters, e.g., when the basketball coach is checking the attendance of team members, the camera leads the audience to see the girl before he pronounces the name; moreover, the sequences that represent their training on the sports ground are mainly taken from a static camera.

In both *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* and *The Drive to Win*, the beauty of women’s bodies is boldly demonstrated, especially their legs in short sports pants. This owes to the comparatively lax political environment in both the mid-1950s and the early 1980s when China was in the process of social, political and economic changes. In these contexts, the bodies of the female athletes, rather than being denounced as the representation of obscenity, can be interpreted as national tropes—health and beautiful bodies metaphorise a strong nation.

The close-up is widely used in the portrait of Sha’ou. With the voice-over narration adopted only twice in the film, the close-up instead works as an efficient film language to show Sha’ou’s emotions. Unlike the close-up on a woman’s body, that usually panders to the male gaze, it is her plain face that is frequently seen in close-ups. Unusually for a female protagonist, Sha’ou is not clearly portrayed as glamorous. In keeping with her documentary aesthetic practice, Zhang Nuanxin chose a non-professional actress Chang Shanshan, who was a former volleyball
player, to play Sha’ou. This was exceptional in Chinese cinema. In her directing notes for this film, Zhang Nuanxin admitted that she had been questioned whether it was proper to choose Chang Shanshan to play the leading role.\textsuperscript{12} And she affirmed the success of Chang’s performance in this film, praising her demonstration of the natural disposition of a young female athlete. Chang’s experience of being a professional volleyball player inspired the depiction of Sha’ou as someone who is not conventionally attractive and is, moreover, endowed with obvious defects in her personality: this is exemplified by her complaint about the coach’s rigorousness and her capricious resistance to the eating of beef which would be of benefit to the development of an athletic body. Every time the camera pushes close to her face, it forces the audience to observe her subjective feelings—whether they are of anger (towards the coach), torment (when being treated for her injured waist) or happiness (being with her fiancé). Sha’ou’s face, which is filmed in such a way as to deny an erotic pleasure to the male desiring gaze and to approach an authentic portrayal of a volleyball player, refuses the conventional objectification of woman on screen.

A unique style of montage is constructed when close-up is combined with audiovisual counterpoint so as to create a "stream of consciousness," which manifests Sha’ou’s mental activities. This montage is used in a series of shots showing Sha'ou's moment of reflection after being informed of the death of Dawei, her fiance. The camera focuses on her tearful face, and her grief is frozen in silence. Instead of a cry or a whimper, the sound of the avalanche in which Dawei was killed

\textsuperscript{12} Zhang Nuanxin, “Women zenyang pai Sha’ou” (How We Filmed \textit{The Dive to Win}), \textit{Dianying (Film)}, no. 08 (1981):12-25.
is inserted as a metaphorised sound image for her inner world. Following the loud noise, the picture of the avalanche appears, which, as has been indicated through the close-up of her face, should be perceived as her imagination. Sha’ou’s shouting of "avalanche" and the happy laughter of Sha’ou and Dawei are interposed with the scene of her larking about with Dawei in a snowy field. Yet the mirth does not last long and is quickly replaced by the noise of the avalanche again and the picture shifts to the tearful eyes of Sha’ou marking a return to “reality.” Alternating between sound and picture, illusion and reality, this montage construction presents the character’s mental experience. More effectively, the use of montage serves a diegetic function of dealing with this woman’s complicated psychological change caused by an unspeakable grief; the device works as an example of cinematic Free Direct Discourse, through which the "stream of consciousness" is depicted within a filmic narration when the narrative voice is absent.13

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13 Free Direct Discourse is originally a concept in literary studies. According to Gerald Prince, Free Direct Discourse is a type of discourse whereby a character’s utterances or thoughts are (presumably) given as the character formulates them, without any narratorial mediation (TAGS, quotation marks, dashes, etc.)...Free direct discourse sometimes is also made to cover those cases in which a character’s perceptions are presented directly as they occur in his or her consciousness. See Gerald Prince, Dictionary of Narratology (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 34.
Figure 1.3. Zhang Nuanxin plays the coach in *The Drive to Win*.

### 2.2.2 Nationalist Discourse: the Cultural Revolution as Invisible Presence

Nationalist discourse, which had been a clichéd narrative element in Chinese socialist cinema, remained dominant in the films of the early 1980s. Films such as *The Dadu River* (*Daduhe*, dir. Lin Nong & Wang Yabiao, 1980) (which extols the bravery of the Red Army who fights against the KMT army under the leadership of the Communist Party), *I Am with Them* (dir. Cong Lianwen & Lu Xiaoya, 1982) (which advocates people’s devotion to the Four Modernisations), and *The Herdsman* (*Wozai tamen zhongjian*, dir. Xie Jin, 1982) (which encourages people to reestablish their faith in a new nation after the Cultural Revolution), all demonstrate nationalist perspectives with different approaches. *The Drive to Win* exemplifies what Wang Lingzhen has described as the “pronounced nationalist character” of the socialist feminist films of the 1950s and 1960s that tied female agency to the political mainstream in China.¹⁴

In *The Drive to Win*, the facial close-up of Sha’ou, apart from serving the purpose of expressing her happiness, sorrow, chagrin, and despair, emphasises the spirit of endurance through the characterisation of her strong will of bearing the pain caused by the traditional Chinese massage of her injured back. A montage sequence cuts from the close-up of her sweating face to the full-length image of her exercising

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intently on the training ground, and cuts back to the close-up, indicating her devotion to victory in spite of the physical pain.

Sha’ou’s sacrifice of her personal health is highly valued because it advocates “the interests of the group taking priority over those of the individual.”¹⁵ The appropriation of woman in the national discourse produces a dislocation of female subjectivity, however. Cui Shuqin has described the employment of images of women in the national discourse in Chinese cinema, pointing out that “[i]n the guise of nationalism, woman serves as a figure of the oppressed, bearing external invasion and domestic problems, a trope of resistance in the struggle for national independence, and a symbol of a component in the building of the new nation-state.”¹⁶ Sha’ou’s face in the film is not appropriated as an oppressed sexual symbol, but is, rather, abstracted as an embodiment for the nationalistic spirit that was requisite for a national recovery from historical trauma (the Cultural Revolution). Zhang Nuanxin once claimed that Sha’ou “epitomised the life experience of the generations within these 30 years of Chinese history.”¹⁷ By the end of the film, Zhang’s portrayal of Sha’ou has obviously revealed a degendered “noble ordinary person” who is “the hope of the country and the backbone of the nation.”¹⁸ Following this nationalistic narrative, Sha’ou’s injured body, which has been repeatedly

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¹⁶ Cui, Women through the Lens,175.

¹⁷ The “30 years of Chinese history,” according to Zhang Nuanxin, refers to the period from 1949-1979. See Zhang Nuanxin, “Keguizhe hun, suoyaozhe dan” (Soul is Precious and Courage is Needed), Dianying xinzuo (New Films), no. 01(1982): 82.

¹⁸ Ibid.
emphasised, can be associated with the metaphorical use of woman’s body in the films or literary works that always signified the “motherland” that sustained the suffering of her people.

This nationalist connotation is also embodied in the sequence set in the Yuanmingyuan Garden, which deliberately relates Sha’ou’s contemplation of individual tragedy to a grand discourse of national honor and disgrace. This scene is both the dramatic climax of the film and the clearest example of the film’s effort to link an individual woman to the national project. After failing to win in the international volleyball competition, Sha’ou returns home and prepares to marry Dawei. However, what awaits her is the news that Dawei has died because of an avalanche. She is submerged by her grief. The only way to relieve her sorrow is to sublimate her personal feeling to a higher emotion through a patriotic enlightenment. She rushes out of the door after an argument with her mother and walks to the Yuanmingyuan Garden.

Historically, the Yuanmingyuan Garden is a very special place. It once was a royal garden built in the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), famous for its extraordinary buildings and treasures. However, it was robbed and burned in the Second Opium War by the united army of English and French forces and was further destroyed in 1900 by the Eight-Power Allied Forces. This garden, afterwards, with only its ruins left, became a symbol of national disgrace and a historical site for Chinese patriotic education. During the 1980s many poets lived in the area and met to write poems.

Bei Dao, one of the most famous among those poets, wrote a short story set in the Cultural Revolution called “In the Ruins,” about a mournful university professor who was labelled as anti-revolutionary during the Cultural Revolution. Badly
missing his daughter, he walks out to the Yuanmingyuan Garden where he encounters a village girl whose father was beaten to death for stealing a watermelon. A passage reveals his feeling towards the ruins left in the garden with an omnipotent point of view: “He touched the cooling stone pillar. Finished, he thought, this once-illustrious palace, which had been the celebration of an age, had collapsed, and once it had collapsed, it was no more than so many pieces of stone. And he himself was just a little stone among them. There was nothing to be lamented; in the midst of a people’s deep suffering, individuals were negligible.” 19 These words resonate with the sequence in Zhang Nuanxin’s The Drive to Win, in which Sha’ou is walking among the stones and recalls what Dawei told her, “All that can be burnt has been vanished to dust, only the stones stand (62’00”).” However, whereas Bei Dao depicts the sorrow of “touching” the stone as a symbol of disillusion with the infringement of personal dignity during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Nuanxin avoids any direct allusion to the period in The Drive to Win. The stones, apart from acting as a metaphor for the loss of Sha’ou’s dream and the death of her lover, remind her of the national disgrace that empowers her to live and devote herself to coaching the new women’s volleyball team.

The Drive to Win was made immediately after the victory of the Chinese women’s volleyball team over Japan to win the first gold medal in an international volleyball competition. Sha’ou is characterised as a patriotic athlete whose responsibility is to fight for the honour of her country. The film suggests that in the

face of the rejuvenation of a whole people, individuals are negligible. At the time, filmmakers were asked to make films that inspired nationalistic spirit: the audience would be encouraged by the victory over Japan—a victory that meant a great deal to China after sustaining the catastrophic years of the Cultural Revolution. The victory requires the sacrifice of people like Sha’ou, who shoulders the responsibility of devoting herself to the country under the name of an honorary athlete.

Figure 1.4, Sha’ou in the Yuanmingyuan Garden.

Dawei’s instruction about the meaning of happiness reinforces Sha’ou’s submission to the state. In the sequence set in the Yuanmingyuan Garden, his voice lingers on when Sha’ou expresses her longing for him, “All that can be burnt has vanished to dust, only the stones stand.” Contrasted with Sha’ou’s crying over losing everything, the stones that symbolise historical memory and the strong will of the Chinese people remain. Dawei’s reply to her enquiry about who was responsible for burning the garden overwhelms her with nationalistic sentiments that then encourage
her to achieve happiness through her devotion to her career. Dawei’s voice is added again when Sha’ou goes back from the Yuanmingyuan Garden. He says: “Real happiness does not lie in the achievement of your goal, but in the process of trying to achieve it.” Sha’ou’s dream of becoming a good housewife vanishes because of the death of Dawei, but his otherworldly voice shows the correct way for Sha’ou to follow. By committing herself to the ideal of wiping out the misery of a nation, her personal grief is assuaged.

Moreover, in spite of its overt patriotic ideology, The Drive to Win manifests female agency through Sha’ou’s strong individual pursuit of self-actualisation. As her best friend Lili comments on her determination to win the game, “My goodness, this is an individualistic heroism!” This individualistic heroism is, of course, has to serve the collective honor for a team and subsequently for the nation. Zhang Nuanxin called for a collective responsibility in her explanation on this film: “They (athletes) are being inspired by the lofty goal, with a conscience that the realisation of it is a long-term project for generations that cannot be expected soon. They do not feel depressed; nevertheless, they persist in struggling as the paving stones for it.”20 It is on the basis of collectivism that Sha’ou’s individualism is foregrounded and justified: the collective goal of national rejuvenation foremost requires the devotion of every individual, therefore no fault is to be found in Sha’ou’s pursuing the success of her career; at the same time, her portrayal is not simplified, as were the characterisations in previous socialist films—the director spared no effort to portray her personal feelings entangled in her personal experience.

20 Zhang, “Soul is Precious and Courage is Needed,” 82.
2.2.3 Narrative Spaces

An investigation of two narrative spaces (public and private) that are juxtaposed in this film shows how the film overthrows the stereotype of woman’s spatial confinement. On the dichotomy of public and domestic spaces, Cui Shuqin has written:

Traditionally, from the Western point of view the public sphere has referred to the world events and men, the private sphere to the world of domesticity and women. These public/private social divisions constitute the primary boundary of gender relations. On one side, the confinement of woman to the domestic sphere is both a spatial and a social control of female identity. The social division thus offers woman a choice: entry into the public world and a life not defined by family or husband, or submission to a domestic realm where her moral status and identity are secure.\textsuperscript{21}

Such gendered dichotomy of public and domestic spaces was also in concord with Chinese view on the positions of the male and female. The idea of separate spheres, however, has become increasingly problematic as politics and economies undergo structural changes in contemporary China, where an increasing number of women entered the public world after the establishment of the PRC. As a result, the boundaries between men and women that reinforce sexual differences and gender relations have been obscured in various social conditions. In \textit{The Drive to Win}, it is

\textsuperscript{21} Cui, \textit{Women through the Len}, 209.
interesting to find that both public and private spaces are occupied mainly by women. In the training playground, a male coach fleetingly appears, contributing nothing to the narrative plot. The person who commands is the female coach Yu (played by Zhang Nuanxin) who trains the girls and helps them with any personal problems. Yu was once cursed by Sha’ou as a “tigress” because she acted very strictly during training. Sha’ou shows her resistance publicly with a deliberate mis-hitting of the volleyball which flips toward Yu. The conflict between her and Yu is also seen in the sequence when Sha’ou is forced by Yu to eat beef, which she does not like. It is not until her turn to be the new coach of the women’s volleyball team that she identifies with the way the former coach Yu acted and performs as strictly as Yu did towards the younger generation. Sha’ou’s change clearly suggests the influence of Yu who is not exclusively a loving mother who is concerned about the girls’ personal problems, but also a guide or a mentor to help girls be stronger in character.

In comparison, there is no emphasis on masculinity in the characterisation of Han, the team doctor. In taking responsibility for helping Sha’ou to find a cure, Han is always puzzled by her persistence in training at the expense of her health. When leaving for rock-climbing, Dawei entrusts Han with the care of Sha’ou, and Han confesses that he may not manage to help such a stubborn woman. Dawei replies, “She is a girl, after all (32’01’’).” While Sha’ou demonstrates a strong agency beyond Han’s expectation, he secretly loves her. Unlike Dawei, whose male virility is repeatedly represented, Han is weak both in his intellectual image and will. Being unable to provide positive support for Sha’ou, he is doomed to fail in persuading her to consider him as a potential lover or husband.
In private spaces such as the home, no clue concerning Sha’ou’s father is provided. The only potential male figure in this family is Dawei, who dies before he could have a chance to participate in Sha’ou and her mother’s life. Dawei is characterised as a man who combines the features of a lover and a caring father. He is an idealised husband, to a certain degree, for a woman like Sha’ou who “cherishes honour more than life.” Instead of forcing her to get married, he supports her pursuit of a volleyball career. He also acts as a spiritual father who encourages her to face her frustrations and guides her to understand the final goal—the truth of happiness lies in the process of achieving rather than the result itself. Dawei’s words function essentially to support the edifying tone of the film—the meaning of life lies in people’s devotion to serving the country. But why does such a perfect man have to die? Compared with the films made in the later 1980s when the Fifth Generation directors sought to restore the symbolic potency of men by linking national spirit with male virility, *The Drive to Win* instead manifests the stronger enduring strength a woman demonstrates.

Not simply occupied with housework, Sha’ou’s mother appears as an intellectual who is engaged with her own career as an entomologist. She respects Sha’ou’s choice of being an athlete, but is worried about her daughter’s marital future—a “new woman” as she is, she still holds the opinion that the most important role for a woman lies in the family. Sha’ou, a rebellious daughter, claims that “my mother cannot speak for me (24’07’’)” when she knows that her mother is trying to stop her volleyball playing career. She also disagrees with her mother on marital issues and rushes out of the house after the argument. The sequence of her escaping from home is filmed in a poetic manner, tracking Sha’ou’s action of wrapping herself
with a milk-white coat and her running away, like a seagull (the literal translation of her name “Sha’ou) flying in the sky.

Towards the end of the film, when Sha’ou encounters Han again in the bridal chamber of her friend Lili, they only talk about the pursuit of honour. Within such a private space emblemising love and marriage, Sha’ou still shows no sympathy for Han’s restrained love although he finally utters “I will do my best to support you (75’02’”),” nor is she overwhelmed by her maternal instincts aroused by Han’s lovely daughter. The sudden appearance of Xiaoyan in the room promises Sha’ou’s spiritual salvation. As one of the new generation of women volleyball players, Xiaoyan is selected as the hope for the future national victory. Men in this film, after all, whether as an ornament (the coach), a martyr for the national cause (Dawei) or a hopeless secret admirer (Han), do not influence the shaping of Sha’ou’s character.

The narrative sometimes focuses on the crucial moments that best represent Sha’ou’s female experience. When facing a dilemma of career and marriage, Sha’ou decides to choose the former without hesitation. It is after her loss of the match that she decides to be a good wife serving Dawei, “I shall be his director of logistics. He will be free to go rock climbing(51’44”).” But she has never been offered such a chance to engage in a binary opposition of career and marriage: her poor health promises no future in her career and her fiancé died before their marriage. At the end of the film, she tells Doctor Han’s daughter: “No, your aunt is not a champion, she is nobody at all (73’25’”)!” In Sha’ou’s mind, she can only identify with the desire to be a winner; in other words, she has no identity except as a winner. The only way to transcend her personal tragedy is to dedicate herself to the nation. The tough image of a woman facing up to frustration finds echoes later in Lu Xiaoya’s film The Girl in
2.3 Sacrificed Youth: An Inward Journey

As revisiting the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and Zhiqing (educated youth)’s lives in the rural China became one of the major trends in the postsocialist cinema, films made around the early 1980s showed a tendency of turning towards characters’ inner worlds. Subjective consciousness—memories, dreams and fantasies were witnessed in films such as Troubled Laughter (1979), The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (1979), Little Street (dir. Yang Yanjin, 1981), and My Memories of Old Beijing (Chengnan jiushi, dir. Wu Yigong, 1983). All reflect the crippling influence of social and political forces upon individuals.

In many films of the Fourth Generation directors, China on the screen was poeticised with nostalgic sentiment, reflecting the clash between historical rupture and the restoration of modernity. Noticing a peculiar tendency in the Fourth and Fifth Generation filmmakers “to deal either with historical subjects or the minority nationalities,” Ma Ning wrote, “[t]his is more than a strategy to outwit film censorship. What these filmmakers seek is a critique of the repressive nature of those traditional cultural values which are the root cause of resistance to reform and change

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22 Zhiqing (educated youth) 知青 refers the educated youth who went down to or were forced to do farm work in villages during the time from the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Most of them graduated from middle schools and were encouraged to receive “re-education” through working with farmers.
in modern China.” In contrast with films which are marked with the scars of the ten-year catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, *Sacrificed Youth*, Zhang Nuanxin’s most well-known film, represents a romanticised beautiful memory removed from traumatic urban life.

The films of the minority nationality genre made in the 1980s demonstrate different features compared with those made in the 1950s and 1960s. As Lu Xiaoning has observed, national minority films made in the socialist period are diversified in their themes, while sharing the central objective of promoting “a horizontal and fraternal relationship among nationalities, and to encourage minority nationalities to develop themselves into a ‘modern nationality’” under the guidance of the Party. In the films made in the 1980s, in contrast, the cultural values of the minority people were highlighted as an antithesis to the Han culture that had been “distorted” by the ultra-left ideology.

Most critics have considered *Sacrificed Youth* only as an illustration of the comparison of cultures. For instance, Ma Ning suggested: “the foregrounding of sexuality and love against the rigid social environment of China during the cultural revolution is a strategy adopted by the director to expose the repressive ideology that dominated the country. The simple, primitive Dai culture in the film is constructed as a cultural ‘other’ that enables the Chinese to come to a critical understanding of their

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own culture.” His conclusion is undoubtedly right, but I would like to emphasise how Sacrificed Youth contributes to Chinese cinema a female expression that gives voice to a silent memory that, as Dai Jinhua has said of women’s filmmaking in China, had been “severed, suffocated in History/male discourse.”

The film clearly bears the influence from the “Root-seeking Literature” that probes the national culture and Chinese tradition. The uniqueness of it compared with other films made in the 1980s, as Chris Berry pointed out, lies in the fact that “[t]here have been cases of the subjective techniques before in China, although they have been rare. However, most of these instances have used a main character to look out at society,” whereas in Sacrificed Youth, “the focus of the subjective gaze is on issues such as character development and personal life.” In my study of Sacrificed Youth, I will examine Zhang Nuanxin’s directorial style from various aspects: first, I will analyse her authorial projection onto the narrator in the film as an example of female subjectivity; next, I will discuss the film’s voice-over narration, visual elements and thematic concerns, all of which express an ambiguous female consciousness.

25 Ma, “Notes on the New Filmmakers,” 86.
26 Dai, “‘Human, Woman, Demon’: a Woman’s Predicament,” 152.
27 Root-seeking Literature appeared in the mid-1980s when Chinese writers embarked on probing traditional Chinese concepts and national cultures in their literary works. Representatives include A Cheng and his “Three Kings” (King of the Chess, King of the Tree, and King of the Children, 1984), Han Shaogong and his Bababa (Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, 1985), and Wang Anyi and her Xiao Bao zhuang (Little Bao village, 1985), etc. See Hong Zicheng, A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature, trans. Michael M. Day, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 366-373.
2.3.1 Authorial Narrator

The auteurism that Zhang Nuanxin was “very interested in” contributed to the manifest feminine narrative of *Sacrificed Youth*. This film is adapted from Zhang Manling (1948-’)s novella *A Faraway Place (You Yige Meili De Difang, 1984)*. Many films made in the 1980s were actually adapted from literary works. Apart from holding responsibility for directing films, some female directors also took part in writing the screenplay, including Zhang Nuanxin, Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun. Zhang Manling, the author of *A Faraway Place*, is a Han woman writer born in Kunming, a city in Yunnan province. She established a very direct connection working with the local Dai people during the Cultural Revolution. In an interview Zhang Nuanxin told George S. Semsel, “I felt I had a lot in common with this young writer (Zhang Manling). You want to be pretty, but you just hide your true nature; you love a man, a young boy, but you say emphatically NO! That’s something we Chinese women share in common. In addition, I’m very interested in the Dai culture and customs. There is a striking contrast between the Dai nationality and the Han.” In Zhang’s film, she recast the role of the female protagonist not through plot changes but by unfolding a process of self-discovery.

Set during the Cultural Revolution, *Sacrificed Youth* tells the story of Li Chun, an urban girl who is sent to a remote Dai village in Yunnan province. Living with a local family there that includes Dadie (father), Ya (grandmother), and Dage (elder

29 Berry, “Interview with Zhang Nuanxin,” 21.

30 Zhang Nuanxin, interview by George S. Semsel, *Chinese Film*,124.
brother), she does farm chores with a group of Dai girls. Inspired by the Dai’s love of beauty and their lack of inhibitions regarding love, Li Chun adopts the local costume. She becomes involved in a love triangle with two men: Dage and Ren Jia, a male Han Chinese Zhiqing. Feeling unable to stay in the village any longer, she leaves and is eventually allowed to go back to the city. Many years later she returns to the village to learn that both her Dai family and Ren Jia have perished in catastrophic mudslides.

Zhang Nuanxin declared in her “Notes of Directing” that “I can imagine, what we are going to make is a brand new type of film that is totally different from those made by other people.” With a further emphasis, she said: “What we pursue is uniqueness.” This pursuit of uniqueness is particularly relevant to her creative authorial subjectivity. Although the plot of Sacrificed Youth is mainly based on Zhang Manling’s novella, I see this film as foremost a visual diary of Zhang Nuanxin’s own youth and her concern about Chinese women’s private issues.

Unlike many films that reflect the life of Zhiqing through scenes of chaos and pathos and typical ultra-left images, Sacrificed Youth focuses on a protagonist who immerses herself in a utopian memory that touches upon her most secret personal experience. Esther Yau has observed that Zhang Nuanxin “removes the mildly resistant politics of the original writing and substitutes it with a full-fledged effort in pure cultural introspection, thus offering insights disturbing enough to an (intellectual) audience without trespassing political taboos.”

31 Zhang, “Qingchunji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing Sacrificed Youth), 135.
observation reveals the main feature of Zhang Nuanxin’s narrative strategy—a de-
politicisation that distances her film from other popular political melodramas.

In addition to a tendency of de-politicisation, Zhang’s style of de-dramatisation is further developed in *Sacrificed Youth*. If she foregrounded her aesthetics of a documentary style in *The Drive to Win*, in *Sacrificed Youth* she developed a poetically photographic realism that expresses a stronger gendered consciousness.

Aiming at manifesting an introspective experience, the film does not follow a linear narration as in traditional Chinese storytelling, since we know from the start that Li Chun has left Yunnan (the information is given through voice-over). The whole narration is structured like Chinese prose poetry (*sanwen shi*) which are anti-
dramatic with emotion-centred sequences. 33 Audiences could easily identify the gender of the director based on their viewing experience of this film. The poetic feminine narrative and construction of a cinema of prose poetry are combined via the use of flashback with the voice-over of the female protagonist and the camera movement.

*Sacrificed Youth* retains the first person narrative mode of Zhang Manling’s novella with the voice-over providing extradiegetic narration, which “is intentionally

33 *Sanwen shi*, Prose poem(s), based on Meyer Howard Abrams’s definition, “are densely compact, pronouncedly rhythmic, and highly sonorous compositions which are written as a continuous sequence of sentences without line breaks.” See M.H.Abrams & Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (11th edition), Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2014, 274.) As a literary genre, prose poems were introduced in China during the 1910s. In Chinese context, *Sanwen shi dianying* prose poem films, as a film genre is different from “essay film” in the Western context and has many nicknames, such as *Sanwen dianying, Shi dianying, Sanwen shi dianying*, etc., which contribute to the ambiguity of its definition. See Yang Xiaolin, “Huayu sanwen dianying de minming, lishi liubian ji meixue tezheng” (The Nomenclature, Historical Change and Aesthetic Features of Chinese Language Prose Poems Cinema), *Minzu yishu yanjiu (Studies in National Art)*, no. 06 (2013):45-49.
filtered through the beautifying ‘good memories’” of a young Han female.\(^{34}\) The extradiegetic narrator, the “person” who is speaking, is obviously an older Li Chun (the narrating self); while the protagonist in the story is the younger Li Chun, who is the experiencing self, participating in the intradiegetic level.\(^{35}\) Therefore, Li Chun is bestowed with double agency in the first person narration, which provides an entry for examining the “gap between two I’s.”\(^{36}\)

In this retrospective narrative, thanks to the visuality of film, the past life represented from the perspective of Li Chun’s experiencing self creates the illusion of a story developing naturally in front of the audience. Sometimes the narrating self emphasises the “past tense” through the voice-over by using words indicating narrative distance: “the first time,” “at that time,” and “for many years I have dreamed about….” etc. In fact, this is a way of underlining the importance of the narrating self which commands the retrospective narration. On the other hand, the narrating self in Sacrificed Youth, to a great extent, is projected through the personality of the auteur herself.

Defining the narrator in a film is more complicated than defining the narrator in a work of literature. Film as a visual medium determines the existence of an

\(^{34}\) Yau, “Is China the End of Hermeneutics?” 129.

\(^{35}\) When Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan is addressing the types of focalisation in literary works, she explains that there are external focalisation and internal focalization. The external focalisation can occur “when the perception through which the story is rendered is that of the narrating self (my emphasis) rather than that of the experiencing self (my emphasis).” See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction (London: Methuen, 2002), 75.

\(^{36}\) Zhao Yiheng points out that there exists “gap” between narrating self and experiencing self in the first-person narration in literary work. Narrating self is usually more mature than experiencing self, and inclines to comment, intervene in and manipulate the retrospective narration. See Zhao Yiheng, Dang shuozhe beishuo de shihou (When Narrator is Narrated) (Beijing: renmin daxue chubanshe (People’s Publishing House, 1998), 151.
“external narrator”—the personality that commands the camera. The film narrator, as pointed out by Jakob Lothe, “is very different from the literary narrator,” while the filmic narrator should be differentiated from the cinematic narrator as well.\textsuperscript{37} The filmic narrator, which has been defined by Robert Stam, is the agency that operates in the film-text as the way a fictional narrator does in literature. Stam identifies several kinds of filmic narrators such as “character-narrator (or “intradiegetic narrator”),” “homodiegetic narrator,” “heterodiegetic narrator” and “extradiegetic narrator,” all of which, except “character-narrator,” have the same definition as Gérard Genette’s categories.\textsuperscript{38} Stam also covers the “voice-over” narrator (which is not included in Genette’s category of narrator). The cinematic narrator is, to be specific, the external narrator who is related to the “extradiegetic narration” that “in film can be defined as the primary narratorial or discursive activity flowing from the medium of cinema itself and it is ‘that which narrates the entire film’ and involves all the codes of the cinema.”\textsuperscript{39} The cinematic narrator has been given various kinds of nomenclatures, including “Kozloff’s ‘image-maker,’ Metz’s ‘grande imagier,’ Black’s ‘intrinsic narrator,’ and Gaudreault’s ‘fundamental narrator.’”\textsuperscript{40} Because a complete film requires collective work, including such areas as script, directing, editing, post-production, and so forth, it is difficult to define accurately what this “external narrator” is. But to a large degree, the filmic narration relies on the director’s

\textsuperscript{37} Jakob Lothe, \textit{Narrative in Fiction and Film} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27.


\textsuperscript{39} Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis, \textit{New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics}, 103.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
intention.

It is obvious that in *Sacrificed Youth* the narrating self of Li Chun is imbued with the personality of the director, who is chiefly responsible for the voice of the “external narrator.” Zhang Nuanxin says in her directing note that the original novella *A Faraway Place* is rich in connotation, while the connotation is conveyed subtly and implicitly. Though she never mentioned the gender-related implication embedded in *Sacrificed Youth*, Zhang Nuanxin illustrated the connotation in her approach to making this film, mainly through a dream style narration. Compared with other films portraying the same period, *Sacrificed Youth* at times appears to romanticise life in rural China during the Cultural Revolution. Zhang actually was not sent down to the countryside but to a military camp in Hebei province where people also had to do farming work. It is highly likely that the experience in a Dai village of Yunnan province would be different from the life in a military camp. Thus to a certain degree, *Sacrificed Youth* as a memory of Li Chun is also a fantasy created by the director. Different from the mainstream political films made by many Fourth Generation directors and the films of the unconventional Fifth Generation in their endeavour of producing national allegories from the standpoint of male intellectuals, *Sacrificed Youth* fully reveals Zhang Nuanxin’s own personality, which is mainly embodied in the female voice-over narration.

### 2.3.2 Consistent and Inconsistent Female Voice-over

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41 Zhang Nuanxin, “Qingchun ji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing *Sacrificed Youth*), *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Cinema)*, no. 04(1985):134.
Voice-over in *Sacrificed Youth* is the evident mark of a subjective attitude. At the beginning of the film, Li Chun’s voice-over unfolds her initial experience of being sent down to the remote Dai village from the city. Instead of feeling excited as many young characters portrayed in the films made in the early 1980s (such as *Our Farmland*, *Women de dianying*, dir. Xie Fei, 1983 and *A Storm will Come Tonight*, *Jinye you baofengxue*, dir. Sun Yu, 1984), Li Chun says in the film, “The sense of loss grows stronger in me (02’13’’).” Detached from the passion that a young person should have when she is sent to receive a reeducation according to Mao’s instruction, Li Chun encounters a life that is different from what the state discourse propagandised.

Because of the loosely structured plot, the voice-over in this film, undoubtedly, is crucial to complement the pictorial narration. The use of the past tense for the voice-over, as discussed by Zhang Nuanxin in her directing notes, makes it possible for Li Chun to recollect her experiences with a contemplative tone. Li Chun recalls at the end of the film: “I believe the water will always be fresh and the grass green (88’89’’),” suggesting that the Dai village has become a highly idealised space for her retrospective narration. While this narration resembles very much a journey of self-discovery, I would argue that the point of view chiefly refers to Li Chun’s understanding of her gender identity. Therefore, in this film the voice-over becomes the key element for featuring a subjective recollection of her past with a dreamlike feeling, which also sheds light upon the fact that the filmic narration itself is a re-romanticised construction of life as a reflection of psychological reality; meanwhile

42 Zhang, “Qingchunji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing *Sacrificed Youth*), 135.
this pursuit of psychological reality justifies the gendered experience exhibited in the film.

In portraying the restrictiveness of Han culture, *Sacrificed Youth* criticises Chinese society without directly attacking the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Nuanxin admitted in an interview with Chris Berry when explaining the reason for her use of voice-over, that “there were many inner things I wanted to express that would otherwise have been difficult to express.” On the one hand, Zhang Nuanxin, by making a comparison between Han culture and Dai culture on both visual and audial levels, criticised Han culture for its repressive features; on the other hand, she adopts the female voice-over as an important agency of a feminine narrative.

The appreciation of women’s beauty is particularly highlighted in this film and to a great degree Li Chun identifies with this female beauty. Her voice-over reflects an introspection and a self-discovery that have been impeded by the “distorted” ideology—to quote from Zhang Nuanxin who considers Li Chun’s soul to have been distorted under Leftist education. In addition to the unsettling experience of joining in a new environment, through interacting with the Dai people and participating in their community, Li Chun gradually realises the collision between her own view formed by her education received in the city and the local people’s naturalistic beliefs. The greatest frustration she encounters is the difficulty of making friends with the Dai girls, feeling that “they look down upon me (21’45’’).” Dadie, the middle-aged master of the family, tells her the secret: “They just don’t like your grey

44 Zhang, “Qingchunji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing *Sacrificed Youth*), 85.
clothes which are disharmonious among their beautiful dresses (21’56”).” Surprised but silent, Li Chun’s reaction to these words is conveyed in the voice-over: “Being beautiful is so important. I had been taught, beauty lies with the inconspicuous. I used to wash a shirt again and again to make it look old. It had never occurred to me a girl should make herself look charming (22’24’’).” This voice-over functions as the interior monologue of Li Chun, which, as Mary Ann Doane said, “displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the inner life of the character.”45 Meanwhile, it is the self-reflexive narration of Zhang Nuanxin herself, which is confirmed by what she asserted in an interview: “My films are all myself, my feeling about life. Because I went to the countryside to work, I had the same experience. I worked hard to be accepted. I even washed my clothes several times so they’d look old. Later, after I had been there a while, I became more familiar with the local people, the peasants, I made friends with them. I came to realize what beauty is, real beauty.”46

An enormous difference between this film compared with those made in the socialist realist tradition lies in the language mode of the character. Li Chun ceases to speak words relevant to the national ideal or honor; rather, her voice-over utters what would be tagged as bourgeois sentiments in the socialist cinematic context. Without openly criticising the “distorted” values that prevailed during the Cultural Revolution, this voice-over ridicules the logic held by the Han culture: “beauty lies with the inconspicuous (22’27’’).”


46 Zhang Nuanxin, interviews by George S. Semsel, *Chinese Film*, 127.
However, the inconsistency of the female voice-over raises problems concerning the reliability of its narration. The negotiation between a straightforward speculation and an evasive attitude towards sexuality imparts the ambivalence in Li Chun’s first-person narration. Her voice-over is supposed to give voice to “the invisible” which is embedded within the filmic text; that is to say, on the one hand, when the voice on the sound track dies away, the off-screen voice-over arrives to complement it; nevertheless, there still remains a vacuum that is the “unnarrated;” on the other hand, because there exists “the gap between two I’s,” for some reason the comments of the narrating self (the older Li Chun) upon the experiencing self may not be so accurate.

In contrast with the bold demonstration of the feminine beauty of women’s bodies, the love and sexuality Li Chun encounters are implicitly recounted, especially when she recollects her feelings toward Ren Jia. She recalls, “I treated him as my best female friend and told him everything. Every time we said goodbye I felt dismayed.” These words seem to convey a comrade’s friendship that goes beyond gender difference, while another subtle emotion is ambiguously expressed in the shots when they are alone with each other. It sounds not reasonable, however, when an intelligent mature Li Chun recalls the event in such an obscure tone of uncertainty. So what is the unspoken message? Wang Jing’s analysis of xungen (root-seeking) theories explains the uniqueness of this retrospective point of view: “… the subject is self-conscious of its repressed desire and the forms of self-distortion as a result of this liaison (with culture). At such moments the retroactive look at culture is fraught
with ambiguities."\textsuperscript{47} This ambiguity contrasts with the persistent visual presentation of an undercurrent of intimacy between these two young people. On such occasions the voice-over tends to remain blurred or silent, indicating the repression of her desire (the repressed desire as the aforementioned “unnarrated” message). This refusal to give voice to her sexuality denotes the gap between the potential fulfilment of her subjectivity (which will be addressed later on) and the withdrawal from the process of obtaining it. The undertone of this absence sparks the realisation that the Han culture which has fettered her has become internalised as an unconsciousness that provides no possibility of escape.

Figure 2.5. There are many shots showing intimacy between Li Chun and Ren Jia.

\textbf{2.3.3 Visual Forms}

Zhang Nuanxin’s interest in experimenting with the visual qualities of cinema and colour finds its strongest expression in *Sacrificed Youth*, the aesthetic standards of which, in comparison with *The Drive to Win*, come closer to those of the European art films she appreciated. These filmic devices serve to reflect the alienation Li Chun experiences in the Dai village.

With ethnic minorities all too easily exoticised, it is unsurprising that at the very beginning of the film the Dai village is presented romantically, with scenic shots and camera movement used to create a mysterious atmosphere through the deliberate manipulation of the camera, the setting, and the colour.

Camera movement functions as the important “artificial eye” that conveys the double subjective points of view of Li Chun as both protagonist and external narrator. In order to produce a strong visual impact, Zhang Nuanxin experimented with different shooting angles that subvert the regular viewing experience of the audience. The defamiliarisation that is mainly achieved by using wide-angle lens and telephoto lens enables Zhang Nuanxin to pursue a subjective point of view. The landscape is presented as very alienating in the opening sequence, with static shots of the pastoral life in the quiet Dai village. As the music starts, Li Chun as a young girl is presented in a high angle shot that follows her going through the forest in which there are patches of cactus. The natural light evokes the gloomy atmosphere that Li Chun felt at that time when she stayed as a stranger in the Dai area. The panning camera acts like an observing eye following her journey and engages the audience in the unfamiliar environment in the Dai village. Tracking shots and long takes are also frequently used in crowd scenes and landscape scenes in the film.
In the sequence when people get together to calculate labour in terms of work points, the camera pans around the hall to show people’s reactions towards the announcement of their points, before fixing on a close-up of Li Chun whose allocation of points arouses dissatisfaction among the Dai people. She looks awkward on screen when other Dai people mumble that she does not deserve seven points (ten would be the highest). Dadie stands up and suggests a compromise proposal of six points and encourages Li Chun to learn more about farm work. She almost cries at that moment and the camera makes her appear isolated from other Dai people—she is in focus while other people are out of focus with their voices clear. In contrast with Li Chun, the most beautiful Dai girl, Yi Bo, wins the highest score because of her beauty—Li Chun cannot understand this Dai way of calculating points. The shooting of this sequence invites the audience to participate in the assembly and to feel her sense of loss and loneliness. As to the sequence with only her within the frame, the shot is taken in a documentary style using hand-held camera movement, which is very different from the mainstream filming at the time—many directors still adhered to the conventional camera shooting and seldom tried the hand-held camera, and is even rare in the films made by younger directors who advocated an avant-garde style, such as Zhang Junzhao for One and Eight (1983) and Chen Kaige in Yellow Earth (1985).

Sacrificed Youth and Yellow Earth were made around the same period. While Yellow Earth was applauded for its allegorical narrative through an extremely experimental employment of colour and an unconventional structure of framing, people hardly noticed the similar avant-garde filmic elements shown in Sacrificed Youth.
In *Sacrificed Youth*, the composition of the characters’ images and the landscape or objects delicately diverges from the traditional way witnessed in many Chinese films in which characters are always framed in the centre of the picture or in a position that will highlight their existence. In the sequence that contrasts Li Chun with the Dai girls after farm work, the Dai girls sing antiphons with men, and then take off their dresses, going swimming in the pool naked. Li Chun can only look on, feeling envious of the girls’ cheerfulness but unable to experience it because she believes “Han people do not behave that way.” She is positioned on the fringe of the frame, with the landscape dominating the picture. In contrast, the Dai people are always framed in the centre, with their facial and body expressions of enjoying love and nature being emphasised.

Unconventional framing is also obvious in the final part of this film. In the scene when Ren Jia talks to Li Chun about the news of recruiting college students in the city, as the two stand beside a tractor, the tractor occupies two thirds of the frame while the two people are in the corner with their dialogue accompanied by the rumbling of the engine. The tractor, compared with the oxcart that is usually used by the villagers, is a metonymy of modern life that pushes human beings to the corner (of the frame). This extremely asymmetrical arrangement bespeaks their future plan of leaving the naturalist style of Dai’s life and heading to the modern culture.

The use of colour is an important aspect of the director’s personal style: for much of the film, warm reds dominate; intense colours heighten the visual force of later scenes. Sharply contrasting colours and unusual framing are evident in the funeral for Ya, the grandmother with whom Li Chun lived together with Dadie. Ya is always reticent and mysterious but extremely kind to Li Chun. Her death
symbolically bespeaks the death of uncontaminated natural culture. The queue of Dai people who take part in the funeral procession is shot in deep focus, marching from the horizon towards the camera with the vast red land dominating the frame. In the following shot, the red land is framed as occupying almost the full screen: indeed the people walking on the top of the ridge protrude out of the frame. Zhang Nuanxin approaches this funeral procession with different angles from far to near with the juxtaposition of red and black as the dominant colours.

Figure 2.6. Li Chun returns to her Dai family after hearing of the death of Ya.

Figure 2.7. The funeral procession.
Zhang switches to bolder colours as a way to suggest her own personal reflection on historical change—the end of the Cultural Revolution and the never retrievable utopia. This device particularly echoes the ambitious use of colour in films made by the Fifth Generation directors, for instance, the way Chen Kaige in his Yellow Earth showing different layers of yellow earth contrasted with the gray sky. In the later sections of Sacrificed Youth, which deal with the death of Ya and the destruction of Li Chun’s dreamland, Zhang Nuanxin deliberately chooses cold colours. Li Chun kneels down beside the dead body of Ya, dressed in black, while the background colour is white and the whole scene is framed symmetrically. In contrast with the solemnity of the symmetrical frame in black and white, the vastness of gray symbolises the power of destruction in the scene when Li Chun is standing in the ruins years after she returns from the city to visit the Dai village. She only witnesses the aftermath of the mudslide which buries both the Dai family and Ren Jia.

The film ends with a sudden change from the grey colour of the destroyed village to a warm yellow. The idyllic pictures of pastoral life are shown in a long take, which is used to soften the sorrow for the tragic loss of a utopian dreamland. A child’s folk song replaces the female voice-over, giving a nostalgic tone. The lyric of this song was authored by Gu Cheng who was a famous member of the Misty Poetry School (Menglongshi pai) that was popular during the post-Cultural Revolution period of the 1980s. The lyrics originally come from Gu Cheng’s poem “Comfort,”
which is written from the perspective of a child comforting his/her mother. This song appears also in the middle part of the film when Li Chun stays in the Dai family, spending the night together with a small boy who comes to do homework. The song is sung by Li Chun, against the background voices of the Dai women and men singing love songs in the woods. The little boy asks Li Chun whether she is missing her home. She remains silent, but the voice-over says: “Home? I have no home anymore.” *Sacrificed Youth*, with its poetic style, echoes the popular literary trend that the Misty Poetry represented at the time for its delicacy, obscurity and disillusion.

### 2.3.4 Sexual Bodies and Clothing

Zhou Xuelin found that “[o]n the pretext of challenging Confucian morality and body repression, filmmakers of the 1980s presented a parade of feminine beauties and female rebels against the patriarchal order….“ Here she addresses the issue of the representation of women in the films made by male directors. In taking consideration of women’s images in the films made by female directors, differences can be easily noted, as is the case with *Sacrificed Youth*.

Indeed, the representation of women’s sexual bodies on the Chinese screen witnessed a revival in the 1980s. These bodies could be denotations for the...

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49 Xuelin Zhou, “‘From Behind the Wall’ The Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese Film,” in *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*, ed. Tan See-Kam et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 131.
remaining feudal ideology (*A Good Woman, Liangjia funü*, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1987), or sexual objects to arouse symbolic male virility (*Red Sorghum, Hong Gaoliang*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987). *Sacrificed Youth*, nevertheless, points the way to realise the female self by confirming the beauty of human bodies, without avoiding an association with female sexuality that had been alienated in the public discourse of the past decade.

The sequence of the Dai girls swimming in the pond is surprisingly beautiful and daring. Zhang Nuanxin, in an interview conducted by George S. Semsel, talked about her vexation during the filming process, saying that “[f]ilming condition sometimes made it difficult or impossible to do everything as we had planned.” She went on to remark that she cut a part in which Li Chun goes to watch the Dai girls swimming: “You see only a little of this in the finished film, and are given some narration but no location sound. Originally there was a scene with the girls washing their hair instead of swimming, with no clothes on, but somehow it didn’t harmonize with the rest of the film, so we cut it.”

Zhang’s explanation that they had to cut some parts simply because they couldn’t do them and her remark “it didn’t harmonize with the rest of the film, so we cut it” manifest an obvious incoherence. The removal or alteration of these sequences can most likely be attributed to the all pervasive state censorship of the representation of sexual bodies.

It does seem unlikely that scenes of naked women on screen would be allowed under the Chinese censorship regulations of that time. Be that as it may, the explicit

50 Zhang Nuanxin, interviews by George S. Semsel, *Chinese Film*, 126.

51 Ibid, 126.
suggestion of the nakedness of the girls as they go swimming is already daring enough; indeed Dru C. Gladney wrote of the film displaying “a rare bit of soft porn.” Most of the shots of these girls swimming in the river are long shots, into which is inserted a medium shot of Yi Bo, the most beautiful girl, as she goes deeper in the river, taking off her dress. Her buttock is silhouetted against backlighting. A long shot follows, so as to present her naked back from another angle. This representation of women’s bodies is one of the most unforgettable moments in the films of the 1980s when nudity still remained unusual in Chinese cinema. The key point here is that the sequence of swimming was not done for the male gaze in the diegesis—no single man is present; rather, it is Li Chun, the Han girl, who is watching these Dai girls who, in her voice-over, “go swimming naked like fish in the river.” However, there is no shot of Li Chun swimming naked in the film, despite her voice-over recalling, “I learned to swim like them, unwilling to wear the sticky swimming suit anymore.” By isolating Li Chun with these Dai girls, the director attempts to represent her repression that forms a contrast with those Dai girls who grow up in the “uncontaminated” natural environment. Swimming naked in the river is normal in the local Dai culture, and Zhang Nuanxin chose to have this filmed due to her intention of linking the emancipation of body to the female protagonist’s self-knowledge of being restricted by her own culture.

The shot of Li Chun carrying water from the well deliberately focuses on her desexualised costume that is typical of the style adopted by the Han people. Her body is later foregrounded in the sequence of her changing into a Dai costume which is also

52 Gladney, “Representing nationality in China,” 105.
connected to an increasing awareness of her sexuality. It is through the frustrations she encountered in the face of the Dai girls that her self-awareness is gradually acquired. If adapting herself to the swimming game is the first step for her to learn the emancipation of her body, the change to Dai costume is her way of, firstly, getting accepted by the local community, then essentially, going through the passage to gender identification. Interestingly, the shot that “sees” her body in the Dai costume is taken by imitating Ya’s point of view, in a way that also avoids falling prey to the male gaze. Using a bottom-up panning shot, Li Chun is presented smiling to Ya, dressing in a light purple long skirt and a white blouse, both of which tightly fit her body. Ya moves slowly to the inner chamber and hands over her a silver belt as a gift. Dadie comments that, “Only after dressing in the Dai costume do you look like a real Dai girl.”

Figure 2.7. Ya is helping Li Chun to wear the silver belt.

In contrast to the de-eroticised situation seen in the films made during the
Cultural Revolution, *Sacrificed Youth*, however, spares no effort to demonstrate the beauty of the Dai girls with their tight-fitting long dresses, forming an evident contrast with Li Chun’s Han style suit. Zhang Nuanxin emphasised frequently her identification with the Dai’s cultural values: “The Dai are not flooded with Confucian ideas, and they love beauty. Me, too.”53 When Li Chun begins to live in a culture that is not contaminated by the Han ideology, she also sees the possibility of setting herself free from the repressive discipline.

The trigger for Li Chun’s change happens when she is frustrated by being prevented from working with the Dai girls because they spurn her dull clothes. Squatting beside a pond, Li Chun is overwhelmed by feelings of depression at being excluded from the Dai girls’ group; the moment of epiphany comes when Li Chun realises the myth of beauty. She stares at the water lilies in the pond that seem to be nodding to her. A low angle full length shot is used to show her body after she stands up and tightens her clothes at the waist, as she looks down towards the water. The image that she sees reflected in the water gradually becomes a new self that she happily discovers—she can also be slim and beautiful.

For Li Chun, her interaction with the Dai community plays a significant role in recognising her female identity. As Rey Chow has commented, “… community is linked to the articulation of commonality and consensus; a community is always based on a kind of collective inclusion.” There is a period of confronting chagrin and frustration before Li Chun grows accustomed to the way of the Dai people when she is alien to the Dai environment and culture. Rey Chow asserts in her discussion of

53 Zhang Nuanxin, interview by George S. Semsel, *Chinese Film*, 127.
“The Politics of Admittance” that the first principle is “admittance in the most physical sense of letting enter.” The “physical sense of letting enter” is crucial in the view of the Dai people, for whom the external manifestations of culture, such as clothing and hairstyle, are seen as marks of identification. Li Chun experiences an initial chagrin when she feels the antipathy of the local people who look down upon her in spite of her assiduous work. In the Han culture that advocated a collective revolutionary ideal and dedication to the revolutionary cause, individual value was deemed to lie in one’s efficient work as a contribution to the state. On the other hand, private matters such as clothing, love and sexuality were devalued. “Equality between man and women” became a slogan for national construction instead of ensuring the individual rights, which in a sense removed the gender traits in its collectivism. Therefore, the Dai culture is in contrast with the Han culture in mainly building its valuation on a naturalist concept of the world.

The sense of commonality becomes a marker of an outsider’s identification with the Dai’s culture and an important element for their acceptance of the other. Li Chun admits her inferiority when seeing Yi Bo, the most beautiful girl in their village. The adoption of native clothing permits her admittance, firstly to Dadie’s family (she is especially welcomed after she starts to dress in the Dai style) and then to the girls’ community. It is Yi Bo’s acceptance of Li Chun that guarantees her interaction with and integration into their community. This acceptance is based on the aesthetic standard of the Dai culture, according to which a natural and honest attitude towards life is most appreciated. Li Chun’s accommodation as such might be seen as a consensus with the value possessed by the Other. Only through the initial unsettlement caused by the discrimination she feels among the Dai girls and her
attempted approach to a naturalness of human life can she get the chance to discover her own gender identity. 54 Zhang Nuanxin’s criticism of the irrationality of the “distorted” Han culture is implicit: the otherness Li Chun adopts helps her to find a new way to look at herself and the people around her.

Another moment reinforcing the theme of the mirror reflection of bodies occurs when, as Li Chun and the Dai girls pass by a pond on their way to a fair, the girls stop to look at their reflections in the water. Insufficiently satisfied with only seeing their images in the water, they derive greater pleasure from seeing themselves in a real body length mirror even though they have to pay money for it. The difference between the Dai girls and Li Chun is obvious. Li Chun does not bother to wait in a long queue to look at herself in a mirror, a modern device that she has been long familiar with. On the other hand, and in diametrical contrast to the Dai girls, she gets her narcissistic awakening through looking at herself in the water.

Instead of focusing on the politicised personal experience that is projected with a broader view on the national tragedies, as do many films made in the 1980s, Zhang Nuanxin approaches the individual consciousness in Sacrificed Youth chiefly via the representation and perception of female bodies, avoiding objectifying these bodies but linking them to an identification of female gender. Moreover, it is through the process of getting a communal identity that Li Chun’s individual subjectivity is

54 Zhao Yiheng, “Wenhua fuhaoxue zhong de biaochuxing” (Markedness in Cultural Semiotic), Wenyi lilun yanjiu (Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art), no. 03(2008): 2-12. Markedness is originally a linguistic term refers to “a very broad notion applying at all levels of analysis. Generally speaking, a marked form is any linguistic form which is less usual or less neutral than some other form – the unmarked form – from any of a number of points of view. A marked form may be distinguished from an unmarked one by the presence of additional nuances of meaning, by greater rarity in a particular language or in language generally, or in several other ways.” See R.L. Trask, Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics (London: Routledge, 1999), 180.
established. However, her reconciliation with the Dai community does not announce the full recovery of her repressed self as many critics have concluded. For instance, Zhang Yingjin in his discussion of minority discourse in New Chinese Cinema asserts that “Sacrificed Youth is less a film about the Dai people than a narrative of how a Han girl recovers her lost or repressed self.”55 He may be right in assuming the dominant content of the film, but I question his conclusion on the recovery of Li Chun’s repressed self as the major narrative of this film. It is also far from the truth that, as Zhang Yingjin has claimed, in the Dai village Li Chun “eventually regains her subjectivity through partial adaptation to the culture of the ‘Other,’ visually symbolised by the Dai costumes.”56 I will argue that Li Chun’s subjectivity fails to be fully established due to her evasive attitude towards her sexuality, which in my view, is an essential feature of her subjectivity.

2.3.5 A Love Triangle

The two men with whom she might have fallen in love are a contrasting pair: one is her “comrade” who is sent down from the city (Ren Jia) and the other is a native Dai “Elder Brother” (Dage). Ren Jia, an intelligent educated young man, comes from the same cultural background as Li Chun, hence a presupposed shared sense of identity makes it easy for them to get intimate. Their friendship is portrayed in a romantic


way, which nevertheless is too ambiguous to define as either camaraderie or unspoken love. This ambiguity of the filmic narration is affected by Li Chun’s point of view—both her perspective and voice-over eschew a clear standpoint. Her self-awareness then occupies an uncertain place, between which and her sexuality there is a gap that mysteriously prevents her self-identification.

In comparison, the scenes with Dage are depicted more clearly. Communication between Dage and Li Chun is mainly via bodily expression rather than language. He openly shows his crush on Li Chun immediately after he first sees her on the banks of a river when he is returning home from working in the mountains. He jumps down from the small bridge and approaches Li Chun who is washing her face by the side of the river. She spurns his wooing but still feels surprised about the magic of the beautiful Dai costume that makes her a girl of charm. She recalls: “Today is the most amazing day in my life ... It happens like the fairy tale of Cinderella who puts on the crystal shoes (34’14”).” Dage’s admiration is a proof of her female beauty and an affirmation of her gender identity: she is a girl like Cinderella who dreams of Prince Charming. Shortly after this encounter, they meet each other again at Dadie’s house. She realises that this man is her “Dage” whom she has previously imagined as a great hunter. Their sensual encounter goes further in an incident when she gets lost in the forest on her way back from work. Dage goes to find her when she is terribly frightened in the darkness. The director creates an erotic atmosphere in the sequence in which Li Chun stays together with Dage who makes a fire in the woods and prepares food for her. Her hand is injured when she tries to find her way in the forest. Dage fetches some herbs for her, his naked body highlighted in the flickering light. When he holds her hand to put the herbs on, they make eye contact that causes Li
Chun to blush. Her voice-over accompanies the visual narrative: “But I did not want to admit at the time that he embraces something more than a brotherly affection (44’20”).” The original novella, moreover, also depicts Li Chun as feeling touched by Dage’s love for her; a description which is absent in the film.

Figure 2.8. Dage loves Li Chun at first sight.

After this incident she is increasingly aware of Dage’s love for her. Compared with Ren Jia who expresses his love mainly through implication, Dage’s love is more sensuous. These two men, with their different ways, show their love to Li Chun, but her confusion and deliberate shunning of them causes the final failure, both of fulfilling the relationship and of establishing her female subjectivity. Analysing the original story, Esther Yau argues that “[o]ne suspects, however, that the conflated effects of class consciousness and inter-racial taboos are the real reasons for the distance she maintains. Her reluctance to give up completely the rights of a Han intellectual accounts for her other relationship, also a restrained one, with a Han
youth, Renjia ….” In my view, the “class consciousness” is actually the discourse that Zhang Nuanxin attempts to deconstruct in the film. After Li Chun arrives at Dadie’s home, she pledges that “I will remould my ideology through doing farm work (06’43”).” This hint of Han discourse on discipline is immediately dismissed by Dadie who interrupts her by handing over her a bamboo basket and telling her to have a rest after the long journey. Moreover, Dage’s sexual attraction to her is reflected in both her diegetic words and her voice-over narration; the reason why she refuses this love remains hard to interpret.

Esther Yau has attempted to explain Li Chun’s emotional ambivalence by “inter-racial taboos,” but it is the repressive mechanism of Han culture, rather than racial issues, that is chiefly responsible for the failure of her relationships with two men. The inextricable state of divided interests in which Li Chun finds herself only leads to her final regression to repression as she runs away from the choice with the result that the two men will henceforth only exist in her dreams.

2.3.6 An Abortive Self-emancipation

In keeping with Althusser’s theory of ideology, which holds that individuals are interpellated as subjects within a certain social context, Sacrificed Youth demonstrates the process of the heroine’s subjugation to ideology. Regarding recognising her gender identification through the interaction with the Dai women and

57 Yau, “Is China the End of Hermeneutics?” 127.
58 Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 44.
men (as potential sexual objects), her thoughts are never clearly articulated, in spite of the first-person retrospective voice-over narration.

The director firstly creates a utopian environment, remote from the contamination of Han culture, in which Li Chun’s repressed self is able to obtain a certain relief. However, the partial adaptation to the Dai culture does not make her a native in any real sense. Disturbed by the invisible tensions between the two cultures of the Han, her authentic origin, and the Dai, representing the instinctive human nature, she seems to vacillate between sticking to Han culture or following her intuition as Dai people do. This conflict intensifies fiercely when Ren Jia and Dage fight on the night of celebrating the harvest. As a direct result of this incident Li Chun runs away and tries to “repress the feeling of missing the small family at the Dai village” (82’57’’) after she moves to another village.

As was indicated before, the voice-over in this film tends to shun the articulation of sexuality, although this should come naturally with the awakening of Li Chun’s gender consciousness. Both the images and voice-over narration of her staying with Ren Jia are ambiguous: when the picture shows the obvious intimate relationship between these two people, the dialogue and the voice-over tend to dispel the possibility of their relationship developing. In contrast, the visual images of them spending time alone by themselves are filmed in a romantic way that emphasises the happiness they share, giving unmistakable signs which speak louder than words.

If Li Chun refused Dage’s love by avoiding his staring, she shies away from Ren Jia’s tentative question. Joining the young Dai people who get together at night in an attempt to find a partner, they talk to each other along the lake. The atmosphere is charged with eroticism, with the young Dai men and women singing love songs and
paying court to the ones they choose as lovers in the woods. When Li Chun asks Ren Jia what they are singing about, Ren Jia answers that she must know—the love song is about a man making lovers’ chat, saying that the hand of his loved woman is white and as cute as a banana. They continue to discuss the candid attitude of the Dai people towards love and Han people’s hesitancy when it comes to expressing their feelings. In the end neither of them articulates anything substantial and Li Chun suggests they go back home. In spite of the freedom offered by the sensual environment, these two urban young people finally give in to repression. When Yi Bo asks whether Li Chun is having a love affair with Ren Jia, Li Chun feels surprised and defies Yi Bo immediately, saying that “we Han people don’t fall in love in an early age (39’57”).”

The ambivalence of Li Chun’s attitude towards Ren Jia well illustrates the discrepancy between her bodily reaction and language. Li Chun dismisses people’s speculation about her sexual love by referring to the Han culture that will ensure the impossibility of her love. Moreover, she tells herself/the audience that when spending time with Ren Jia “I treated him as my best female friend (59’55”),” in the manner of pushing away her sexual desire from her consciousness through interpreting this love as a pure friendship.

Although Li Chun feels envious of the Dai girls’ beauty and the sensuality between men and women, she is always aware of her own cultural identity as an educated Han youth. In other words, she never escapes from her identification with Han ideology, which has become the hegemonic power among the Zhiqing generation. Ren Jia, who has never thought of changing his Han identity, keeps reminding Li Chun of their Han culture that privileges wisdom while Dai girls in the
minority community are only valued during the brief period of their youth. Each time Li Chun avoids a direct reply, and the voice-over makes no clear statement. Li Chun admits that the unfettered Dai culture gives her a new understanding of life. It is not the shortcoming of the Dai village with its poverty and back-breaking labour that prevents Li Chun from staying in the village. Instead, these hardships help to build a self-confidence in her own ability, especially when she uses her medical knowledge to save the life of the child who had accidentally eaten a poisonous mushroom. However, these temporary moments of seeming freedom from Han ideology do not bring any essential change. At the end of this film she resumes the ideological role as prescribed by Han culture.

The ending of this film turns serious due to the loss of Li Chun’s dreamland, in another departure from the original story. The attempt to enlarge the historical context is somehow in conflict with the atmosphere of the former part. The rosy color associated with the personal expression of a sensitive femininity gives way to white, black, red and gray, so as to render a sense of desolation. These symbolic colours not only signify personal loss but also the loss of the Zhiqing generation. When Li Chun is living in the Dai village, she misses her family in the city badly but also expresses her unwillingness to leave the Dai people, whereas Ren Jia, who is always eager to escape and go back to the city, mysteriously stays. Li Chun eventually leaves for the city though she once clearly refused his suggestion of taking the upcoming national college entrance exam. No clue can be found either in the film or the novella as to their final choice.

Li Chun’s role as the protagonist, both an experiencing subject and the voice-over narrator of this film, reflects the repressive characteristics of the film. She is
first formed by the Han culture through her education, functioning as part of the ideological state apparatus. The imposition of this discipline is suspended when she is forced to stay in an environment of “nature.” It is only through the interaction with this “nature” that she realises her own repression by Han ideology. Her uneasiness is especially demonstrated through her envy of the beauty of the local Dai girls and their interaction with men. The discipline of nature obviously goes against Han culture which stipulates that “unattractiveness is beauty” (20’23”) and recommends for women “not to fall in love at an early age” (39’55”).

The story relates Li Chun’s past self which was formed in the nurturing environment of Han culture but who has now become self-reliant but alienated. She never overcomes the repression that is generated by her internalisation of Han ideology. The hesitancy of the voice-over narration also indicates that the narrating self in the film is not necessarily a competent narrator who is supposed to reveal more information than the experiencing self. When she hides her inner thoughts, she is demonstrating the links between language and repression produced by dominant ideology.

Compared with the narration in Zhang Maning’s original story, the filmic voice-over narration is more reserved, especially in its attitude towards sexual consciousness, although it addresses the search for a narcissistic self. Furthermore, by treating repression as a social symptom, to be acquired in the course of moral development, the ideological dimension has been emphasised. Li Chun as the protagonist in the story defends her repression by resorting to the culture that upsets her but ultimately dominates her. The discourses of Li Chun as the narrator of the film and as a character within the diegesis both collaborate to avoid sexuality, and
this avoidance of sexual discourse, both in the levels of story and discourse of the film, precisely signifies its unarticulated ideological implications: the ultra-leftist cultural climate of the Cultural Revolution and the constant ideological control over private life. The Dai village which is exoticised in the film turns out to be a fantasy that is finally crushed by the hegemonic state ideology.

2.4 *Sacrificed Youth vs. King of the Children*

The similar settings and structure of *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1987) and *Sacrificed Youth* suggest the possibility of drawing comparisons. *King of the Children* tells a story of a man, Lao Gan, one of the countless young people who were sent down to the villages during the Cultural Revolution, who first labours on a farm and is then suddenly assigned to teach in a near-by village school. If *King of the Children* refuses woman’s participation within the fraternity of male autonomy, as is illustrated in Lao Gan’s rejection of Laidi, the only woman in this film, who loves him and longs to be with him, in *Sacrificed Youth* Li Chun refuses any chance to establish a relationship with men. But she is not positioned in the same way as Lao Gan, who embodies the male intellectuals’ predicament in their historical reflection of Han culture and their thoughts on the relationship between culture and nature during the 1980s. *Sacrificed Youth*’s narration of a woman’s private memory would not be popular in an age of historical reflection and national enthusiasm, however. After *Yellow Earth* kicked off the “Golden Era” of the Fifth Generation directors, the films made from the middle to late 1980s showed no concern about the personal discourse in the realist context, but, instead, pertained
more to a national discourse with an allegorical style under the vision of a male elite stance.

In addition to the adoption of the folk music of Yunnan province at the beginning of both King of the Children and Sacrificed Youth, the endings of these two films are surprisingly similar. King of the Children ends with images of the red burning fire on the hill which metaphorically signify the destruction of the mysterious nature that is isolated from modern culture; meanwhile local music with bizarre sounds and unrecognizable lyrics is added. Sacrificed Youth has its denouement in a funeral which is represented with the strong colours of land and fire (both are red) and the final devastation of the whole utopian village immersed in the gray mudslide. In King of the Children, after the fire, the image of the blackboard and small classroom returns into focus, suggesting the remains of the education system and its unresolved problems. In Sacrificed Youth, the grandmother, as the symbol of both motherly love and mysterious Dai culture, is burned and the utopian village is buried. Thus the tension that starts from the beginning of this film between the Dai culture and the Han culture is dissolved by the absolute abandonment of the Dai. Li Chun’s predicament of struggling in these two cultures also ends with her final submission to the Han culture. The Dai village will only live in her memory in the perpetual utopian picture where “the water will always be fresh and the grass green (88’89’’).”

The repetition of the images showing the hill in Chen Kaige’s film implies a circle, both in the narrative form and content (which is also implied in the voice-over of storytelling: “Once upon a time there was a mountain. In the mountain was a temple. In the temple was a Buddhist monk telling a tale. What is the tale? Once upon a time there was a mountain. In the mountain was a temple. In the temple...”).
*Sacrificed Youth* also demonstrates a narrative circle of Li Chun’s personal experience which leads to a retreat to repression, leaving the beauty of human nature in the untouchable distance of dream which, despite the idyllic scenery and its exotic customs, has to be wiped out entirely from reality, left forever for Li Chun to recall and reconstruct from her fragmented memories. The binary opposition that the director has deliberately constructed in the main body of the film is suddenly cancelled out with the affirmation of the Han culture as the legitimated one with which the subject should identify. The disappearance of the Dai village becomes the sacrifice of Li Chun’s youth that enables her to examine herself but fails to release her from her repressed self. Generally in the 1980s many films touched upon dystopian themes; *Sacrificed Youth* seems to indicate the picture of a postsocialist society in which only the repressed self has survived.

Zhang Nuanxin’s later essay discussing Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (1987) confirmed the Fifth Generation directors’ uniqueness in their way of filmmaking that would leave a mark on the Chinese film history, mentioning that the sequence of sexual intercourse in the sorghum field “manifested Zhang Yimou and his generation’s cry for human, sexuality, humanity, women and energy, which is so strong and is what I wanted but failed to enunciate in *Sacrificed Youth.*”\(^59\) It is not difficult to figure out what Zhang Nuanxin attempted to enunciate in her film but was restrained from so doing by her hesitancy. She wanted to reveal the process of self-liberation of a girl who has been repressed by the social environment but the gaps of

the narrative precisely reflect the impossibility of this liberation. Zhang Nuanxin said: “The film (Sacrificed Youth) should also emphasise Li Chun’s change from being numb to being awakened. She is eager to gain but dares not to do so, bidding farewell to the Dai village in the end. This film is an elegy of youth for the Cultural Revolution generation.”

However, Zhang does not make it clear what she “is eager to gain.”

Dai Jinhua comments on this film, saying that in it, “A woman gains recognition of her own gender position through historical experience and ethnic difference. Nonetheless, this realisation offers nothing more than greater tribulations and chagrin.” Even if, as Dai argues, Li Chun “gains recognition of her own gender position,” she dares not face her sexuality and fulfill her desire. Lu Lei pointed out that Zhang Nuanxin’s aesthetic attitude in her filmmaking reflects “self-restraint derived from repression” and further argued that “this is the deep-rooted tradition in the sub-consciousness of their generation after many years of idealist education (under the socialist regime), which leads to a conscious or unconscious tendency of repression and self-control of their emotion in artistic creation,” hence, “while the film renders a poetic beauty, it lacks a stronger shock to the heart.” This repressive tendency also prevents Sacrificed Youth from achieving a full expression of female consciousness.

60 Zhang, “Qingchunji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing Sacrificed Youth), 85-87.
2.5 Conclusion

It has been suggested that *The Drive to Win* is “one of the early avant-garde films produced after the Cultural Revolution,” noteworthy for “its daring exploration of new film techniques.”\(^6^3\) Its avant-garde nature must be understood in the context of Chinese cinema, since many of its cinematic methods were not new in relation to the world cinema. My close examination of film text reveals how Zhang Nuanxin practiced her reformation of film language, and how she maintained a socialist tradition in her characterisation of a female protagonist by linking her female agency to nationalism.

In the discussion of her cinematic style, I analysed Zhang Nuanxin’s use of long take, close-up, and audiovisual counterpoint, combining documentary and montage approaches. Those who espoused postsocialist realism in filmmaking like Zhang, criticised the antirealist tendencies of Chinese socialist realist film. *The Drive to Win* is the best example of Zhang’s understanding of Bazin’s theory—the use of long takes marks the style of this film. Rather than abandoning montage, however, *The Drive to Win* employs it in order to present mental activities; a montage sequence, for instance, plays a significant role in the representation of Sha’ou’s recollection of Dawei’s death.

While *The Drive to Win* avoids discussion of the Cultural Revolution, the historical perspective is broadened in order to cater to the political ideology that called for a nation’s rejuvenation. The adhesion between personal expression and

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national discourse, as I have analysed, is well illustrated in *The Drive to Win*. It has to be on the basis of collectivism that the individual consciousness is established: the women volleyball players are organised as a team, a community, within which the demonstration of unique personality is allowed. The struggling of Sha’ou in this film turns out to be a sacrifice for winning honour for the nation. In other words, the film clearly implies that it is only through her recognition of her role as a sacrifice that her life takes on value.

As a director’s first film that was among the first films made after the Cultural Revolution in the Youth Film Studio of the Beijing Film Academy, and a film made by a woman who taught in the Beijing Film Academy, that *The Drive to Win* anchors itself in mainstream discourse is necessary and understandable. Nevertheless, I consider the film as Zhang Nuanxin’s first step of in practicing her cinematic auteurism, which was only possible, taking account of film censorship, by cloaking it in the uncontroversial theme of patriotism. The film reflects Zhang Nuanxin’s artistic pursuit through the strategic mediation between her personal expression and a conscious adherence to the mainstream discourse.

Compared with *The Drive to Win*, *Sacrificed Youth* is a step forward in pursuing novelty of form, an auteurist style, and a strong subjective tendency, furthering the exploration of a feminine narrative in the post-Cultural Revolution period. As Esther Yau has written, *Sacrificed Youth* is “a lyrical piece that set an important precedent for personal filmmaking long submerged in the self-effacing aesthetic practices of revolutionary realism, subtly expressed a middle-aged woman’s sense of emotional
loss through carefully selected images.”\textsuperscript{64} The film reflects the director’s more mature mastery of documentary style in combination with other filmic devices. It also frees itself further from the restriction of the traditional dramatisation of film and emphasises a cinematic mode that challenges the audience’s habitual viewing experience. Finally, the film embodies a more self-aware gender consciousness which transcends the patriotism and ideological appeal of mainstream Chinese cinema. This gender consciousness is aligned with the individualist discourse that is clearly articulated in Zhang Nuanxin’s discussion of filming \textit{Sacrificed Youth}: “When I was making \textit{Sacrificed Youth}, I was more aware that film was not only the representation of real life, it should also be a reflection of the author’s subjective expression.”\textsuperscript{65} It is based on this belief in auteurship that she positioned female subjectivity as the centre of narration.

As I have demonstrated, Zhang Nuanxin’s romantic style, illuminated in this film, gets away from the socialist cinematic convention of representing an ideologically manipulated reality, which can still be found in \textit{The Drive to Win}. If \textit{The Drive to Win} still centres on the development of Sha’ou’s character in order to organise the plot, the narrative of \textit{Sacrificed Youth} is mainly based on the flow of Li Chun’s emotion, which determines the multiple elements of colour, sound and angles of shots. The tendency of de-dramatisation is pushed further by centring on Li Chun’s mental experience of feeling estranged, mysterious, fearful, happy and chagrined. I examined the repression of sexuality in the film chiefly via two aspects:

\textsuperscript{64} Yau, “Is China the End of Hermeneutics,”128.

1) the inconsistent female voice-over narration; and 2) the ambiguous love relationships between Li Chun and Dage, and between Li Chun and Renjia.

The critical neglect of the Fourth Generation directors has obstructed greater understanding of their versatile cinematic practice and theoretical contribution. Probably because of her gender, in spite of the fact that Zhang Nuanxin was a pioneer in calling for cinematic innovation, her works have not received as much critical attention and exploration as they deserve, either in the brief moments when the Fourth Generation dominated in the early 1980s or in the later development of Chinese film history, mostly as a result of the gendered mapping of ideological and political discourses.

Notwithstanding Zhang Nuanxin’s denial of a deliberate pursuit of “a woman’s perspective,” the feminine “writing” as auteurism that is practiced both in her film theory and her filmmaking was integrated into her modernisation of film language. Zhang believed that “[t]he film (Sacrificed Youth) was a good one to make … because there were a lot of controversial opinions in Chinese film circles over the past few years that touched upon the subject of the prose poetry vs the dramatic narrative. Sacrificed Youth is a prose poem in the same way that My Memories of Old Beijing is.”66 Admittedly, the differences between My Memories of Old Beijing and Sacrificed Youth are obvious. However, Zhang’s filmmaking no doubt initiates the experiment of narrating a female experience that overturns the essentialist representation of women by male directors, and foreshadows the possibility of establishing an alternative narrative which departs from the grand discourse of

66 Zhang Nuanxin, interviews by George S. Semsel, Chinese Film, 124.
historical reflection.

In spite of its pioneering spirit expressed through a gendered narrative, *Sacrificed Youth*, like *The Drive to Win*, did not herald the birth of feminist film in China. The tension between the personal narrative and the submission to ideological discourse obstructs the director’s ambition, declared in her directing notes, to make “a brand new type of film.”

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67 Zhang, “Qingchun ji daoyan chanshu” (Discussion of Directing *Sacrificed Youth*), 135.
Chapter Three Body and Sexuality: Passages to Individual Discourse

3.1 Introduction

The expression of love and sexuality constituted a crucial part of the individual discourse of the modern Chinese enlightenment of the 1980s. Harriet Evans has pointed out that “[w]ith the introduction of policies that emphasized the importance of ‘objective’ economic principles against the ideological purism of the Cultural Revolution years, the constraints on public discussion of ‘personal’ matters began to relax.”¹ Love as a topic became popular in public debate. As Evans observed, romantic love came to represent the ideals and hopes of youth in film, popular magazines, and other forms of media.²

The new approaches to love began to be evident in the films made in the early 1980s. For example, in *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), the key theme is a reflection and criticism of the evil of the Cultural Revolution, though the plot is mainly based on the love relationships of three couples: Song Wei (a female Communist official) and Luo Qun (a misjudged and wronged male Party member during the Anti-rightist Movement); Feng Qinglan (a female primary school teacher) and Luo Qun; and Song Wei and Wu Yao (Song Wei’s husband and a Communist official). As the film implies, Song Wei is criticised because of her betrayal of Luo

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² Ibid, 96.
Qun for the sake of her own political interests; the relationship between Song Wei and Wu Yao is exposed as a tragedy of selfish desire and a loveless marriage. In contrast, Feng Qinglan is eulogised for her loyalty and devotion to Luo Qun (of course, the given prerequisite is that Luo Qun is the embodiment of political righteousness). What is astounding in the film, apart from its direct criticism of the ultra-leftist ideology, is the romance between Song Wei and Luo Qun, which is exquisitely and audaciously portrayed through their intimate embracing and kissing. Later in the film, Wu Yao makes an overt sexual demand to Song Wei as he goes to embrace her forcefully, saying words that imply her obligation to do something for her husband. Such direct approaches to the depiction of emotion and passion were not seen in the earlier years of Chinese cinema after 1949.

A portrait of bodily feeling and its connection to female subjectivity emerged in the films made by female directors who focused more on sense of self. This chapter discusses two films made in the mid-1980s, both of which are concerned with issues relating to adolescence. The bodies of girls are marked out, signifying their subjectivities. While Lu Xiaoya’s *The Girl in Red* (1985) expresses confidence in individuality and self-consciousness through its portrayal of a girl of an independent mind, Shi Shujun’s *A Missing High School Girl* (1986) has more to say on sexuality. While *The Girl in Red* aims to demonstrate subjective agency, it avoids touching upon sexuality; instead, just like *Sacrificed Youth*, the film resorts to nationalist discourse. In *A Missing High School Girl*, repression is primarily embodied in the second part of the film which is concerned with didactic indoctrination. Since Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun, unlike Zhang Nuanxin, showed little interest in the reformation of film language, I develop my arguments mainly on the basis of the
themes of their films.

### 3.2 The Girl in Red: an Exalted Confidence in Individuality

“I watched Yellow Earth (1985) and One and Eight (1983), which provoked my thoughts. In my view, it’s good to have this kind of films because they enriched the diversity of Chinese film genre. But I won’t make film like these. I want to make a balance between pursuing a new way of making film and catering to the viewing pleasure of Chinese audience. We middle-aged directors should be responsible for connecting the past and the future, instead of making something absolutely highbrow.”

Lu Xiaoya

Lu Xiaoya, a former actress of the Changchun Film Studio, began her career as a film director after she graduated from the Directing Department of the Beijing Film Academy. She worked with Miao Ling in making Flying to Future (Feixiang weilai, 1979), a children’s film, and collaborated with her husband Cong Lianwen in making In and Out of Court (Fating neiwei, 1980), a social drama on the problems that followed the Cultural Revolution and I Am with Them (1982), a typical mainstream feature addressing the passion of achieving the Four Modernisations. Both of these two latter films have middle-aged women as the protagonists. The Girl in Red (1985), Lu Xiaoya’s first film directed by on her own, was awarded the Best Fiction Film in the Chinese Golden Rooster awards of 1985.

In contrast to the films that initiated an experimental trend, such as *Yellow Earth* (dir. Chen Kaige, 1985), which was made in the same year as *The Girl in Red*, Lu Xiaoya’s film language looks quite conservative. She admitted that while she appreciated films like *Yellow Earth* that diverged from the mainstream filmmaking of the time, she did not plan to make films of that kind. I will argue that if *The Girl in Red* is not particularly noteworthy for its experimental film language, it is noteworthy as a breakthrough in its portrayal of a female figure on the screen, one that is not overshadowed by any stereotypes of women carried over from earlier periods of Chinese filmmaking. At the same time, it does not resemble the western feminist films which call for an interruption of the dominant discourse with a counter-discourse that challenges gender clichés; instead, it was made within the mainstream discursive system that was accepted by the mass audience who had formed regular viewing habits at the time. Still, the distinctive feature of the film lies in its unusual narrative mode: an anti-dramatic narration and the unification of the narrator’s and the character’s point of view.

De-emphasis of plot was shared among certain female directors in the 1980s for its effectiveness in showing how female characters existed within realistic human relationships. The filmic narration in *The Girl in Red* works as illustration of the main character’s psychology, which appears remarkable for its difference from people who were weighed down by traditional thought and snobbery. An Ran, the protagonist of the film, emerges into the national narrative with an alternative everyday experience and ventures across the gender stereotypes that had dominated the articulation of a long history in which woman were excluded from discursive power. The red blouse, apart from being a signifier of her female subjectivity, is
metaphorised as a nationalist spirit encouraging the release of feelings in the 
passionate 1980s.

The awarding of the Best Fiction Film in the Chinese Golden Rooster awards of 
1985 to *The Girl in Red*, Lu Xiaoya’s first film as sole director (she had previously 
co-directed a film with her husband), aroused considerable controversy. It was said 
that this film was improper because of its negative portrait of a high school teacher as 
a hypocritical prude. Criticism was also directed towards the authenticity of the 
protagonist An Ran, a controversial female image—a girl who “swim(s) against the 
tide” in a period when women were again entangled in a dispute about their position 
in a new era of China.

Moreover, some audiences questioned the validity of the film’s reflection of the 
Chinese people’s “boldness of vision” because it fell short of the masculine virility 
that conventionally embodies a national narrative. Yet woman on screen had long 
been a mouthpiece, on many occasions, for ideological purposes since the birth of 
Chinese cinema. In most cases, woman was perfectly positioned in a grand narrative 
for denouncing the oppressive old society, assisting national liberation and delivering 
messages for the revolutionary cause. In the socialist cinema, women were 
transformed into soldiers participating in the class struggle, enjoying equal rights

4 Anon. “Hongyi shaonü shi zuijia ma” (Is *The Girl in Red* the Best Film). “Meizhong buzú” 
(Beautiful yet Incomplete). “Jinji jiang yinggai ruhe pingfa” (How Should the Golden Rooster Awards 
Be Decided). *Dianying pingjie (Film Review)*, no. 06(1985):11.

5 Katherine J. Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis* (New York: Berghahn 
Books, 2009), 8.

6 Wang Zhichao and Xu Molin, “Huidiaozi zhongde hongchenshan—Ping yingpian hongyi shaonü” 
(Red Blouse in Gray—Review of The Girl in Red), *Dianying Pingjie (Film Review)*, no. 09 (1985): 
14.
with men to fight for people’s welfare. However, China’s feverish progression toward socialist modernisation in the 1980s witnessed a backlash against women, accompanied by calls for women to go back home and resume the roles of “virtuous wife and good mother.”

An Ran, the newly constructed female figure, however, could not fit any prescribed positions that women were supposed to occupy. It seems that it is much more acceptable to show a young girl representing a nostalgic perspective as Yingzi does in *My Memories of Old Beijing* (1983), an uncontroversially acknowledged classic. An Ran does not seek to accord with any traditional or recently fashioned images of women as defenceless and passive witnesses, degendered signifiers or inferior creatures for erotic pleasure, images in which the interests of the various forms of patriarchy coincide. In the following section, I will analyse the film’s digressive filmic narration and its entanglement of gender perspectives and national discourse.

### 3.2.1 A Digressive Narration

*The Girl in Red* is adapted from a novella called *A Red Blouse without Buttons*, written by the renowned female writer Tie Ning (1957- ). The main plot concerns the psychological changes undergone by the protagonist An Ran, a first year high school student who worries about the election of the “Three Good” students in her class. Diverging from the presumption of the viewer that this would be a story of a student working hard to win honour, the narration digresses, both before and after the selection, to trivial matters that seem to be irrelevant to the primary concern. The
sub-plot, which involves social issues related to An Ran’s sister An Jing, a journal editor, provides an entry into her working milieu as a means of allowing the investigation of people’s relationships.

Lu Xiaoya changed the original novella’s first-person narration, taken from An Jing’s point-of-view, to a third-person narration, as she felt this change facilitated the expression of her understanding of Tie Ning’s story. Lu wrote, “The most difficult part to handle in making this film is its structure. I thought a lot about it. I assumed two structures. One is the external structure which is based on the chronological order. And the other is the internal structure which mainly focuses on An Ran’s mental activity and mood.” The “external structure” to which Lu Xiaoya refers is actually a third-person filmic narration built on changes of time in which the narrator often identifies with the “camera eye.” The narrative mode in this film is that of a not-quite omniscient external third person whose external account sometimes slips into a specific character (An Ran). Because of its characteristic of being a persona of authorship (as Lu Xiaoya emphasised), this external narrator is given an agency that creates the “selected truth” which is used for subjective expression within a linear timeline. This external narration is closely relevant to An Ran’s self-consciousness, and the narrative perspective is often shifted to hers. This explains the way we see the different “eyes” on the poplar trees that An Ran imagines when she is walking with her sister, talking about her feelings regarding the election of the “Three Good” students. The “internal structure” that Lu Xiaoya pointed out in her talk refers to a

7 Jin and Xiang, “I feel with My Artistic Mind.” 33.
character’s point of view that restricts the narration. It reminds the audience of the authenticity of what they see in the film. For instance, in the scene of the swimming pool, the images of the boy whom Mi Xiaoling (An Ran’s best friend in her class) suspects of peeping, are taken from An Ran’s perspective, thereby producing a contradiction between what her friend tells her (about the boy peeping at her) and what An Ran sees (that the boy does not show any trace of peeping).

Figure 2.9. An Ran and her elder sister An Jing walk in a road surrounded by poplar trees.

Unlike many female images that were created on the Chinese screen, An Ran is vividly presented as a person fraught with self-consciousness and the new spirit of a promising future. She is marked out in virtue of her difference as an honest youth, although this does not mean that she is portrayed as a saint; in fact, as a high school student, she is a little conceited, reckless and stubborn. This realistic portrayal

\[8\] Jin and Xiang, “I feel with My Artistic Mind,” 33.
liberates the image from being a fetish for the male gaze, while her self-asserted
power may have unsettled the male intellectual viewers of the time.

A different way of portraying female images after the Cultural Revolution started
from Zhang Nuanxin’s *The Drive to Win* (1981). Behind the mainstream appeal of
the film’s message of devotion to the country, the undercurrent of a female
perspective and an innovative filmic narration which emphasised mental
development in a loosely organised plot find an echo in *The Girl in Red*. However,
An Ran’s image is distinctively presented with an exalted confidence of an
independent mind. Moreover, Lu Xiaoya, in discussing making this film, pointed out
that *sentiments* were underlined in the film. This idea also coincided with Zhang
Nuanxin, especially with regard to her film *Sacrificed Youth* (1985), which looked
backwards at memory in a mood of nostalgia, whereas *The Girl in Red* aims at an
active self-construction of an individual with an ardent self-confidence. In order to
facilitate subjective expression in this film, Lu Xiaoya chose not to adopt a
documentary style but to accumulate signs of “selected truth” as a way of providing
psychological realism.

The digressive narration restores triviality and complications to everyday life. If
we summarise this narrative as anti-drama, it is to notice that this film values the
same idea embedded in both *The Drive to Win* and *Sacrificed Youth*—a style of
“prose poetry.” Although such a style was not used solely by female directors in the
1980s, it can be considered in terms of its effectiveness for women’s self-portraits
during that historical period when both Lu Xiaoya and Zhang Nuanxin adopted the
same narrative structure in representing images of new women. After all, these
female directors were allowed in some sense to articulate their own voices and
transgress the boundaries of conventional narrative norms.

The digression in *The Girl in Red* weakens the expectation for the sort of dramatic conflicts that were inherited from traditional Chinese drama and the melodramatic style imported from Hollywood cinema and Soviet cinema, while at the same time illuminating the characters whose inner conflicts were pushed to the forefront through the cinematised expression. This innovatory film language which had been advocated since the end of the 1970s by Zhang Nuanxin enabled herself to find a different way of making a film that broke away from the ossified cinematic practice in China. It also heralded a further exploration of the “prose-poetry” style of the Fifth Generation directors, such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou’s experiments with filmic form in *Yellow Earth* (1985). What is more, the possibility of ushering in auteurism in Chinese films was raised, which in some sense seems very useful for a marginalised group keen to insert a personal narration. Lu Xiaoya agreed that filmmaking was a way of projecting her own understanding of a literary work onto the screen rather than rigidly adhering to the story itself.

### 3.2.2 Clothing and Body: Synecdochical Embodiment of Individual Discourse

Just as these female directors were marked out because of their gender in the field of filmmaking, the unconventional female figures in their films are unavoidably marked and therefore arouse controversy, because of their implicit or explicit self-consciousness and brave outspokenness. An Ran, a genuine rebel against the older generation, comments “I do not look like either of them; I am who I am (26’12”),”
when she and her older sister An Jing are looking at a picture of their parents. Lu Xiaoya admitted in her essay that this was not only a declaration of An Ran, but of herself. This was the first time that a women director had distantly echoed her women predecessors in the May Fourth Movement who wrote with the spirit of rebellious daughters and fought to have their voice heard. Since Lu Xiaoya claimed that she was identical to An Ran in many aspects, the perspective of the narrator is likely to identify with her character. This unification of perspective provides a reliable narrative and thus characterises a more realistic female image compared with those in many films made by male directors.

Nurtured in a westernised environment where her father works as an oil painter, An Ran has been greatly influenced by the way her father behaves; for instance, her father quotes Western masters such as Anton Chekhov and Auguste Rodin. Learning from those great figures, An Ran embraces the independent mind in thinking of issues in everyday life, as she states: “I find beauty with my own eyes; I see nature with my own eyes; I recognise classmates and friends with my own ability to analyse (61’35’).” Thus when all other people, including her sister An Jing with whom she is very close, disagree with her wearing a red blouse before the election of the “Three Good” students, she insists on putting it on because she cannot see anything wrong with it. The metaphor of the red blouse, with its conspicuous colour and style (a blouse with a belt but without buttons was unusual at that time), captures her character of independent thinking and gendered subjectivity and suggests a

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modernised concept.

The unequivocal self-identification makes An Ran more realistic: she never shies away from the construction of a gender identity but positively engages in this process. This construction of self-identity is mainly achieved through two means: clothing and body.

In the films of the 1980s, clothing had a synecdochical function to signify social changes. Antonia Finnane noticed that “[f]ashion was one of many areas in which the opening of a dialogue between China and the rest of the world occurred in the late 1970s, all in line with developments in international diplomacy and trade.”\(^\text{10}\) In the early part of *The Girl in Red*, when An Ran and her sister walk on the street one weekend, they pass a shop window with two mannequins (one male and one female) wearing dull dark suits. This kind of suit had been extremely popular before the 1980s, denoting the suppression of sexual difference and gendered beauty. The two girls laugh at the mannequins for not changing clothes even on such a hot summer day and joke that their faces look strange, just like people who get sick. The shot of these two stiff mannequins in the window forms a sharp contrast with the vigor of the people on the street, most of whom dress in white shirts. As Finnane has commented: “… in striking contrast to the situation in 1949, the new clothing culture emerging in the towns of China is remarkably innocent of any obviously Chinese feature.”\(^\text{11}\) In a broad sense, when the Four Modernisations effectively led to the increasing spread of western fashion in China, the red blouse without buttons distinguishes An Ran not


only from her classmates but the majority who conform with conservative discourse.

Figure 3.1. An Ran looks conspicuous among people on the street.

For An Ran, the red blouse ensures the affirmation of her subjectivity. Because the blouse is different from the dull surrounding colours and refers to a westernised fashion of thinking, it poses an unsettling power to the silent majority of an implied consensus. In a discussion of the cultural reproduction of the communities, Nira Yuval-Davis has pointed out: “The mythical unity of national ‘imagined communities’ which divides the world between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is maintained and ideologically reproduced by a whole system of what [John] Armstrong (1982) calls symbolic ‘border guards.’ These ‘border guards’ can identify people as members or non-members of a specific collectivity. They are closely linked to specific cultural codes of style of dress and behavior…”12 By wearing this blouse, An Ran demarcates herself from the rest and refuses to compromise with a collective inclusion.

12 Yuval-Davis, Gender & Nation, 23.
Collectivism as an official discourse reached its acme during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), prevailing in Chinese people’s daily lives and gradually becoming internalised as a communal unconsciousness. In contrast, An Ran’s maverick character is unveiled in the opening sequence of the film, when, as a small child, she challenges “common sense” with a series of questions, asking, for example, “why is the truck running so fast [it refuses to stop when An Ran’s mother tries to hitchhike]? Why are dates red? (01’46”)” A tracking shot of running in a vast land as her voice-over reverberates in the vast landscape implies her quest for the future in her own way of thinking.

In Chinese cinema, the colour red has various political and gender connotations. As Paul J. Bailey described, in socialist China, “[a]lthough women might appear in red jackets—symbolising conversion to communism—traditionally, women dressed in red signified sexual attractiveness and allure (for men it denoted courage and loyalty).” The teacher’s insinuation that An Ran’s wearing such a blouse indicates a divergence from the correct line, in itself suggests an allusive political discourse. Ran’s resistance to her teacher takes the form of a childish willfulness and a strong self-consciousness. The red blouse for her is an apolitical sign of subjectivity and a means to build her gender identification; she considers that there is nothing wrong with wearing a beautiful piece of clothing. Therefore the colour red, which was


14 The teacher (Wei Wan) indicates that An Ran’s way of dressing shows a “tendency” of individualism (which also implies a sexual attractiveness). She tells An Ran’s elder sister (An Jing) that “you should help me to guide her down the right path.” This mode of speech was a typically socialist discourse, denoting someone is doing something “politically incorrect.”
supposed to symbolise an authoritative power (the communist regime), has been used contrarily to question the imposed authority (the teacher). With its high-profile iconoclastic stand, the film suggests an alternative way to understand the world in a post-Mao period.

In the domestic space of her bedroom, An Ran declares “I look really pretty in this (19’13”)” when she is looking at herself in the mirror, and then tells An Jing, with whom she shares the room, not to treat her as a boy and ask her to wear old-fashioned clothes. The next shot cuts to the scene of her taking off her blouse (An Jing is going to wash her clothes) leaving only a vest which is framed in a bluntly presentational shot, as she says, “Keep in mind. I am a girl. Don’t forget (19’30”).” This sequence is extraordinary for its ingenious showing of a girl without appealing to an eroticised gaze in a lingering movement; instead, it is a key moment in this film about the reaffirmation of her gender identity. The significance of her body therefore emphasises clothes: only the red blouse matches this energetic body in the freshness and bravery with which it counters a sexually oppressive collectivism.

The affirmation of gender consciousness weighs heavily if we compare the view of gender in the socialist context. As Zhou Xuelin notes in her essay on the representation of gender and sexuality in modern Chinese film, “it was rare to see women spend time on their external appearance in Chinese films of the 1950s; neither was there any trace of erotic beauty and fashionable clothes associated with them. (If any such trace appears on the big screen, it would unambiguously refer to
Many Chinese women in the socialist period were very shy and ashamed of their female bodies, and even felt inferior, consequently trying hard to conceal their bodies and any trace of sexuality. This awkwardness was openly demonstrated on screen in *Sacrificed Youth*, in which an educated youth, Li Chun, who acknowledges the sexual repression of the Han culture in a voice-over, becomes aware of her gender consciousness through interaction with the local Dai people. She changes her dull suit to the bright costume of Dai woman, feeling pleasant as she acquires her female identity. But this is just a flash of a self-awareness that finally surrenders itself to the dominant culture. An Ran, on the other hand, is not burdened by the traumatic memory of the Cultural Revolution (she was too young at the time). Nourishment from Western culture affects her way of thinking, and meanwhile her positive engagement of self-identification indicates a breaking with the shackles of the socialist discourse on women.

The sequence of shots set around a swimming pool provides another demonstration of the body. An Ran is wearing a red swimming suit and her body is “casually” presented (we can see a scar on her knee). Her friend Mi Xiaoling approaches to talk about a murder committed by a film star and mentions that a boy often peeps at her. However, An Ran has failed to notice this and laughs at Mi Xiaoling for thinking too much. The shots of the boy whom Mi Xiaoling suspects of peeping are taken from An Ran’s point of view. It is clear that the situation does not back up Mi Xiaoling’s claim that the boy had tried to peek at her. However, this does

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15 Xuelin Zhou, “‘From Behind the Wall’ The Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese Film,” in *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*, ed. Tan See-Kam et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 129.
not mean Mi Xiaoling is lying, as it can be extrapolated that she is not a vain girl according to An Ran’s opinion of her: she is honest and always dares to say things straightforwardly.

After this incident these two friends begin to drift apart because An Ran tells her sister that Mi Xiaoling “has got too many silly ideas (32’20”).” These ideas, we can infer, are those which refer to the subtle awareness of sex between girls and boys. Compared with Ma Xiaoling’s “precocity,” An Ran is quite slow to acquire this sentiment related to sex. She seems to have an intimate relation with the boy Liu Donghu, both a classmate and a neighbour of her. But she never considers him as an object of her love. In the sequence where she corrects his mispronunciation of English word “cough,” she not only laughs at his clumsiness but also the funny expression on his brow. In a comparison, she mentioned Zorro to her sister earlier in the film, saying he has “a handsome chin (07’46”).”

It seems that female directors incline to represent sex in allusive ways. This phenomenon in The Girl in Red resonates with the ambiguity of female desires in Sacrificed Youth, in which the female protagonist not only epitomises the generation of Chinese youth experiencing historical trauma, but also suffers an individual repression of sexuality. The avoidance of addressing An Ran’s sexuality seems reasonable: she is merely a high school girl. The audience should bear in mind that the discussion of young love was usually a forbidden zone in the 1980s. It was not until the release of Shi Shujun’s film A Missing High School Girl (1986) that the first film on that topic was released. As the director, Shi Shujun, admitted, the process of making this film was quite tough as the sensitivity of its topic led to problems with
the censors.16

3.2.3 Three Women

The women in An Ran’s family are interesting for their distinctive characteristics; they represent three different kinds of females who are typically produced by the social environment at different historical moments. An Ran’s mother is a victim of the Cultural Revolution, a very traumatised and cynical character. The tensions within the family are released by the three other members: An Ran, An Jing and the father, all of whom have been influenced by western ideas.

The mother is irritable due to her frustrations during the Cultural Revolution and her dissatisfaction with her current work. She gave up her major of a foreign language to become a clerk in an Art Institute in order to “create a better political background for children (20’35’).” Feeling aggrieved, she always grumbles about her sacrifices for the family, “Am I doomed to be a housewife? ... For ten years I shouted slogans with quotations (from Mao Zedong). I’ve forgotten everything and lost everything … (56’47”-57’00”)” Vexed by the frustrations in her life, she becomes passive to many things and is not prepared to trust people any more, complaining that: “I have seen it all. Friends, friendship—all nonsense (45’08’).” However, she remains the authority of the family, replacing a powerful father figure, which is a rare case in Chinese cinema as a whole. The film shows how she changed

16 Tan Qing, “Yuanta chengwei yige jingtanhai—Shi Shujun tan Shizong de nü zhongxuesheng” (Wish It Will Be An Exclamation Mark: Shi Shujun’s Talk on A Missing High School Girl), Dianying Pingjie (Film Review), no. 08(1986): 12.
from a girl who could write poems in 1955 to a cynical woman, indicating the destructiveness of the political climate of the years after 1955. Consequently her self image as someone who had made great sacrifice is juxtaposed with An Ran as a pair of symbolic modes—an opposition of the past and the present/future.

An Jing, however, is the one who stands in the middle. She was born during the Cultural Revolution and grew up in the 1980s, as a result of which she learns a shrewdness in dealing with matters in life. She curries favor with An Ran’s teacher in order to help An Ran win the accolade of a “Three Goods” student. On the other hand, it is she who buys An Ran the red blouse and who dares to break the social prejudice of the time by falling in love with a widower who has a child. She seems to be the one who entangles herself in a contradiction between yielding to the social consensus and following her own desires.

An Ran, as Lu Xiaoya observed, lashes out against the conventional preoccupations and corrupted conceptions of a society, speaking out for a new generation. She represents a future climate that the director longs for. The characterisation of the three women in a single family reveals an attempt to envision social changes and to discover the association of social atmosphere and women’s experience.

### 3.2.4 Patriotism vs Western Culture

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Another interesting coincidence between *The Girl in Red* and *The Drive to Win* is that the protagonists of both films go to places of historical interest for nationalist inspiration: Sha’ou goes to the garden of the Yuanmingyuan while An Ran visits the Baiyang Dian Lake with a bunch of boys. The Baiyang Dian Lake is one of the places where the Anti-Japanese War was waged in the 1930s and 1940s. It has been argued that the off-screen sound of gunfire in this scene has a synecdochal connotation which implies that a nationalist education has helped to shape An Ran’s character, which seems to suggest that young people should never forget about history and learn from the heroes who once dedicated their lives to fight against the enemy.\(^\text{18}\) Does this sequence of shots aim at an integration of the implicit national narrative and a personal perception?

In her essay on this film, Lu Xiaoya recounts her own experience of going to choose the location at the Baiyang Dian Lake. She was inspired by the heroic stories during the war and deeply touched by the simplicity of the people living there. For her, the national roots could be found in nature.\(^\text{19}\) The sequence set at the Baiyang Dian Lake shows the lush greenness of the natural environment and contains a pronounced use of off-screen voices, something that is also seen in Zhang Nuanxin’s *The Drive to Win*. The montage that follows alternates between depopulated shots of natural scenery and close-ups of An Ran’s face, indicating psychological


\(^{19}\) Lu Xiaoya, “Hongyi shaonü chuangzuo hou suoyi suoxiang” (Afterthoughts about *The Girl in Red*), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no. 08(1985):53
sublimation. However, the narrative implicitly lays claim to a masculine power (the sound of gunfire), through which patriotic education is conveyed. This sequence was made to explain the motivation for the shaping of An Ran’s character, as a way of extolling patriotism, yet turns out to be far-fetched and ambiguous.

Western culture is prevalent in *The Girl in Red*, mainly via different signs: the sunglasses a woman wears, the advertisement of English classes (a board written with “English on Sunday”), the book of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, the music from the film *The Sound of Music* (dir. Robert Wise, 1965), the quotation from an American physical scientist on the wall and, of course, An Ran’s Western style red blouse. According to Antonia Finnane, the Four Modernisations effectively overcame the inhibitions of the past decades, “leading to the spread of western fashion in China.”

The film, interestingly, pays tribute chiefly to aspects of Western civilisation that changed social horizon substantially in China. By comparison, it is the remnants of leftist political ideology that jeopardise social progress and have a deleterious effect on human character: for example, An Ran’s teacher, Wei Wan, feels annoyed and angry about An Ran’s challenge of her authority in the class; Zhu Wenjuan, the best student in their class, is actually a dishonest person who dares not to report the truth after she witnessed the bullying of a student; neither dare she admit the mistake Wei Wan commits in her pronunciation of a Chinese character. All these examples call to mind leftist practices of the Cultural Revolution. Those people’s failings are portrayed in sharp contrast with An Ran.

Therefore in this film, the director juxtaposes two discourses: Western civilisation and Chinese patriotism. Western civilisation, to a large degree, exerts a positive impact on An Ran in shaping her character: she is honest to everyone and engages in thinking of issues on her own. Her Western style blouse has become something that denotes her vivid character. At the same time, the director has to balance the two ideologies to avoid being blamed for overvaluing foreign things.

The film indicates, on the one hand, that the open policy adopted in the late 1970s imported many Western products to China which benefited Chinese society and moved it towards modernisation, and, on the other hand, that people should never forget about their own history and should make elements borrowed from Western civilisation serve the future of China. The revolutionary discourse is ridiculed in *The Girl in Red*, when An Jing finds the poem written by An Ran’s teacher Wei Wan absurd for being marked by revolutionary connotations popular in past decades. Wei Wan writes a poem in a style that echoes the songs for the Great
Leap Forward in the 1950s: “I ride the rocket of my national soul. With red heart, I watch red flags all over the world. Oh, go full steam ahead, go full steam ahead.” Both An Jing and An Ran do not consider it as a real poem.

It was from the 1980s that a gendered narrative on screen initiated a new dimension for Chinese women’s cinema. If women in Zhang Nuanxin’s films are still too reserved and therefore cannot but immerse themselves in an irretrievable sadness for the past, the “Girl in Red” in Lu Xiaoya’s film liberates herself as a passionate speaker for her own thoughts and reflections on life.

3.3 A Missing High School Girl: A Didactic Sexual Education

“It is normal for a girl who is in her adolescence to have some romantic ideas about love. Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu, the protagonists in Dream of Red Mansions fall in love at the age of thirteen. Why do people who read this classical novel never criticise it, but become so fussy when their own children are facing a similar situation?”

Shi Shujun

Films of the mid-1980s explored hitherto taboo topics in a way that broke deliberately with the ideologically safe manner of films of the past. As Harriet Evans has noted, the change of approaches to love and pre-marital relationships “was particularly evident in the new legitimacy given to love and sexual desire as sites of

individuated experience,” and “[t]he view that ‘in modern life … people treat love as a personal matter’ (ziji de shi) permitted the expression of a wide variety of views.”

This kind of personal discourse obviously detached itself from the dominant discourse of the preceding decades in the socialist period. The use of romantic imagery to idealise love indicated an emphasis on individual feelings rather than notions of love for the nation/motherland.

It is in this discursive context that Shi Shujun’s *A Missing High School Girl* (1986) was made. Shi Shujun, who graduated from The Central Academy of Drama (Beijing) in the 1960s, began her film career in the mid-1970s in the Shanghai Film Studio. Most of her films centred on young girls. Physical attraction and sexual excitement are boldly expressed in *A Missing High School Girl*, her second feature film. Images of the sexual fantasies of a little girl meeting a man in the forest offered a representation of sexual desire that had been unprecedented in the cinematic discourse since 1949. The movement of her body and the longing look in her eyes are used to celebrate the legitimisation of the individual’s psychological and physical needs and desire. But the new status of romantic love and private experience did not gain unanimous approval in the Chinese cinema of the time. Though tolerance of sexual discourse was seen in the public discourse, Shi Shujun still faced opposition over making a film about the sexual education of high school students, a topic which remained off-limits in the Chinese cinema.

Since the 1950s, as Harriet Evans has pointed out, “any indication of wanting to extend the ‘natural’ sexual interest of adolescence into active desire for the opposite

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sex is unacceptable.”23 That the film was completed and released in spite of the pressure testifies to the significance of the social changes under way at the time, however.

3.3.1 A Challenge to the Off-limits Topic

Shi Shujun made her own choice to direct a film on the experiences of young love among Chinese high school students, being aware of her identities as both female director and mother. Before embarking on filming A Missing High School Girl, she made a film about college girls called Girl Students' Dormitory (Nüda xuesheng sushu, 1983), which mainly centres on the interactions between girls from different family backgrounds and of different characteristics. It was a popular “youth film” because of its realistic portrayal of college students at that time. When the news about her plan of making a film about high school students was made public, a hot discussion was sparked among parents, teachers and young students, underlining the sensitivity and importance of this topic as a social concern.

The representation of romantic love and sex was once persistently prohibited on the Chinese screen, especially in the socialist period. The new patterns of “love” in Chinese cinema after 1979 have been described by Chris Berry:

… in 1979, with broader political and cultural loosening up, a greater variety of love stories appears … Also, love is represented as an autonomous feeling, rather than something

23 Evans, Women and Sexuality in China, 97.
stimulated by and subordinated to the demands of socialism, and fulfillment of love faces all sorts of political and social obstacles, ranging from the opposition of parents and double standards against women who are too educated or not virgins to poverty and prior entanglements. This could be said to be romantic love, as opposed to the socialist love that preceded it. Despite this change, sexual desire remains taboo throughout.24

Indeed, scenes of sexuality were usually avoided in Chinese cinema under the strict scrutiny of film censorship after 1949. But in the course of the 1980s, sexual attitudes and practices underwent a significant change. *A Missing High School Girl*, which was made in 1986, showcases certain changes in the cinematic treatment of love and sexuality that had been emerging since the late 1970s and early 1980s. The film is distinctive in its bold exploration of a teenager’s love and sexuality with a positive attitude of affirming naturalness and beauty without addressing larger political concerns. For instance, it does not resemble the films made in the aftermath of the end of the Cultural Revolution in which love was usually driven by a passion for the Four Modernisations. At the same time, it does not eschew the didactic traditions of Chinese cinema, committing itself to the pedagogical purpose of educating both students and parents.

According to Shi Shujun, a new form was needed for the cinematic representation of this groundbreaking story on screen. She adopted an unusual narrative structure dividing the film into two parts with separate subtitles and themes, resembling a short TV series. Rather than making it a film centring on a love affair, it

appeals for consideration of the problems that were caused by young love as a social concern. The first part is mostly taken from the perspective of Wang Jia, a young girl whose affection for a college student is unrequited; the second part, told from her father’s point of view, depicts his response to Wang Jia’s running away from home. The film aims to balance the pursuit of cinematic aesthetics with the positive educational function it was supposed to fulfill.

Interestingly, the film also echoes the director’s double identification as director and mother. The first part, in some sense, demonstrates her filmic pursuit of a romantic style of narrative whilst the second part uses a “traveling and interviewing” documentary style narrative in order to illustrate the experience of searching for a runaway daughter. The film as a whole seems to be a dialogue of the two different identities that the director herself possesses.

Among the negative responses this film aroused after its release, many parents and teachers protested against its presentation of teenager’s love in a romantic and poetic way, worrying that many students would imitate this “bad example” of Wang Jia’s falling into young love. Others felt that young love was a trivial problem that should not be represented on the screen. Generally, film critics still displayed a conservative attitude towards the representation of a teenager’s consciousness of love and sexuality.

25 Geng Tianli, “Ci jinqu buyi dapo” (The Forbidden Zone Should not be Broken), 10. Zeng Zha, “Jinqu tupo heyi yinqi buan” (Why It Aroused Anxiety after Breaking the Forbidden Zone), 12-3. Zhai Shengning, “Women danxin women huyu” (We Worry, We Appeal), 13, Dianyingpingjie (Film Review), no.08 (1986); Lin Shiyi, “Yinchu genduo de wangjia zenme ban—jianyu daoyan shijian shangque” (What to Do If There Will Be More Wang Jia: A Discussion with Shi Shujun the Director), Dianying pingjie (Film Review), no.11 (1986). No page number provided; Zhang Xianrui, “Shizhi pianmian de fanying” (A Biased Reflection), Wenyi pinglun (Literature & Art Studies), no.12(1986): 104.
The first part of the film, which is called “Secret,” manifests Wang Jia’s infatuation with a male college student called Lan Bo and her final disillusionment with this unrequited love. The mental activity of Wang Jia is emphasised by using dream sequences, flashbacks, and imaginary scenes, all of which help to create a romantic world full of sentiment. The film embodies the major characteristic of female directors’ filmmaking in the 1980s: they often paid greater attention to the psychological development of characters as self-aware individuals rather than abstract human symbols denoting a social or political function.

3.3.2 Sexuality as an Explicit Narrative

Whether by design or not, the imagery presented in the first part of the film to indicate Wang Jia’s unconscious sexuality relates to the Freudian analysis of sexual desire. The film starts with a dream sequence, in which Wang Jia takes off her shoes and dress while she is running on the grasslands. Her body is full of the beauty and vigour of youth. Then she goes on a boat that sails on the grasslands. At the end of her dream, wearing a white dress and holding a red scarf, she runs to a large tree and hugs it. In her line of vision is a man who is smiling at her. The whole sequence demonstrates a sexual awareness in a romantic representation. Then Wang Jia is awakened by the lick of her cat, and her dream leaves an expression of shyness on her face. The deliberate presentation of a girl’s body is also found in The Girl in Red when An Ran takes off her clothes before going to bed and when she wears a red swimming suit in a public swimming pool.
Shi Shujun’s *A Missing High School Girl* takes this further, showing Wang Jia’s developed consciousness of her own sexuality, especially in the scenes when she is preparing to attend the graduation performance of Lan Bo (who majors in music) in his college. Looking at herself in the mirror after she cleans the make-up with which she wanted to make herself more beautiful, she touches her breast and then puts two pads into her clothes, feeling satisfied with her more womanly image.

The changes in the depiction of love in films were more or less influenced by the Western ideal of love and sexuality: love (or sexuality) is an individualistic force that happens autonomously for human beings. In this film, the love Wang Jia embraces moves away from the subordination to socialist ideologies which had been emphasized in the films of the previous three decades. If An Ran as a high school student in *The Girl in Red* is still shy about love and sexuality, Wang Jia was given a more authentic portrayal in her nascent sexual consciousness. The director confirms
her purity and naivety with a poetic style, portraying a teenage girl’s romanticised imagination. With the transition to Wang Jia’s perspective, especially in the sequences of her looking at Lan Bo or herself in the mirror, the external third-person narrator that is usually endowed with the director’s personality identifies with her narrative point of view and invites a positive response from the audience.

Female directors’ sensibilities to female desire and female subjectivity are greater compared with men who made films also centring around women figures, such as, *A Good Woman* (1985) and *A Girl from Hunan* (1986), both of which were also made in the mid-1980s and appropriate female sexuality chiefly to reflect feudal remnants. Shi Shujun, nonetheless, audaciously associates sexuality with the life of a teenager. Most of the shots in the first part of *A Missing High School Girl* are organised by Wang Jia’s sexual fantasies about a handsome young man, who at the beginning of the film is merely a non-specific imaginary image of perfection, later to be fulfilled by Lan Bo.

The turn to the exploration of humanity was pushed further in the mid-1980s through a more realistic representation of love and sexuality. While Lu Xiaoya initiated a bold presentation of young girls’ bodies in *The Girl in Red*, Shi Shujun emphasised the connection between physiological changes and sexuality. The allusion to sex is not shocking by today’s standards, though it was indeed unusual at the time when this film was released. The details are subtly represented; when the female students go to the beach, for instance, they are shown lying down in a very relaxed way, the movements of their legs and feet buried in the sand shown in close-up shots. A girl’s vision is attracted to a naked man who has a very handsome body and she keeps staring at him when he is passing by. Another girl notices this and
laughs at her. Such a direct representation of juvenile sexual consciousness was indeed very rare in the 1980s.

In addition to the filmic narrative that is bluntly focused on the point of view of Wang Jia and the girls, the outspoken voice-over, monologue and writing of Wang Jia are used to allow the character the opportunity for self-expression. Apart from the poetic presentation of Wang Jia’s dreams and imagination, her voice-over introduces her attraction towards Lan Bo and also manifests her attempt at self-control over this “incorrect” emotion (based on the discipline with which she has been nurtured as a good student). She talks with her friend about her own feelings towards Lan Bo, discussing what love is and whether she is really in love. Composing a love letter to Lan Bo becomes her way of uttering her love directly. She extracts sentences from a poem to convey her adoration of him, which is revealed to the audience by her voice-over. All these means of expression are not interrupted by the external narrator that functions through the camera movement; instead, the character fully commands the initiative of the narration.

Wang Jia’s mother is very strict towards her daughter and expects Wang Jia to concentrate solely on her studies. The conflict between the mother and the daughter is intensified after the exposition of the daughter’s affection for Lao Bo. But the film also inserts an incident that relates to the sexuality of middle-aged women, ridiculing their attempts to prevent their children from getting to know about love. One day Wang Jia’s mother and a friend of her mother are at home, chatting about things related to marriage. They make jokes and agree that children should be kept away from learning about sexual things. During their conversation her mother’s friend says, “I do admire you [her mother] for marrying a sailor who often leaves home for
They burst into laughter, feeling no worries because they believe that Wang Jia is not at home. But she suddenly comes out from the toilet, leaving the two women looking at each other in embarrassment. Their rigid attitude foreshadows the failure of Wang Jia’s attempt to communicate with her mother about her secret affection and her frustration with her mother’s surveillance and restrictions on her freedom of movement.

The second part of the film is called “Anxiety.” The protagonist is no longer Wang Jia but her father who has returned home for a holiday. Getting the bad news of his daughter’s running away from home immediately after he returns, he goes out to different places in order to search for her. The style of this part is totally different from the romanticism of the first part; in contrast, it chiefly adopts a “traveling and interviewing” structure that is based on the father’s perspective. This structure dwells on a broader view of the social space and the confrontation of the father’s personal experiences with the modern conception of the 1980s. The two parts of A Missing High School Girl are constructed for comparison, with the micro personal narrative turning to the macro social perspective that is performed by the father. The image of him in this film is interesting because he is not placed in a traditional patriarchal position as is usually the case in socialist films. An “irresponsible” father who is often absent in the family life due to his busy work as a sailor, he exerts almost no influence upon the domestic and the social space, lacking discursive authority (the father in The Girl in Red is also powerless). His journey of searching for Wang Jia is full of frustrations and is in fact a re-experience of his past younger life.

The first part of the film shows that Wang Jia’s mother is an independent career
women as well as a caring mother who looks after Wang Jia at home, while the father is absent and is only mentioned few times, preparing for his presence later on. Although Wang Jia does not manifest a strong attachment to her father, the object of her secret love is a man who is older than her. Even the person who appears in her dream in the opening part is a man who is obviously more mature than teenagers. But the presence of her father is not an autonomous power that solves the problems in his family. His journey in search of his daughter is in vain.

When Shi Shujun affirmed the understandability of young love she was also aware of her identity as a mother who had an assumed responsibility, as she explained, “I chose ‘Anxiety’ as subtitle for the second part, which is actually a reflection of my own anxiety about this problem (young love).”26 The image of Wang Jia’s father, to a great extent, becomes the projection and reflection of Shi Shujun’s own anxiety and introspection. The journey helps him to understand the younger generation better through his interaction with all sorts of people along the way. The conflict between sense and sensibility in which the director herself is stuck is alleviated through the father’s recollection of his own past when he was in love with a girl. The words of his high school teacher (a woman’s voice-over is articulated along with the flashback) convey the attitude of the director, but are nevertheless a clichéd indoctrination: “As your [referring to Wang Jia’s father] teacher I cherish your affection, but you are too young to understand love. Bury the seed of love in your heart, and it will send forth a delicate fragrance thereby reminding you of the

power of rationality … If you truly like her, you should restrain yourself … And
don’t disturb her at least now (82’25’’- 83’06’’).” Although these didactic words are
too weak to mediate the confliction between the two identities the director bears and
fail to provide an effective “solution” to “young love,” the implied message is to
legitimate sexual arousal as a normal phenomenon that should be understood.

The two parts of the film form a dialogue of the director’s conflicting identities,
between which she attempted to make a balance. The two major perspectives that the
narrators embody represent the director’s two personalities (including the external
narrator and the character-narrator). The perspective of the narrator in the first part
often slips to the character, that is, the narration is based on Wang Jia’s point of view.
This enables the audience to identify with what she sees and perceives under the
specific situation she confronts. In the second part, however, the father’s perspective
introduces a broader view of the social environment, showing an adult’s surprise and
misunderstanding of the world. The father is a sailor who spends much time on the
sea without close contact with society. He is the chief mate responsible for steering a
ship, but is not able to control the problems within the family and the social trends
with their rapid development. In other words, the father is no longer an authoritative
figure that dominates, but one who feels powerless facing the new atmosphere and
situation that are changing too fast for him.

3.3.3 A Didactic Ending

The father’s confusion also illustrates the situation that the parents encountered at the
time when they still stuck to the old and traditional ways of thinking about their
children’s education. As discussed before, the father is the incarnation of the director’s concept, which shows the conservative moral sense and anxiety about being incapable of dealing with young love in a proper way. Shi Shujun herself acknowledged that she just raised the question on the screen without providing a solution.27 The conventional happy ending of a family’s reunion after Wang Jia’s return automatically precludes further exploration. What Wang Jia concludes from the whole event is that she still embraces her dream of exploring at sea (which was indicated in the beginning of the film when she was sailing on the grasslands) but barely remembers Lan Bo with whom she once was deeply enchanted, as if this requited love “was a memory of her childhood” that is now far away from her. Unlike the discourse that emphasises self-restraint and self-supervision in matters of young love and adolescent sexuality, Shi Shujun aims to express their normality as part of human nature. But she also confirms the mainstream valuation of the “golden years” of adolescence for an individual’s educational and personal development. Wang Jia’s adolescent experience ends with her forgetting her young love and pursuing her dream of being a marine biologist.

In the second part of the film, Wang Jia does not appear until the end after her father returns home, having failed to find her. The part of the plot relating to her mental development is not present and thus the cohesion of the narrative structure is affected. Shi Shujun was aware of the question that might be raised by many people on the form of the film but she insisted that its uniqueness lay in an attempt to

27 Tan Qing, “Yuanta chengwei yige jingtanhai—Shi Shujun tan Shizong de nü zhongxuesheng” (Wish It Will Be An Exclamation Mark: Shi Shujun’s Talk on A Missing High School Girl), Dianying Pingjie (Film Review), no. 08(1986): 12.
produce a comprehensive picture of her views on young love and educational issues. The major concern of the director lies in the social responsibility she assumed for herself, which explains the unexpected shift from the private space to the social space within which the film touches on more complicated social problems. But her exploration of adolescent sexuality stops after scratching the surface. In spite of the director’s recourse to a balanced view, she was widely criticised for a romantic representation of young love on the screen that could lure more students to step off-limits in terms of premature sexuality.

In the 1980s, some female directors displayed unprecedented courage in presenting alternative perspectives that contributed new ways of developing the multiplicity of Chinese cinema, yet their works have not received much attention from film critics and scholars at home and abroad. The reasons for this ignorance mainly pertain to two aspects: one is that their voice was repressed due to their social position as part of a marginalised gender group; the other is that their works are lacking in aesthetic and filmic breakthroughs. The two-part structure in *A Missing High School Girl* is indeed very unusual in Chinese cinema, which makes it more like a TV series that focuses on different but related events through showing separate points of view. However, the shift of the point of view is abruptly made in this division, which jeopardises the integrity of the film as an artwork that should differ from TV programmes.

The film’s structure nevertheless works as an effective expression of the double personalities that Shi Shujun possessed as woman and mother. In both of these two parts, the camera as the external narrator often identifies with the perspectives of these two roles. But obviously the ending of the film emphasises the educational and
social effects. Shi Shujun’s exploration of young love had to come to terms with the film censorship at the time as she was working at the Shanghai Film Studio, one of the major film studios in China. To a certain extent, A Missing High School Girl is groundbreaking as the first film on adolescent love and sexuality in China. However, the film is still restricted to a conventional didactic function.

The second part that Shi Shujun envisaged as a balance to provide a view on the generation gap touches on many issues that move away from the problems addressed in the first part. The film concludes that young love may be forgotten while Wang Jia’s dream of being a biologist is preserved as something of essential value. The father as the spokesman of the director declares in the opening of the second part that China is different from the Western world as it is a socialist country and not everything should be changed in its modernisation. This statement resonated with the critical discourse at that time on the dangers of being exposed to Western ideas, including sexual liberation. In the course of his search for his daughter, the father is changed as he witnesses many changes affecting society. However, his anxieties are automatically relieved when he returns home, knowing that his daughter has come back by herself. This result seems to dispel the necessity of the parent’s action towards children’s young love, since it is just a normal experience that many of them will undergo as time goes by. In consequence, the director demonstrates a very ambiguous and inconsistent narration in the film.

The ambiguity of this film comes from the conflict between the conservative social morality that was part of Chinese society and that the director internalised and her conscious attempt to insert nonconventional expression. A Missing High School Girl manifests something in common with the films made by other female directors
in the 1980s: for one thing, they tried to touch upon sensitive topics such as women’s sexuality and self-consciousness; however, they submitted to the mainstream discourse in order to be safely guarded under the studio system that was controlled by the central ideology. Ironically, the didactic ending of the film that calls for an attention to the moral education of “big children” in a way to make it suitable for their psychical development did not satisfy the adult audience, who still held opinions against the positive representation of adolescent love and sex which was dismissed as base and socially injurious to the individual.\(^{28}\)

Since the 1950s sexual desires of women had no place within a cinematic representation. The relaxation of control over the political atmosphere and the progression of social ideas in the 1980s reflected two sides of the sexual discourse. On the one hand, surveys about pre-marital sex conducted in Beijing in the mid-1980s to the early 1990s reflected the more open sexual attitude young people had. On the other hand, the common opinion also insisted that “pre-marital intercourse is morally and socially unacceptable.”\(^ {29}\)

### 3.4 Conclusion

*The Girl in Red* and *A Missing High School Girl* portray different aspects of the lives of teenage girls in terms of their sexuality and subjectivity. *The Girl in Red* emphasises a girl’s honesty and independent mind in thinking of issues in everyday

\(^{28}\) Geng, “Ci jinqu buyi dapó” (The Forbidden Zone Should not be Broken), 10.

life. The metaphor of her red blouse, with its conspicuous colour and style, captures her gendered subjectivity and suggests a modernised concept. The construction of her self-identity is mainly achieved through two means: clothing and body, both of which relate closely to gender awareness. Sexual matters are seldom mentioned directly but are alluded to via details such as talking about the male star’s handsome face and her parents’ marriage.

A Missing High School Girl has more to say on teenagers’ sexuality. Sex education in schools after 1985, as Evans commented, “primarily consisted of warning pupils (again with girls very much in mind) of the dangers of unrestrained sexual activity. Chastity for women, in fact, was defined as a socialist ideal.” A similar socialist ideal still dominated a post-socialist China where many people protested against Shi Shujun’s filming the sensitive topic of adolescent sex. A Missing High School Girl implied the convergence between the changing practice and the dominant discourse on love and sexuality.

It is not unjustified to conclude that female directors like Lu Xiaoya and Shi Shujun did not embrace the pursuit of an innovative film language in their filmmaking careers as Zhang Nuanxin did. However, the distinctive screen images of women they created play significant roles in our research on women’s representation in Chinese film history and paved the way for further exploration of women’s love and sexuality in films made in the late 1980s.

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Chapter Four Accommodating Female Desire in War Films

4.1 Introduction

From the late 1970s, films on war themes, which constituted one of the most important genres in Chinese cinema, were mainly made by veteran directors who had worked since the 1950s. Films such as *The Dadu River* (1980), *Nanchang Uprising* (*Nanchang qiyi*, dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1981), *Xi’an Incident* (*Xi’an shibian*, dir. Cheng Yin, 1981), and *The Bloody Battle of Taierzhuang* (*Xuezhan taierzhuang*, dir. Yang Guangyuan & Zhai Junjie, 1986) all serve the propagandist function of ensuring the authority of the Chinese Communist Party. Women play minor roles or are absolutely invisible. Films like *Little Flowers* (*Xiaohua*, dir. Zhang Zheng & Huang Jianzhong, 1979) and *The One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzha, 1983) are very different types of war films compared with those mentioned earlier. Whilst these two films place emphasis on individual emotions, the women characters do not occupy the centre of the narrative perspective.

Hu Mei and Liu Miaomiao, two female directors, approached war-themed films with more private points of view. Hu Mei made two films about war in the 1980s, *Army Nurse* (1985) and *Far From the War* (*Yuanli zhanzheng de niandai*, 1987), both of which focus on the inner world of characters with regard to their memories of love experience. *Army Nurse* brings forward a love tragedy of a woman serving in the army while *Far From the War* centres on a lonely veteran soldier who immersed himself in the unfading memories of love during the war. Liu Miaomiao, the youngest Fifth Generation director, began her career in her early twenties. After successfully finishing her first film, *Those on Voyage* (*Yuanyang yishi*, 1986), which
is about a bunch of sailors who have their own stories of love, kinship and friendship, she embarked on her second film, *Women on the Long March* (*Mati shengsui*, 1987). This may be the first Chinese film to focus on the life experience of a group of women soldiers who plod through the marshy grasslands of western China during the Long March (1935-1937), when the Communists abandoned their base camp in southeast China to avoid the Nationalists. Hu Mei and Liu Miaomiao share the same concern for women’s issues and both chose to make films (*Army Nurse* and *Women on the Long March*) based on novels in which strong gender sensitivities are present.

I consider these two films to be examples of an alternative narration of a heroic narrative which is usually told from male perspectives. Focusing on the female soldiers’ sexuality, this chapter will show how the films no longer position women as either powerless victims or asexualised soldiers, and how the directors were able to find room for female desire in films made under the system of state censorship. Those aspects will be examined mainly on the basis of narratological studies of narrative voice, together with analysis of the directors’ thematic choices.

### 4.2 *Army Nurse: A Self-exile*

““The time she lives in, her age, and her experiences are all very similar to my own. I was interested in her habit of constantly turning things over in her mind.””

Hu Mei

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4.2.1 *Army Nurse* as an Epitome

The first film of Hu Mei, one of the most famous Chinese female directors, *Army Nurse* neatly encapsulates the situation of Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s: a cinema of negotiation. Historically, *Army Nurse* was situated in the genre of “Scar Literature” that emerged in the late 1970s, portraying the tragic experience of the Cultural Revolution, while reflecting female directors’ initiative in widening thematic concerns about women and developing a film language to visualise women’s experiences. At the same time, the film reveals the kind of compromises with state censorship and film culture that exerted an influence on filmmaking. In other words, *Army Nurse* manifests both on-screen and off-screen interplay between ideological repression by the state apparatus and impulses toward self-liberation.

Socialist films, to a great extent, were constructed on an ideological mechanism that was devoid of an individual point of view. In place of desiring gaze was the collective point of view directed by ideological authority. The gradual acceptance of individual desire was reflected on screen of the 1980s. Hu Mei’s sensitivities to female desire and female subjectivity are greater than those evident in many of the other films centred around women characters.

*Army Nurse* portrays a woman protagonist, Qiao Xiaoyu, who was sent to the army hospital by her father to learn to be a nurse at a very young age. The hospital in the mountain area is a place where many young girls like her live and work. She meets a male patient (who is a soldier) there and has a crush on him. Because of the army discipline the unspoken passion is buried in their hearts. Xiaoyu misses the chance to remain in contact with this man after he leaves the hospital. She works
very hard subsequently and becomes a model head nurse. She refuses to marry a man who is introduced by a friend and is approved by the leader of the Party, thereby losing the opportunity to work in the city. In the end she decides to go back to the hospital in the mountains and serve the people there.

Ding Xiaoqi, the scriptwriter of *Army Nurse* and also the author of *Maidenhome* (the novella on which the film is based), recalled, “In making the film, we could return to the intentions of the original story: the effect of being in the military for a long stretch and the oppression of sexuality in the military. We could only put in a little bit of that, of course. We didn’t dare deal with it too directly.”\(^2\) Censorship frustrated both Ding Xiaoqi and Hu Mei. Originally, Hu Mei planned to emphasise Xiaoyu’s love stories with three men at different stages in her life. But the film finally was made to concentrate on two episodes of the love story. Moreover, the overall story-telling seems to convey a clichéd message about a woman’s devotion to public affairs through serving people in a remote area, which is inconsistent with the individual perspective embedded.

In spite of its undistinguished plot, the unassuming private discourse on women’s desire marks *Army Nurse* as an important film made by a female director of the time. The possibility of inserting sexuality into the mainstream film requires a subtle control over the narration under the close scrutiny of the PLA August First Film Studio. As Tian Zhuangzhuang said in an interview: “August First is far more conservative than most studios, and their emphasis is on the revolution, Yan’an, the

Red Army, and all….”³ It is nothing other than the restriction of cinematic presentation that creates the “punctum” in Army Nurse that was rarely seen in Chinese cinema of the 1980s.⁴ Understandably, the gendered sensitivity in Army Nurse is masked by a conformity with the political ideology of the time; however, the understated narration ironically betrays the state ideology that always shades individual expression.

### 4.2.2 Digressive Voice-over Narration

The use of flashbacks with voice-over narration was not new in Chinese films, though it does typify Chinese woman’s cinema in the 1980s with its possibility of accommodating female consciousness. Zhang Nuanxin’s Sacrificed Youth (1985) is a good example of adopting a woman’s voice-over to string the retrospective narration together. The similar extensive use of flashback and voice-over in Army Nurse constitutes not only an essential narrative structure, but also the anxious expression of female desire. Xiaoyu’s inner self is articulated through a personal voice that is often in conflict or disjunction with the collective disciplines in the public space (in this film it chiefly refers to the hospital). Yet this personal female voice moves in and

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³ Hu Mei, interview by George S. Sensel, Chinese Film, 155.

⁴ Roland Barthes introduces the twin concepts of studium and punctum in his book Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Studium mainly refers to the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, while punctum denotes the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within the photograph. I use “punctum” metaphorically here in order to emphasise the subtle moments in Liu Miaomiao’s film that will arouse the sharp feeling towards the images of women which are so different from those seen in the Chinese mainstream war films. See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25.
out of the filmic narration, thereby lacking consistency.

*Army Nurse* has a very avant-garde beginning with a panning shot on patients and medical equipment against a pure white background. The voice-over is added on the sound track but articulates ambiguous words that do not form any semantic connection with the pictures. In an interview with Chris Berry, Hu Mei explained, “My original voice-over wasn’t very precise. It was scattered and fragmentary. She (Qiao Xiaoyu) might be doing one thing, but talking about something else.”

With regard to the unique way of using voice-over, Hu Mei expressed her attempt to reflect something that had been neglected in the representation of women: “I think women have one very important characteristic, and that is that they like talking to themselves, fantasizing and remembering a lot. Especially Chinese women.” Nevertheless, the censorship she confronted frustrated her plan to fully demonstrate this characteristic, because the officials could not understand the point of this digressive narrative with a voice that did not directly connect to the pictures shown on screen—the taste for a more direct style had been long ingrained in the bureaucratic censorship. Therefore, in the final version of this film, we can no longer find the inner monologue of Xiaoyu when she sees off the soldier she loves (which was included in the script): “What is a shadow? I really don’t understand. Sometimes I really want to grab it, but I can’t get hold of it at all. When I want to grab hold of it, it goes far away, and when I want to get rid of it, it insists on following me. What is

5 Berry, “Interview with Hu Mei,” 34.

6 Ibid.
it? Seems people are like that, too.”\(^7\) Hu Mei’s original intention was to insert these words into the film, and she said to Chris Berry: “I really like that.”\(^8\) This monologue echoes with Xiaoyu’s voice-over when she tries but fails to meet her potential husband at a railway station: “At the railway station, all are rushing about their own business. Could they still make it if they were late? Is everything in the world like this? I don’t know. But I want to pluck up my courage and try. Anyway, things should come to an end.”\(^9\) Luckily these words were not cut out by the censors. Still, the elimination of the foreshadowing monologue disrupts the coherence of her first-person narration. Because of the restrictions imposed by the ideological censorship, the director had little freedom when portraying a woman’s fantasising character.

E. Ann Kaplan pointed out that “Army Nurse manifests a new self-conscious split between an evident, but socially forbidden eroticism and romantic love and the subject’s explicit interpellation by the state.”\(^10\) This split is well illuminated in the voice and pictorial narration of the film. The speaking subject in Army Nurse is Xiaoyu who is both the protagonist and the narrator. Basically, her voice-over is in accord with the pictorial narrative that denotes her thoughts, ensuring the reliability of her first-person narration. But the uniqueness of this narration lies in its inconsistency of self-contradiction: the speaking subject is trapped within an instinctive sexual arousal and an inward censorship under the army discipline. The

\(^7\) Berry, “Interview with Hu Mei,” 34.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Cui, Women through the Lens, 203.

split voice from a split subject is produced by the conflicts of personal and public discourses which are mainly embedded in the public field (the hospital).

In the early part of this film, following scenes depicting her departure from Beijing to a backdrop of images of the Cultural Revolution, Xiaoyu’s voice-over introduces herself as a girl who had no self-awareness until she was brought to an examination room where someone measured her height and weight. The various sorts of physical details recorded for her enlistment into the army constitute what she knows about herself at the age of fifteen (a time when the Cultural Revolution was at its acme). As Ann Kaplan puts it, “Xiaoyu is caught up in these historical events without understanding what is going on. ‘Everything suddenly changed,’ she says in the flashback voice-over. History seizes hold of the heroine: History violently uproots her, confusing her; history is turmoil, violence, noise. Xiaoyu seems not to understand or be able to inset herself into what’s happening.”

The Cultural Revolution as the background is fleetingly presented with big-character posters hanging in the hall as young people with red armbands rush in and out. The sequence at the train station where Xiaoyu gets on a train to leave to be trained as a nurse epitomizes the chaotic situation at the time. Xiaoyu’s unawareness of her subjectivity and her submission to military education afterwards foreshadow her personal tragedy. She spends most of her life working and living in the army hospital which is located in a mountainous area. The temporal transition is indicated through the voice-over: “Time goes quickly, we, women soldiers, just like the birds in the mountains,

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grew up unwittingly in this familiar and warm place (15’30”).”

4.2.3 An Unfulfilled Desire

Female desire is accentuated in the sequence when Xiaoyu meets Ding Zhu, the man she loves at first sight. This is a turning point of her growth. Hu Mei’s representation of sexuality reveals the difficulty of visualising female desires under the ubiquitous censorship of military discipline.

Ding Zhu is an injured soldier for whom Xiaoyu distributes medicine. She mispronounces his name the first time they meet. She mispronounces his name the first time they meet. She is embarrassed when he corrects her, but their look at each other implies the beginning of a connection. Recalling the change of her life after Ding Zhu comes, Xiaoyu as a narrator says: “At that time, I was only a grown-up child. I hadn’t even thought about love. But he … he quietly walked in front of me.” Ding Zhu awakens the female desire that she had hardly noticed before. The strongest emotion is not conveyed through her voice-over, rather it is signified by silence. In a restricted pictorial way, the silent sequence in a pharmacy room with only her and Ding Zhu present underscores Xiaoyu’s strong emotion and desire. Her desire is graphically imaged in the scenes when she is helping to bandage Ding Zhu’s wound on his chest, in which, in E. Ann Kaplan’s words, her movement of “[t]he bandaging is eroticized to an almost unbearable degree.”

12 Kaplan, “Melodrama/Subjectivity/Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema,” 22.
In Zhang Nuanxin’s *Sacred Youth* (1985), Li Chun’s sexual consciousness is tentatively expressed by her encounters with two men in the Dai village; in contrast, Hu Mei tries to construct Xiaoyu’s subjectivity, in a way that was new for the time, through her frustrated but obvious desire for the injured soldier, Ding Zhu (who was supposed to be one of the people for her to serve, in accordance with Mao Zedong’s words “serve the people” which had become a Communist motto). Xiaoyu’s desire for him is first expressed through her gaze. She pays special attention to the ward in which Ding Zhu stays, looking for him every time she passes by without letting him know. When they come across each other in the hospital, Ding Zhu responds to her with seductive eyes. Her repressed desire bursts out at the moment she bandages Ding’s wound when they are alone in the pharmacy room. Owing to the censorship of sexuality in Chinese cinema, even at such a moment only a silent intimacy is
permitted—Xiaoyu rests her head on Ding Zhu’s shoulder when she finally fails to control herself. As Jerome Silbergeld commented, “Their physical encounter is so chaste and brief that it would scarcely qualify as a sexual encounter by today’s standard,” however, it becomes the punctum in a film that was under the restrictions of ideological discourse.\(^{13}\) Jerome Silbergeld also asserted that this moment of sexual arousal initiated by a woman “envisaged a whole culture that yearned for a personal affection after many years’ devaluation of individual connections.”\(^{14}\) As he said, the three-minute long sequence showing Xiaoyu and Dingzhu’s intimacy with bodily interaction “became one of the most emotionally charged moments in modern Chinese cinema.”\(^{15}\) I will give an extended analysis of this sequence in the following paragraphs.

When Ding Zhu goes to the pharmacy room to have his bandage changed, he unexpectedly meets Xiaoyu there. Instead of using voice-over, the director dramatises the representation of sexual arousal with other devices, such as a close-up of Xiaoyu’s eyes and her hand resting on Ding Zhu’s body. This is the only sequence in which Xiaoyu takes the initiative to express her uncontrollable desire for Ding Zhu. Ding Zhu’s body is presented in a shot that caters to Xiaoyu’s as well as the audience’s gaze. An establishing medium shot frames the two people with their backs to the camera—she is preparing a new bandage, while he is getting ready by taking off his clothes. Then the shot cuts to Xiaoyu who turns her head and casts a glance at


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Ding Zhu with a close-up of her eyes showing a mixture of surprise and longing. When she is unwrapping Ding Zhu’s bandage from his chest, Ding Zhu has his back to the camera, with only Xiaoyu’s face being shown. Her position as a nurse legitimises her gazing upon his body, and the movement of unwrapping naturalises the closeness between their bodies.

The scene unfolds in absolute silence. Not until Xiaoyu begins to rewrap his wound with new gauze is Ding Zhu’s face seen. The action of wrapping signals an erotic bond that ties Xiaoyu to Ding Zhu whose face betrays his nervousness as Xiaoyu carefully wraps the bandage. While these two people are silent, the sound of knocking is suddenly heard in the distance (an earlier shot has established that a man is mending a window nearby), which is allusively used by the director as a way of indicating their heartbeat. When the process of bandaging is almost complete, Xiaoyu’s movement of wrapping becomes slower and slower until the moment when she is totally overpowered by her intimacy with him. A piece of trumpet music is then added to accompany the close-up of her sweating face of unbridled passion. Then her hand hesitantly rests on Ding Zhu’s shoulder. Slowly Ding Zhu stands up and Xiaoyu leans on his shoulder as the camera moves to a close shot of Ding Zhu’s handsome body and Xiaoyu’s passionate face.

However, the pharmacy room is by no means a private space for this couple—it functions as part of a military institution. After a brief moment, the shot cuts to Ding Zhu’s face as he nervously reminds Xiaoyu to stay awake; at this point two men (one is a doctor and the other a patient) intrude into the space, which ends the erotic interaction. This three-minute sequence becomes the key scene in Army Nurse, illustrating the director’s original wish to represent a woman’s love and sexual
experience. The silence, the trumpet music and the shifts between close-up and two-shots compose a psychological montage that insistently expresses a woman’s internal passions and desires. However, the representation is prevented from going further. The director, just as her female protagonist on screen, has to restrain herself from transgressing censorship.
Hu Mei admitted that the film “isn’t what I originally wanted,” because she was forbidden to film a love story through a deliberately obscure cinematic narrative.\textsuperscript{16} The film that was released in 1987 was a result of Ding Xiaoqi’s repeatedly writing and rewriting her script and Hu Mei’s cutting and recutting so as to pass the

\textsuperscript{16} Berry, “Interview with Hu Mei,” 34.
censorship of the Studio officials. The sole sequence showing the characters’ intimacy disaccords with the surface narration about a woman’s devotion to her work. In this sequence, the gazing of Xiaoyu no longer projects to an emptiness that is devoid of personal desire as was the norm for socialist films. Ding Zhu’s sweating naked body is audaciously presented as a perceivable and tangible object. The brief moment when they are alone in this public space of the pharmacy room is the only time Xiaoyu breaks through her repression, though the intrusion of two men symbolically shatters the possibility of accommodating personal desire under the ubiquitous surveillance. According to E. Ann Kaplan, the director told her that “originally the scene had been much longer—and even more erotic—but the studio leadership insisted on its being cut.”

Compared with films made in the West in the 1980s or in today’s China in which graphic sexual images are commonplace, the erotic representation in this sequence is not visually provocative at all. However, taking the cinematic censorship and the historical context into consideration, the heavily restrained sexual allusions, the uneasiness of Xiaoyu and Ding Zhu’s behavior and facial expression and the claustrophobic setting betray the rigid disciplines of the army on sexuality, and also intensify the impossibility of Xiaoyu’s sexual desire and ridicule her final decision to devote herself to the demands of social responsibility (which is actually an outcome of her frustrated love).

The romance between Xiaoyu and Ding Zhu ends hastily after Ding Zhu leaves

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Kaplan, “Melodrama/Subjectivity/Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema,” 23.
hospital without bidding goodbye to her. When Xiaoyu learns that Ding Zhu has left ahead of schedule, she rushes to the ward and then to the bus stop in the hope of seeing him. The director uses fast cutting with close-ups of Xiaoyu’s face and feet and long shots of her whole body when she is running to look for him, with the music adding an atmosphere of anxiety to the tracking shot. The forest and hill on the way seem to impede her pursuit of Ding Zhu. What makes this sequence more remarkable is that following her approaching to the bus stop, the camera invites the audience to see from Xiaoyu’s point of view the road winding away with nobody there. It seems to suggest Ding Zhu’s absence and Xiaoyu’s failure to see him. But surprisingly Ding Zhu appears in the next shot—as if the director is playing a trick, with his eyes looking at Xiaoyu coming over to him. Their very brief dialogue is filmed in close-up and reverse close-up shots. Xiaoyu is the one who first breaks the silence by asking Ding Zhu if he really has to go. The shot cuts back to Ding Zhu who hesitantly mutters that “it is hard to explain.” Immediately the camera pulls back to give a long shot of the two people standing at a distance from the camera. The distance prevents the audience from knowing what Ding Zhu says to Xiaoyu. Then the camera moves close to Xiaoyu who murmurs, “I…we…” Immediately the shot transfers to her point of view, panning on the trees from the oblique hill. It stops on the image of the bus going away (with Ding Zhu sitting in it). Thereafter Xiaoyu is left with her longing gaze finding no response but dwelling on the empty bed in the ward where Ding Zhu once stayed.

4.2.4 From Being Oppressed to Being Repressive
The eternal loss of Xiaoyu’s object of desire and of the possibility of constructing her female subjectivity is caused by the pressure of military ideology. Ding Xiaoqi saw Xiaoyu’s personality as undergoing a continuous self-denial and a process of conversion of oppression into an internalised repression: “… after getting a letter from him, she flushes it away in panic before she even gets to read it properly. She’s not just afraid that someone will find out; she’s even afraid herself to see what is in it. I felt that was a crucial scene because it shows how Xiaoyu oppresses herself to the point where she throws one’s love down the toilet.”

Xiaoyu’s inner turmoil coincides with the double discourse of the cinematic narrative. In the latter half of Army Nurse the tension between the public discourse and the private discourse becomes more apparent as the contradiction between Xiaoyu’s submission to political ideology and allegiance to personal desire is intensified.

The filmic narration explicitly displays her authoritative image after she is promoted to be the head nurse; she seems to enjoy little happiness except for the time she spends maternally taking care of a boy patient. She meets a man called Tu Jianli who is introduced to her by a friend, but she can never experience the same feeling of love she once had for Ding Zhu. She fails to see Tu Jianli off at the train station, which signals the failure of their blind date. Later Commissar Lu talks with Xiaoyu, telling her about his positive opinion after he has checked Tu Jianli’s personal file and confirmed him to be a good comrade. Xiaoyu accepts Commissar Lu’s suggestion and prepares to marry Tu Jianli. Meanwhile, her inner loss and psychological imbalance betray her mask of a model worker. Things that have any

19 Berry, “Interview with Ding Xiaoqi,” 113.
trace of association with Ding Zhu bring to mind the love buried in her heart. The night before their wedding, Xiaoyu refuses Tu Jianli’s intimacy and makes her way back to the hospital in the mountain area.

The voice-over at the end of this film seems very abrupt and ambiguous, almost ridiculing the personal discourse that is linked to her inner desire: “I never thought it would end like this. After I gave a long time to thought, I suddenly saw myself clearly for the first time. Over the past fifteen years, I’ve lost a lot. But the value of life lies in the ceaseless contribution and sacrifice, doesn’t it? It seems that I saw the eyes of patients who are expecting me. Are they still waiting for that bird? Don’t worry, she will be back. No matter where she’s been to, she will definitely be back.”

Although for the most part the narrative is told from Xiaoyu’s perspective and through her voice-over, the constraints of her position are actually illustrated by this final confession. On the one hand, Xiaoyu has made a decision that follows her heart (she will not marry a man she does not love); on the other hand, the voice-over is not consistent with her personal discourse, especially about her love and desire for Ding Zhu, almost ironically overturning her self-identification and concealing the repressed female subjectivity: she finally realises that “the value of life lies in sacrifice and devotion,” instead of pursuing individual pleasure.

When Chris Berry queried the ambiguity of the ending, Hu Mei said, “Of course she (Xiaoyu) may have gone back because of her work, but that could hardly be the case.”

Hu Mei admitted that she did not have any alternative choice to make a

20 Berry, “Interview with Hu Mei,” 36.
“reasonable” ending. The conflict between the director’s personal discourse and the ideological discourse with which she has to compromise creates the duplicity of the “textual identity” of the film just like Xiaoyu’s split personality. According to Zhao Yiheng, a film can be considered as a signifying “text” with an identity that is independent of the director. The identity of the film is relevant to its director or interpreter (critics or audience) to a certain degree, but in most occasions it is produced by the social culture. The textual identity of Army Nurse reflects the director’s intention to shoot a film about a woman and her love experience, an intention embodied in the feminine point of view and narrative voice; however, as the name of the film studio suggests (PLA August First Film Studio), any film produced there should be about soldiers serving in the army. The director’s artistic exploration was tightly restricted by the film censorship which determined its main theme; the film had to show how “the value of life lies in the ceaseless contribution and sacrifice,” directly echoing the state ideology.

Hu Mei noted that “I felt I had a split personality … After I went to the Film Academy I read Freud and things like that. It all came as a big revelation to me.”

21 Ibid.
22 Zhao Yiheng, “Shenfen yu wenben, ziwu yu fuhao zuwo” (Identity and Textual Identity, Self and Semiotic Self), http://www.semiotics.net.cn/Articles_Show.asp?UserID=207&Arti_id=1075, accessed August 13, 2013. Zhao Yiheng reckons that any signifying text has its own identity as the way a person enjoys. Textual identity is related to sender and interpreter of the text but is also independent from the both. The signification of any text relies on its identity in different socio-cultural contexts therefore changeable. Zhao also moves further on talking about the gender identity of a text, which is also relevant to the cultural definition of gender.
24 Berry, “Interview with Hu Mei,” 36.
Hu Mei is by no means a feminist director though, as can easily be inferred by her later work that are mainly historical TV series: *Yongzheng Dynasty* (*Yongzheng wangchao*, 1999), *Hanwu Emperor* (*Hanwu dadi*, 2005), and *Qiao’s Grand Courtyard* (*Qiaojia dayuan*, 2006), etc. But at least in *Army Nurse*, she managed to insert a female consciousness that is conveyed through “a position where one can see the world from what is completely a woman’s angle.”25 Embracing no ambition to challenge authority, she never regards herself as a female director who especially cares about feminist perspectives in her own filmmaking: in an interview with E. Ann Kaplan, Hu Mei concluded that “her own and many other films dealing with the frustrations of heroines could be seen as a relatively safe way for Chinese directors to comment on the more general frustrations people endure under communism.”26 *Army Nurse* typically shows that Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s was trapped in a dilemma of submitting to sociopolitical ideology while struggling to insert an individual discourse. Its process of compromise to mainstream discourse resembles an on-going conversion of oppression into internalised repression.

### 4.3 Women on the Long March: Rediscovery of Lost Experience

“It is very strange; I become aware that there are no men in all three major films I made so far … this was determined by

25 Ibid.

my unconsciousness. After I lost my father at the age of nine, I can hardly feel the importance of men in my life.”

Liu Miaomiao

4.3.1 An Exploration of an Erased Memory

Liu Miaomiao, the youngest Fifth Generation director, went to the Beijing Film Academy at the age of sixteen. Although her work is rarely discussed, she is a female director whose practice of innovative film language went further than Zhang Nuanxin, Lu Xiaoya, Shi Shujun and Hu Mei. At the same time, her films take part in the major artistic pursuit of the Fifth Generation: the introspection of modern culture and the emphasis on composition as a dominant means of representation (the latter aspect did not play a significant part in many films made by female directors in the 1980s). *Women on the Long March* (1987) is Liu Miaomiao’s second feature film (her first, *Those on Voyage*, was made in 1985); apart from the loose plot, the experimental compositional style of the film is noteworthy. The shots linger on natural scenes and the unconventional juxtaposition of human figures and landscape within single frames is suggestive of the film style of the later 1980s. This film differs from others made by women that are either sentimental in their lamentation for the past or passionate in evoking a new political and social atmosphere. *Women on the Long March* instead examines a historical period in which women’s experiences are more likely to be erased—experiences that are intensely connected to

27 Yang, *Tamen de shengyin*, 252-3.
the national discourse, under which all other individualised expression is muffled to silence.

The Long March was inscribed in Chinese history as a great human epic which approved the will and courage of men and women soldiers of the Chinese Red Army. Women were a small part of the march, compared with the number of men. Out of a total 300,000 soldiers who participated in the Long March, only sixty women cadres were enrolled in the First, Second and Twenty-Fifth Front Army and around two thousand in the Fourth Front Army. Little is known even in China of the women soldiers who participated in the Long March, their stories having been obscured in the dust of history.

As with all films with historical themes, according to some critics, “generally, the political ideology is strongly imbued in the Long March films. Those with no revolutionary themes are unlikely to be filmed.”28 Indeed, the Long March films are usually highly stereotyped revolutionary narratives which are chiefly made for an educational and propaganda purpose. The March has been portrayed as a pilgrimage—the suffering is necessary in order to get the final victory that is promised by the Party. The major motivation of filming Women on the Long March, for Liu Miaomiao, who was only twenty-five years old at the time, was the sympathy she felt for and the inspiration she took from the women’s experience in this unprecedented retreat. The film, in the words of Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, hails “[t]he idealism of these women as well as their courage and endurance under

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cruel conditions …”

At the same time, heroism in war and the eulogy of a great human epic are diminished compared with other Long March films. The focus, instead, is placed on the “historically insignificant” experience of eight women soldiers—an episode which was easily ignored in mainstream narrative.

*Woman on the Long March* is not among the popular Chinese films of the 1980s, because like the avant-garde cinema of the Fifth Generation, it eschews the sort of conventional melodramatic devices exemplified in the films of the popular director Xie Jin. The spectator is denied many of the usual cinematic pleasures. Instead, the film stands out in two aspects: its unconventionality within the Long March film genre and the treatment of women’s experience as a theme. Yu Qian argued that this film made people feel the truthfulness of life during the Long March in a way that had never been seen on screen before.

Compared with the routinely idealised representation of the Army in Chinese cinema, Liu’s film is distinctive in setting, atmosphere, and characterisation. It is set in a period when the Red Army was in retreat—the Army had lost its battle. High revolutionary spirits and passionate optimism for victory give way to the desolation of defeat, the brutality of abandonment, despair and death during the March. The mutual hatred and jealousy among women soldiers are foregrounded, exposing the darkness of human nature, getting away from the typical Long March film.

Liu Miaomiao acknowledged in an interview that men in her films were

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30 Yu Qian, “Kan mati shengsui (View on Women on the Long March), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.08 (1988): 44.
mysteriously absent—an effect that was produced unconsciously.\({{\text{31}}\) This is also the case with *Women on the Long March*, which recounts a story of eight women soldiers who overcome difficulties as they struggle to catch up with the main Army during the Red Army’s third retreat from the clutches of Chiang Kai-shek. In this film, a male commander called Chen fleetingly registers as a desirable object of women. Chen becomes the object of fascination for two of those women but he is symbolically castrated afterwards—his legs are injured seriously and cut off. According to one woman who knew him before, he used to be a valiant hero who fought bravely and skillfully in the battle against the enemy, for which he was admired and desired by many women soldiers. His erotic encounter with one of the woman soldiers in this group is ambiguously presented and turns out to be nonsexual. He finally kills himself in a deserted camp built by the Red Army as a temporary clinic.

The eight women soldiers were actually rejected by the main Army (this was common in the Long March since women were physically weaker), though they never give up hope of catching up. It seems that in this film women are endowed with a transcendent power which enables them to overcome their physical limitations. This transcendent power, to a great extent, not only refers to a revolutionary ideal that is informed by the Communist Party, but attributes more to the esteem of individual life. However, a representation of the women as undefeatable superwomen is avoided in this film. Women are argumentative,

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envious, disillusioned, and some of them die during their passage through the prairie and mountain areas.

The narrative of war has been replaced by a concentration on human nature in the study of this small community of women, invalidating the conventional narrative that the Red Army was united against all obstacles. In spite of Liu Miaomiao’s statement that the March was a process during which these women gradually lost their femininity and therefore became men, I argue that although they are included into the masculine system of the army, they continue to embrace their femininity. Indeed, their goal is or has to be a collective ideal of serving the Army. The tension of this film is produced by the attempt to balance a narrative of the women’s personal experiences, sticking to a female consciousness, and the pursuit of the collective dream that is the presupposition of the Long March narrative. It is true that the Army soldiers are quite often eulogised in the war films for their enormous courage; it is difficult enough for a digressive narrative to find a voice, let alone for the experiences of a marginalised group of women to be recorded. *Women on the Long March* both confirms the greatness of the retreat and tries to uncover the female experience of women who devote themselves to the revolutionary ideal.

4.3.2 The “Antinarratable” in the War Film

**Sexuality on the Long March**

Usually, in Chinese films about revolutionary war, gender and sexuality are evaded throughout. But Liu Miaomiao’s film transgresses by addressing the “antinarratable”
narrative of women’s private everyday experiences. \(^{32}\) In the early part of the film, the
group leader Feng Guizhen warns other women to be careful when they have to
urinate in case men see them, and to bury or burn their sanitary pads if possible. But
inevitably, sexual encounters still happen. Two women soldiers (Shaozhi and Junfen)
fall in love with the male commander Chen. The early part of the film reveals that the
straw sandals of these eight women have worn out along the way to catch up with the
Army. Shaozhi gets a pair of new straw sandals from Commander Chen, which is
actually a love token from him. The film discreetly shows their encounter during the
night. Remaining silent, they tightly embrace each other all of a sudden. The shot
dwells on a close-up of Chen’s hand on Shaozhi’s back, followed by shots of the
landscape, denoting the passage of time to the next morning. The rest of women
soldiers who get up in the morning are surprised by what they see, as the film cuts to
a shot in which Commander Chen and Shaozhi are standing not very far from them,
holding each other. Then the camera moves closer to them: Chen asks for Shaozhi’s
name, and she has no reply.

Junfen is jealous of Shaozhi for winning Chen’s love, which subsequently sparks
a major conflict between the two women. Junfen is the most feminine figure of the
group, both in her appearance and her behaviour. She once sang for a living in the
street and danced in the army. She complains that the hardship of war makes women
unaware of their womanhood any more. Junfen envies Shaozhi because the latter

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\(^{32}\) Robyn Warhol defines “the antinarratable” as “what shouldn’t be told because of social convention,”
which “transgresses social laws or taboos, and for that reason remains unspoken.” See Robyn Warhol,
“Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film.” In A
Companion to Narrative Theory, ed. James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz (New York: Blackwell
Publishing Ltd., 2005), 229.
possesses what a “real woman” has: sexual contact with a man. It is immediately before Junfen’s death that she learns the truth from Shaozhi that all she and Chen did was to hug without further contact, and Chen does not even know her name. After her death in an accident when trying to get a dead horse as food, her team members find the braid she has kept throughout the March in memory of her past as a “real woman.”

Figure 4.7 Junfen (left) complains that only Shaozhi remembers her femininity because she has an affair with Commander Chen.

**Name as a Signifier for Self-identity and Singing as a Way of Self-expression**

Women’s names and experiences are easily obliterated from history. The calling of their names in this film, on the one hand, is an ideological interpellation that reminds them of their collective identity as Red Army soldiers; on the other hand, and more importantly, it highlights women’s effaced positions, illustrating their connection with both mass and individual discourse.
Hemmed in by the peril of the historical moment, their personal affection is trivial compared with the battle for survival in the harsh environment and the revolutionary ideal soldiers swore to die for. In other words, human existence is meaningful only when it serves the collective ideal rather than individual values. In Liu Miaomiao’s film, however, there is a sequence of shots that emphasises the significance of women’s names. After the death of two soldiers along the way, the rest of the women become a closely bonded group facing up to future challenge. Instead of uniting in an unnamed group, they hold a ceremony to inscribe their names in a collective memory. The proper name is given as the definite signifier for each woman as a self-affirmed individual who refuses obliteration from history. This affirmation takes place in a ritually solemn process during which each woman leaves a thumbprint on the paper (or cloth) with their names, underlining their self-identity as participants and witnesses in the historical narrative.

Shaozhi’s experience manifests the function of hailing the name both on the personal and historical levels. In the sequence of her romance with Commander Chen, she refuses to tell Chen her name even though she is in love with him, owing to her awareness of the situation they face on the March—the doomed separation (they belong to different divisions) and the unpredictable hardships or death ahead. She dies immediately before they finally rejoin the main Army. The scene of her death is shot in slow motion with a mysteriously sacred atmosphere. She sits in shadow, surrounded by several Tibetans riding on horses in a circle in the sunlight. These men leave afterwards. The original story gives the detail that these men lift her clothes off and find her too skinny—this is reason why they choose not to take her. But Liu Miaomiao intended to produce a more mysterious representation open to different
interparation. Shaozhi stands up slowly after they go away and begins to repeat her name. After a shout with all her strength she falls down on the grassland and dies. Her dying hallucination is represented in a montage of women soldiers marching in step and chanting, with arresting red decoration on their straw sandals. The red decoration metonymically signifies the endurance of female consciousness as a bold juxtaposition of personal and historical discourse. Shaozhi’s repetition of her name, on the one hand, can be regarded as a belated response to Commander Chen and an acknowledgment of her repressed emotion; on the other hand, it seems to reaffirm her connection to revolutionary ideals through its association with the flashback of women marching in step, full of militancy and revolutionary ardour. In contrast to the typical representation of a soldier shouting “Long Live the Communist Party,” so frequently seen in war films in China, Shaozhi’s response to her interpellation in army ideology not only confirms her position as a soldier, but also functions as an expression of individualism.

Figure 4.8. A group of Tibetan men leave Shaozhi alone.
Singing is also endowed with a double connotation. It both serves to encourage women in the face of hardship and gives voice to female desires. Military songs are usually based on folk song melodies and intended as a way for soldiers to combat suffering and release anxiety. The ritual of collective singing functions as an ideological interpellation that unifies soldiers in the military community. When Dajiao (big feet) suddenly becomes immobile as they are climbing the mountain, incapable of moving her numb feet, Feng Guizhen asks her to yell the military melody. Dajiao then bursts into song, and the miracle happens—her feet begin to move. Junfen is very good at singing since she became a singer at the age of thirteen. The songs she likes to sing, however, are not of the revolution—they are songs of love between men and women, a theme that is obviously incongruous with the criteria set up by the political ideology of the Red Army. As the most frivolous of this group of women, Junfen is not a soldier of strong will and thus she does not get along very well with some women comrades. An incident finally enhances the mutual understanding of the group. One night when they are eating by the fire, these women are touched by Junfen’s song and collaborate as a duet to follow her melody. Junfen seizes the chance to make fun of them, saying, “you can also sing ‘suan gezi’ (a kind of Shanxi local melody that is often about love affairs) after all, can’t you?” Junfen’s song triggers what women have repressed in the “pilgrimage:” a gender consciousness related to sexual love.

Junfen is derided by Dajiao for being too frivolous in the face of men. In the sequence of the women sitting together to have a group discussion, instead of discussing revolutionary ideals, as is usually shown in war films, they begin to talk
about their ideal husbands and recall their previous love affairs. Junfen’s narration of her early experience of engaging with a young man is sincerely touching. She recalls that this man was tall and nice, and her affection towards him is illuminated on her face against the dark surroundings. But he died after being conscripted by the KMT. Women remain silent after hearing this while the camera moves back from medium shot to long shot. This sequence portrays a moment when almost every woman is given the chance to express her views of marriage or love, a discourse that has hardly been possible in Long March films.

Junfen’s jealousy towards Shaozhi culminates in their confrontation in the forest towards the end of the film. Shaozhi is enraged by Junfen’s provocation and tells her the truth about her relationship with Commander Chen. What follows, however, is Junfen’s death in an accident as she and another younger girl are swept away in the act of trying to cross a river to get their hands on a dead horse for food. The incident is soberly presented, with a medium close-up shot of the dead horse and a lingering shot of the flowing water that brushes the dead body of the horse after the two girls are washed away. These shots are made not to serve a narrative function but to create a tragic atmosphere. Such kind of film language had rarely appeared in films made by female directors before, although it does correspond to the avant-garde style of the Fifth Generation. The white body of the horse looks so disturbing in the picture because of its bleak colour and the sense of death generated by the contrast with the flowing water. Junfen’s death ends the tension between her and Shaozhi, as well as between her and Dajiao: Shaozhi is her rival in love and Dajiao is the person who despises her femininity. Junfen’s sacrifice is not to justify her loyalty to the revolution, but to reflect her kind heart: she is not selfish and timid, as her comrades
mistakenly thought. Afterwards, the narrative about female consciousness is suspended, since the rest of the film centres mainly on the group’s successful struggle to catch up with the main Army.

4.3.3 Implicit Criticism on Nationalism

The history of the Long March includes not only the cruelties of the natural environment that soldiers had to fight against, but also the tragedies of inhuman abandonment of the weak. In Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles’ book, there is a story of a woman soldier who suffered a lot in her life after falling behind. She was captured by Moslem soldiers and was assigned as a concubine to the commander of a regiment of engineers. She managed to escape but was denied acceptance as a party member again when she finally found a Communist office. She married several times in order to survive—in those years the only way to live was to marry a man. She kept pursuing re-admission to the party and the restoration of her party membership credentials. In spite of the difficulties she experienced, she felt no regrets and replied in an interview: “No, I have no regrets. It is the greatest honor of my life that I was able to go on the Long March. I am very content just to have been part of it.”33 The fear of being excluded by the dominant group is not unusual for people of the Long March. Similarly, in Women on the Long March, women soldiers are sustained by their belief in the Party in the face of tough conditions. Silver dollars are left for these eight women soldiers in a habitation where the Party leader arranges for them

33 Lee and Wiles, Women of the Long March, 217.
to stay. The group leader Feng Guizhen decides to cover up the fact that they were abandoned by the Army and encourages them to catch up with the Army instead.

This film exposes the bitter experience of soldiers who are left behind by the main Army during the Long March, which accords with what Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles describe in their book:

The weak, the sick and the wounded, be they men or women, knew that if they fell behind on this forced march they would be captured, tortured to extract any strategic information and then executed....While the army assigned searchers to round up stragglers at the end of each day’s march, those who were too exhausted or weak to go on were taken to the nearest human habitation, given some food, a rifle and ammunition and eight silver dollars. Everybody was clear-eyed about this: the army simply could not afford to be slowed down.  

The lives of women after being abandoned could be extremely miserable. Injured or weak soldiers would probably be taken care of by local people (usually minority people), but most of them died or were enslaved by serf-owners who were hostile to the Communist Party. In this film, scenes of the slave trade market are presented. Men are tied to poles, being demonstrated to the Tibetan slave owners. It is not easy to tell whether these men are Army soldiers or not, because they are in rags with scars and bruises exposed. Being selected as livestock, these men suffer humiliation as exchangeable goods. There is no presence of female slaves though, leaving space for imagining the women’s end if they become enslaved.

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Figure 4.9. A man who is to be sold at the market.

Nationalism is always powerful and attractive to women who pursue a sense of belongingness as a marginalised group. The feeling of belongingness was manipulated under Communist ideology: the members of the community should be united by one revolutionary ideal, that is, to save people from misery and to live a happy life in a communist society. Meanwhile, this belongingness was developed in a systematic and naturalised way to make women feel proud of and grateful for being included. This explains why Junfen appears as a dissident in this group, as the one who has a clear sense of individuality, complaining in a woman’s position: “what do we lack compared with men? Why do they abandon us?”

The belongingness that stems from the national discourse exerts a powerful influence on these women soldiers. Feng Guizhen says, “If we fall behind the Party organisation, life becomes worthless. If we catch up, we can help carry goods and injured soldiers, and thus we can still be useful!” Even if they become aware that they have been abandoned, they will not feel disillusioned but instead will struggle to rejoin the organisation. The Army soldiers regard Party membership as their reason for being, and it is out of the need to be of use to the Party that Feng Guizhen
prevents women soldiers from risking their own lives by coming to the rescue of several other women who are captured by a group of vaguely discernable men (probably KMT soldiers). As this incident demonstrates, the Party must serve the revolutionary ideal at all costs, including the loss of weak or imperilled individuals.

Feng Guizhen is the rational representative of the Party authority. Based on her knowledge as a veteran, she is the one who makes the “politically correct” decision whenever they come across difficulties. In contrast with Feng Guizhen’s rationality, other women soldiers appear more emotional in their reaction to their situation. Their self-awareness is based on the consensus that they are first soldiers and then women, although this recognition sometimes conflicts with the impetuous display of their gender consciousness. This is well illustrated by their opposition to Feng Guizhen’s turning away from saving the women who are about to be raped by the enemy. Dajiao angrily criticises Feng Guizhen: “You are a woman, too. We just stood by. Can you imagine the fate of those comrades?” Then she proposes to dismiss Feng Guizhen from her leadership position. Such a rebellious reaction could never be shown on the Chinese screen of the previous decades: how dare a soldier disobey her leader in the Army? It would be an anti-Party crime.

4.3.4 The Significance of an Alternative Point of View

Liu Miaomiao’s Women on the Long March exemplifies an individualised expression, in contrast to the mainstream war film that obliterates the visions of women’s experiences in the historical discourse. Focusing on a special episode that had been obscured by the heroic narrative of the Long March, the director embarked
on the rediscovery of a realm of personal history that had been consistently ignored and imperceptible in Chinese filmic tradition. It was only in the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution, that such a viewpoint on history became permissible.

At the same time, as Women on the Long March shows, the compromise with “political correctness” requires individual expression to subordinate itself to collectivistic nationalism. This strategy, even if out of an unconscious choice, is an example of what Mary Layoun has described as a kind of “narrative performance”: “[p]articipation in and opposition to established and dominant narratives thus can be considered particular strategies of narrative performance based on both practical and theoretical competences.”35 In line with this theory, Liu Miaomiao borrowed a war film structure that inscribes a nationalist appeal (to emphasise the significance of the Long March and extol the bravery of the Red Army) but craftily accommodates a counter-discourse.

4.4 Conclusion

Except for Wang Ping, a veteran female director who made several well-known films about soldiers in the socialist period, very few young women tried their hand at making films with war themes. In the 1980s female directors adopted pragmatic approaches to widening the practice of manifesting women’s experience of sexuality and subjectivity that had been absent in or deliberately obliterated from the

mainstream narrative in the socialist cinema. As I have discussed in this chapter, Hu Mei and Liu Miaomiao’s unconventional ways of manipulating war-themed films show the possibilities of filmic innovation even under their restricted circumstances.

I conclude that their cinematic practice manifested a “Narrative performance.” This strategy has its expression not only in Liu Miaomiao’s film, but also in Hu Mei’s Army Nurse. The inconsistent voice-over narration of Qiao Xiaoyu in Army Nurse signifies a similar “narrative performance”: on the one hand, her first-person narration facilitates a self-expression, especially addressing her sexual encounter; on the other hand, this narration has to adjust itself to the established narrative of state ideology prescribed in a war-themed film. Liu Miaomiao touched on more controversial issues, including the abandonment of the soldiers, the slave trade in the Tibetan area, and women’s “trifles” related to sexual experience, which had previously been taboo in films about the Long March. Compared with films made before, both Army Nurse and Women on the Long March demonstrate more explicit expression of gender consciousness, especially the latter film, in which the expression is less subjected to repression.
Chapter Five Quest for More Self-aware Female Subjects

5.1 Introduction

Although it has not attracted as much critical attention as either *Yellow Earth* (1985) or *Red Sorghum* (1987), Huang Shuqin’s film *Woman, Demon, Human* (*Rengui qing*, 1987) is one of the most important Chinese films of the 1980s. Made during the Fifth Generation directors’ heyday in the late 1980s, its aesthetic value has been underestimated in Chinese film history. Before *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Huang Shuqin employed opera as an essential element in her film. Unlike *Farewell My Concubine*, an opulent and ambitious film, whose narrative structure is based on a triangular love relationship seen through different periods of Chinese history and in which opera mainly serves as visual spectacle, opera in *Woman, Demon, Human* is fully integrated into the surrounding narrative, providing new narrative information and contributing to the unfolding of the heroine’s personal history. Moreover, *Woman, Demon, Human* depicts opera in a cinematic manner rarely seen in Chinese cinema.

Acclaimed in 1993 by Dai Jinhua as the sole Chinese film that can be considered feminist, *Woman, Demon, Human* has generally been discussed by scholars from feminist perspectives. Indeed, the release of this film in 1987 sparked an enthusiastic discussion in Chinese film circles. Influential critics like Zhang Junxiang, Huang Shixian, Wang Zhaowen and Feng Mu were invited by the Chinese Film

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36 Dai, “‘Human, Woman, Demon’: a Woman’s Predicament,” 151.
Association and the National Film Bureau to watch the film and give a talk on it. However, instead of focusing on gender issues, their discussion pointed to the creative use of Zhong Kui’s image as a hero capable of beating all sorts of demons. The demons in their eyes symbolise the evil that impeded social progress in China. The critics who gave the film the “Golden Rooster Award” stated “Woman, Demon, Human” found a new perspective in refining the profound theme: ‘There are good people among ghosts and bad ghosts within human beings.’ To its credit, the film avoids the conventional patterns of representing political movements such as the Cultural Revolution. It fully demonstrates the spiritual world of people in multiple aspects, turning simple social critique into a profound moral critique.”

Shao Mujun was among the first critics who noticed the woman’s consciousness embedded in this film. Adopting Freudian psychoanalytic theory, he analysed Qiu Yun’s repression of her desire to be loved by men. Dai Jinhua, who saw the film from a feminist point of view, regarded it as a cinematic “retelling and a reenactment of the Hua Mulan story” that unveiled “the historical fate of modern women.”

Before accomplishing her first independently-directed film Long Live Youth, (Qingchun wansui, 1983), Huang Shuqin had been given the opportunity to be assistant director for Xie Jin, one of the most famed directors in China, on Oh, The Cradle (A, yaolan, 1979) and The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (1980). Because of

37 Liu, “Ren Gui Qing: cong ‘renxing biaoben’ dao ‘nüxing jingdian de chanshi zhilu’” (Woman, Demon, Human: Change of the Interpretation from a “Specimen of Humanity” to a “Classic of Women’s Film”), 154.

38 Ibid.

the credibility she had won by making successful films that were assigned to her by the Shanghai Film Studio, Huang Shuqin obtained a degree of freedom to shoot what she was personally interested in.

Of a younger generation than Huang Shuqin, Peng Xiaolian graduated from the Directing Department of the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s. In a sequence of events that was similar to the experience of Huang Shuqin, after her completion of the filming of *Me and My Classmates* (*Wohe wode tongxuemen*, 1986) gave her credibility as a director attached to the Shanghai Film Studio, Peng was able to fight for her next film, a story about three rural women. Compared with the first one, her second feature film, *Women’s Story* (*Nü ren de gushi*, 1988), is less known in China even though it was awarded prizes at Hawaii International Film Festival in the US (1988) and Créteil International Women’s Film Festival in France (1988). Peng Xiaolian was inspired by the intimate knowledge of rural women that she acquired when she spent nine years in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The film follows three rural women who step out from their village and domestic roles to pursue wealth and freedom by selling yarn in the city. These women are very different from the educated youth, such as Li Chun in *Sacrificed Youth*, who are immersed in a melancholic lamentation of the past after their experiences of being sent to the remote countryside. In Peng Xiaolian’s view, the nostalgic filmic narrative was far from the truth. She nevertheless articulated an unsentimental self-salvation and self-fulfillment in *Women’s Story*. The social context of the film, made

in the late 1980s when the Chinese economy was undergoing rapid commercialisation, is also different from that of *Sacrificed Youth*.

The women characters in *Woman, Demon, Human* and *Women’s Story* are more self-aware subjects, compared with the women who appeared in the films made in the early and middle 1980s. This chapter examines the distinct aesthetic elements adopted by Huang Shuqin in her representation of women’s dilemmas, and explores how, as the “bourgeois liberalism” was approaching its apex, women were less burdened by sexual repression, a process that can be seen in *Women’s Story*. In discussing *Woman, Demon, Human*, a rich film in relation to the quest for female identity, I will cover topics related to its aesthetic elements, such as the use of mirrors and the incorporation of opera, together with the dilemma of gender identification. In discussing *Women’s Story*, I will focus on the characterisation of women who embody a strong female agency.

### 5.2 *Woman, Demon, Human*: the Dilemma of Transgender Performance

“If a film is to be filmed with its own distinctive features, the director’s personality should be integrated into it. This must have something to do with the director’s gender, which bears close connection to the personality. If there is no “gender,” how could it possible to have real distinctive features?”

Huang Shuqin

41 Yang, *Tamen de shengyin*, 113.
*Woman, Demon Human* won several film awards at home and abroad. Just as the indifference that met Zhang Nuanxin’s provocative use of film language in *Sacrificed Youth* (1985) contrasted with the critically positive reception for Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth*, released the same year, *Woman, Demon, Human* was largely ignored by critics who were busy enthusing over the emergence of China’s biggest film talents of the Fifth Generation: in 1987 Chen Kaige released *King of the Children*, while Zhang Yimou went on to release his directorial debut *Red Sorghum*.

In diametrical contrast to Joan Riviere’s argument of “womanliness as a masquerade,” Qiu Yun, the protagonist in Huang Shuqin’s *Woman, Demon, Human*, performs a male role on the opera stage and masks her womanliness in order to keep a distance from gender prejudice.42 Her wish for masculinity is not motivated by any psychological notion of an intense sadism directed against her parents, but, rather, relates to the civilised violence imposed on her.43 The film portrays Qiu Yun as a famous opera actress, representing her personal experience from childhood to adulthood, trapped in a permanent state of bewilderment about her gender identification.

*Woman, Demon, Human* is a biopic of an outstanding opera actress, Pei Yanling, who is best known for her portrayal of male roles on the stage. Zhong Kui, one of her most successful roles, is a masculine spirit of a mythological demon hunter. Pei Yanling also stars in the film in the scenes when Qiu Yun (played by Xu Shouli) is performing in the role of Zhong Kui.


43 Ibid.
Cross-dressing in Chinese opera is age-old since the Yuan Dynasty, but it is more common for men to adopt female roles (dan). Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) is mentioned in this film because of his great success in playing female roles. Huang Shuqin said when she first read Pei Yanling’s story she felt its immediate difference with other stories that she was familiar with. What shocked her, she said, was the fact that “such a pretty and charming actress plays the rugged and grisly demon hunter Zhong Kui. I sensed that there was an unusual spiritual journey that was worth delving into.” In her performances as Zhong Kui, Qiu Yun challenges the conventions of opera much as Pei Yanling did in real life.

Regarding Woman, Demon, Human, Huang Shuqin articulated her concept in this way: “The surface of this film is about the actress’s personal experience from childhood to adulthood. She sees the world from a woman’s perspective, so I de-emphasise the historical background and story-telling plot so as to fully demonstrate her inner world and spiritual experience, and that’s the reason why I combine the two worlds of human and ghost.” It is obvious that the film avoids the representation of grand historical events, especially the Cultural Revolution. The narrative focus, I will argue, is on the traumatic experience that was specifically relevant to sexuality.

The story of Woman, Demon, Human is based largely on psychological themes. Qiu Yun, the heroine of this film, is raised by her stepfather and her mother, who are both members of a travelling opera company. She sees her mother having sex with a man in a haystack; shortly afterwards, her mother runs away with this man (who

44 Gu Zhengnan, “Fang Huang Shuqin tan ren gui qing” (An Interview with Huang Shuqin about Woman, Demon, Human), Dianying xinzuo (New Film), no. 02 (1988):63.

45 Ibid.
happens to be Qiu Yun’s biological father). Determined to develop her talent and succeed as an opera performer over the objections of her stepfather and despite the derisions and betrayals of those around her, Qiu Yun comes to the attention of a well-known actor, Zhang, who offers to train her. He comes to fall in love with his pupil, but abandons the relationship to avoid tainting her career with scandal (Zhang is married). In the last part of the film, now a successful actress in middle age, and unhappily married, Qiu Yun returns to her hometown on the eve of her departure for an overseas tour.

*Woman Demon Human* spans Qiu Yun’s career roughly from the late 1950s to the 1980s. The story is told through flashbacks to Qiu Yun’s childhood and early adulthood, interspersed with dream sequences in which Zhong Kui fights demons and dances to marry off his sister on an ethereal stage. The film adds considerable cinematographic artistry to the opera, creating a powerful and visually stunning interaction of drama performance and filmic narrative. On one level, *Woman, Demon, Human* is a very typical psychoanalytic drama about a girl’s bond with her family which affects her all through her life, employing such elements as mirrors, cross-dressing, the absence of the father, the image of an unreliable husband, etc. On another level, which has been neglected in discussions of the film, the film is a cinematic representation of operatic performance.

### 5.2.1 Qiu Yun in the Mirrors

At the beginning of each chapter in Qiu Yun’s life, the film shows the reflection in the mirror of two self-images, one a mask (that of Zhong Kui or the female mask of a
Dan), the other her own face. The film begins with a shot of three bowls of white, black and red paint, followed by two opera masks of a male and a female figure. Then against a dark background a woman comes into the frame, looking at herself in a mirror. She then applies makeup, holding a small mirror in one hand. A close-up shot shows her face gradually changing as she paints her face with the colors that appeared at the very beginning of the film. After she finishes dressing up in Zhong Kui’s opera costume, she stands in front of a confusing array of mirrors. Surrounded by darkness, the mirrors reflect her in full make-up as the male Zhong Kui. Examining herself in the mirror, she notices the image of a woman behind her: it is Qiu Yun herself without make-up. As the camera pans horizontally, Zhong Kui and the woman are refracted into superimposed images. The mutual gazing of these two selves of the same person (Qiu Yun) foreshadows the theme of this film: an inquiry into the construction of identity and an inevitable personality split.

Figure 5.1. The superimposed images of Qiu Yun with the drama costume and without.
Later in the film, the juxtaposition of Qiu Yun’s stage performance as Zhong Kui and her off-stage life experience corresponds with this opening sequence of the two images divided into different spaces (the mirror and real worlds). For Huang Shuqin, the mirror is both a narrative device, propelling the forward motion of the story, and an image that evokes the fragmentation and reconstitution of the heroine’s identity.

The following shot cuts to a little girl’s face in two mirrors and then pans to two boys holding up mirrors while the third boy is about to print a red spot on the girl’s forehead. This is a flashback to Qiu Yun’s childhood. In these two mirrors she sees no other images but a complete self, signifying that she is, at this time, enjoying a happy childhood, loved by friends and parents.

Another important use of the mirror happens when a grown-up Qiu Yun dresses herself in a female opera costume and appreciates her feminine beauty in a mirror. Trapped in the contradiction of her double gender identification, she tentatively changes to a female mask as a way to attract the man she loves, indicating her submission to a complete identification of a woman. Unlike the male masks she put on before, through looking at herself in a female mask in the mirror she confirms a recovery of the repressed femininity that is stimulated by a heterosexual desire for a man.

5.2.2 Double Layers of Narrative Structure and a Cinematic Representation of Opera

Apart from Zhang Nuanxin, who clearly declared a pioneering spirit in the modernisation of film language and practiced it in her filmmaking, almost no other
female directors have been credited with innovation in their filmic practice during the 1980s. Critics have paid attention to the critical theme and feminist significance of Huang Shuqin’s *Woman, Demon, Human* while largely avoiding discussion of Huang’s use of film language. I will argue that Zhang’s experimental representation of opera performance displays cinematic elements which create a fantasy world. This fantasy world vividly visualises the split personality of Qiu Yun—Zhong Kui playing on the ethereal stage of opera and Qiu Yun struggling in the world outside of opera. The double diegeses of opera performance and Qiu Yun’s life experience constitute double layers of narrative structure, interweaving opera elements into a realistic narrative.

Frustrated by her childhood experience, Qiu Yun consciously refuses to be an actress like her mother when she decides to play male roles in her opera career. She naively believes her choice to be a man onstage will protect her from repeating her mother’s tragedy. In spite of her young age in her adolescence, Qiu Yun changes to a masculine look after practicing at performing male roles. She also behaves more mischievously compared with other girls of the same age. All these characteristics show her affinity with her onstage male roles. However, she never really gets confused about her gender identity as a female in life. The film deals with her conflicted selves by separating them into two spaces that are parallel with each other: the artist who appears as a strong demon-hunter on the eternal stage and the powerless woman who is envied and isolated by different kinds of “demons” around her.

Generally speaking, opera performance in Chinese cinema is not unusual, but it seldom becomes a narrative motivation and structure (except in the “opera film” as a
genre). In *Woman, Demon, Human*, however, the stage scenes of legendary Zhong Kui are inserted into the narrative construction, with Qiu Yun performing in opera makeup and costume, dancing or struggling with various opera demons. The cinematic representation of opera performance in *Woman, Demon, Human* appears as rhetorical fantasy sequences. The opera stories of “Zhong Kui Catches Demons” and “Zhong Kui Marries off His Sister” are integrated in the film as a narrative form.

Figure 5.2. The cinematic representation of the opera performance “Zhong Kui Marries off His Sister” (Starring Pei Yanling).

Instead of filming a stage performance and inserting it into the diegesis, Huang Shuqin transfers theatrical performance to an unreal space by employing cinematic methods. The stage setting is removed and substituted with studio scenes of a black background (which was created by using black velvet cloth), producing a hellish atmosphere. This device enables a transition from theatrical performance to cinematic representation that approaches Zhong Kui (the legendary character played
by Qiu Yun) from different angles, making these shots more like those in a fantasy film adopting an opera form. All the characters are dressed in opera costume, wearing heavy make-up. Huang emphasises characters’ exaggerated movements particularly through the combination of medium shots and close-ups. The interweaving of a cinematic representation of the opera world and a realistic portrayal of the actual world has created a complex dialectic between fantasy and reality in Qiu Yun’s life, opening up a space for exploring Qiu Yun’s repressed wish. Zhong Kui appears not only as an artistic image of Qiu Yun, but also the personality she possesses, which can only be possible in an unworldly space that is separate from the real world in which Qiu Yun lives.

What makes the opera performance more special is its complementary and explanatory function for Qiu Yun’s real life experience. Fantasy episodes of Zhong Kui’s appearance are inserted six times in the film, and on the last occasion he appears as an independent character meeting with Qiu Yun, crossing the boundary between fiction and reality. As Cui Shuqin has pointed out, the cinematic representation of the opera and the autobiographical narration of Pei Yanling (Qiu Yun in the film) create what Peter Wollen has described as “an interlocking and interweaving plurality of worlds.”

.Symbolically, the opera discourse provides an explanatory commentary on Qiu Yun’s life. The parallel narratives of the opera and the filmic narration both address Qiu Yun’s transition from childhood to adulthood along with her gender predicament. For example, in the first episode when Qiu Yun is humiliated by some boys and loses her fight with Erwa Ge, the shot cuts to a scene

\[\text{Cui, Women Through the Lens, 222.}\]
from an opera in which Zhong Kui is fighting with demons. The fantasy scenario gets free from the one-dimensional presentation of theatrical performance, with the special lenses and blue smoke used for the purpose of creating a mysterious environment.

This juxtaposition of two narratives implies at least two layers of meaning: one is relevant to an imaginary revenge for little Qiu Yun’s suffering from the evil which surrounds her; on the other hand, it betokens a future that Qiu Yun will face—a struggle with the ubiquitous “demons” in her life. A close-up shot shows Zhong Kui’s face after he beats all the demons and prepares to go to marry off his sister. Then a montage returns us to the “real” world where Qiu Yun is going through her adolescence. The play “Zhong Kui Marries off His Sister” has already indicated the choice Qiu Yun will make in her later life—she will marry herself to the stage where she can play a man and therefore free herself from the gender trouble she will encounter in her life. However, the durability of this freedom may be questioned. In the section that follows, I will discuss how her transgender identity results in an impasse.

5.2.3 The Impasse of a Transgender Identity

Qiu Yun’s boy-like character since her adolescence has already caused trouble. If her declaration of being “nobody’s bride” in her childhood is childish, her determination not to play female roles onstage arises out of her conscious choice to overturn the prejudice she suffers from her gender, which is also her way of getting rid of the negative influence exerted by her mother while identifying with her stepfather’s
Playing male roles onstage is the first stage in the development of Qiu Yun’s self-consciousness. However, her life does not become better because of this choice. She maintains the awareness of female gender characteristics, which results in the crisis of gender identification she encounters afterwards. On the stage she is appraised as “more masculine than the male,” while off stage she is identified by people as a boy and humiliated in public after being pushed out of the ladies room. Partly because of her dress style as a boy with short hair and also because of her skillful performance of male roles in opera, nobody cares about her claim of being misunderstood, and abusive men even insist that she should take off her pants to identify her gender. Her desire to keep her gender identity as a woman and the attempt to challenge the transgender role as a man lead her to a predicament. Her denial of her femininity onstage and offstage (her behavior and her way of dressing in everyday life) leads to a crisis precipitated by her hidden desire for a man—her teacher called Zhang who works in the provincial opera troupe. Whereas the other girls in the troupe flaunt their femininity before Zhang, Qiu Yun remains inhibited and frustrated by her masculine costume.

The mirror is again employed by the director to reflect Qiu Yun’s beautiful face in female make-up when one day she stays alone in the dressing room and puts on a female opera mask. Zhang happens to see her and suggests that she has a great talent for playing male roles which will possibly make her as successful as Mei Lanfang. On the one hand, he obviously notices her feminine beauty, saying “You are really a beautiful girl,” while on the other hand he emphasises that her true beauty lies in her ability to perform male roles well. His words seem to guarantee for Qiu Yun the
possibility of differentiating her biological gender from the male roles she plays on the stage. However, the further development of their relationship is frustrated by Qiu Yun’s escape from her sexual encounter with Zhang and Zhang’s retreat from their love relationship.

Figure 5.3. Qiu Yun and Zhang meet in the dressing room.

One evening Zhang and Qiu Yun meet when Qiu Yun is practicing her Kung fu skills in the darkness surrounded by haystacks. Zhang expresses his love to Qiu Yun, confessing that he “cannot stop watching” her and coming close to her. Zhang is attracted certainly because he sees her as a woman rather than a homosexual object; her response to this love also affirms her identification with a female gender which is in opposition to her masquerade identity onstage. But their intimacy reminds her of the traumatic memory of her mother’s scandalous adultery. When Qiu Yun escapes from him, a tracking shot is used, just as in the scene when she fled from seeing her
mother’s sexual intercourse in the haystacks. Irony is produced through this repetition of the same cinematic device, the same action (Qiu Yun’s escaping), and a similar environment. Qiu Yun insists on playing male roles on stage because of her intention to step out of her mother’s shadow; however, what she endeavours to avoid befalls her in a very similar way. Immediately, gossip about Zhang and her overwhelms her, in another repetition of her childhood sufferings. The rumour spreads not only among their compatriots but also reaches the leader. Under pressure, Zhang chooses to leave Qiu Yun because he does not want to ruin her career as a promising Opera actress. For Qiu Yun, the desire to gain a real sense of self (as a woman) surpasses the conscious choice to have a masquerade identity (as a male).

5.2.4 Repressing an Oppressed Identity

Qiu Yun’s masquerade as a man onstage in order to repress her female persona is ultimately rooted in her childhood experience. Like her stepfather, Qiu Yun is adept at playing Zhong Kui, a shared specialisation that stems in part from her close bond with her stepfather after her mother abandoned the family. The construction of Qiu Yun’s subjectivity intriguingly entangles her relationships with her mother, her stepfather and the biological father whose face has never been seen in the film. The mother-daughter bond is, however, the original base that determines Qiu Yun’s self-consciousness. Early in the film, escaping from little boys pursuing her in a game, Qiu Yun runs into a field of haystacks. A shot from Qiu Yun’s point of view shows two people having sexual intercourse in the hay. Her mother’s returning gaze assures Qiu Yun’s recognition of the mother, whose ignorance in spite of seeing Qiu Yun is a
shock both to Qiu Yun and the audience.

According to Nancy Chodorow, “women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care and for (at least) later female socialization…In particular, certain features of the mother-daughter relationship are internalized universally as basic elements of feminine ego structure (although not necessarily what we normally mean by ‘femininity’).”47 In Woman, Demon, Human, Qiu Yun’s ego structure is largely determined by her relationship with her mother, which leads to her conscious choice of evading her mother’s scandalous life (she feels ashamed for her mother’s behaviour). Nancy Chodorow also considers it probable that the mother’s continuing to feed and take care of a child will intensify the child’s primary identification with her.48 As the film shows at the start, Qiu Yun was very much attached to her mother; nevertheless, this attachment is broken after she witnesses her mother’s adulterous acts, which is especially shown in the scene when Qiu Yun refuses to take the food her mother gives her—the reaction of refusing to be fed indicates the renunciation of her identification with her mother.

The tragic connotation of her mother’s sexual scandal was defined by the social discrimination against any woman who wanted to pursue sexual pleasure. In socialist China, sexual immortality was one of the most commonly invoked crimes committed by unchaste women. Qiu Yun’s hatred towards her mother is rooted in two aspects: first, she cannot bear the blow of losing her mother sexually to another man (her stepfather is sexually impotent); she is also vexed by the burden she is forced to carry

48 Ibid.
as a daughter of an unchaste woman. Ironically, after she tries to identify with male roles so as to refuse the bond with her mother and to construct a gender identity by repressing her femininity, she commits the same “mistake” as her mother, though in a slightly different way. The sudden fear that overwhelms her at the moment when Zhang holds her face in his hands comes from her awareness of the similarity of her situation with her mother’s. She fails to realise, however, that both her mother and herself are victims of the violence that takes the form of sexual humiliation.

Her step of establishing a masquerade male identity on the stage is, in part, a way to identify with her stepfather. Zhong Kui is her stepfather’s favorite role in his career as an opera performer. Qiu Yun has watched her parents’ performance since she was a little child. The opera her parents frequently perform is “Zhong Kui Marries off His Sister,” with her stepfather playing Zhong Kui and her mother playing the sister. As this opera indicates, her stepfather and her mother actually have no sexual relationship. Qiu Yun’s biological father is the one she sees having sexual intercourse with her mother in the haystacks. In Qiu Yun’s heart, Zhong Kui as a fictional male character, though he is said to be very ugly, makes her feel safe and strong enough to struggle with various demons; his image is a projection of that of her stepfather. In contrast, her biological father appears as a mysterious image, with only the back of his head visible.

Toward the end of the film, Qiu Yun confesses to her female colleague that to play Zhong Kui on the stage is her life-long dream. The day before her performance that will take place in her home town, she has a conversation with her stepfather on the night of the banquet that he organises to welcome her back. With candle-lights flickering in the darkness, Qiu Yun suggests that her father play Zhong Kui and
marry her off on the stage. In some sense, for Qiu Yun, Zhong Kui is her imaginary father who will safely marry her off to a good man. Obviously, Qiu Yun’s understanding of Zhong Kui is different from her stepfather’s. His major interest (as Zhong Kui) is to beat all kinds of demons (which of course, has its symbolic meaning related to the real world signified, mainly referring to a hero fighting against evil people). Qiu Yun has her own interpretation of Zhong Kui as a good matchmaker who understands women and always thinks of finding them good husbands. This is what her stepfather cannot understand and can never manage to achieve. In the same scene, her nanny who delivered her as a baby runs into the frame and reveals to her that when she was about to be born her stepfather was actually expecting a boy. This unexpected truth banishes Qiu Yun’s last hope in men.

Figure 5.4. Qiu Yun and her father are at the banquet.

As the shot pans to the village stage on which Qiu Yun is going to give the performance the next day, the last cinematic representation of Zhong Kui in the opera
performance is inserted, with a candle-lit setting similar to that of the banquet. The boundary between opera space and story space is erased. A close-up of Qiu Yun’s face seems to suggest her expectation of something, which is followed by a shot of the corner of the stage. Zhong Kui then walks through the darkness and approaches Qiu Yun. This is the time when the two narrative plots/spaces overlap. Qiu Yun and Zhong Kui meet face to face: one is the impersonator, and the other is the persona that is projected with an ideal male ego. The film shows them scrutinising each other in shot/reverse-shot.

Figure 5.5. Qiu Yun meets Zhong Kui.

Qiu Yun: Who are you?
Zhong Kui: I’m you. You are me. We are always together. But you are a woman. You’re tired. You don’t need to cover it. I know you’re tired. I am an ugly ghost. It’s hard for men to play me. You’re a woman. It is even harder for you (96’00”-97’00”).
While Zhong Kui is talking, Qiu Yun remains silent, her smile and tearful eyes responding to Zhong Kui’s words. Only Zhong Kui understands the hardships she suffers as well as the gender identity she chooses by directly pointing out that she is a woman, although she plays male roles on the stage. After Qiu Yun buries her head, Zhong Kui suddenly moves out of her line of vision. Qiu Yun, in a hurry to find him, shouts: “I don’t mind the hardship. I am delighted to endure it. Come back! I wish you’d save me. Please don’t go (97’10’’)!” Zhong Kui’s face suddenly appears on the screen of the stage, saying: “There are too many demons in the world, and I am not able to beat them all. I’ve come to marry you off (98’09’’).” In a white coat Qiu Yun stands in the corner of the stage, responding to Zhong Kui: “You have married me to the stage (98’39’’).” Zhong Kui asks: “No regrets (98’43’’)?” Qiu Yun rushes to him and yells “No, no (98’44’’)! The face of Zhong Kui disappears from the screen, leaving the voice lingering: “Goodbye, goodbye (98’59’’).” Then the camera shifts to a long shot to demonstrate Qiu Yun’s solitude on the stage. The sudden shining of the stage lights suggests an end of the dialogue between her two personalities. This ending metaphorically expounds Qiu Yun’s real life predicament: being exposed under the lights, she is left alone on the stage, pacing back and forth with her problems unsolved. Zhong Kui as the opera character has actually been desexualised by Qiu Yun. What is special about him, compared with other men, are his non-human characteristics. Zhong Kui can be her father and her ideal ego but never a desired object. Taking account of his legendary image in the folk myth, as Haiyan Lee says, “He is god, demon and human all at once, embodying cosmic justice and freedom.”

But for Qiu Yun, he is most importantly portrayed as a “man” who shares his sympathy towards women.

![Image](You've married me to the stage)

Figure 5.6. Zhong Kui’s face appears on the screen of the stage.

The story jumps to the 1980s to reveal that Qiu Yun is suffering from an unhappy marriage. Her husband’s image is only fleetingly shown in a wedding photo hung on the wall. However, his power is effectively presented through the discourse that is conveyed in Qiu Yun’s dialogues with her son, her female colleague and a male stranger who comes to ask for the payment of her husband’s gambling debt. The husband is addicted to gambling and does not care about the family, but he has his say in Qiu Yun’s career, which is articulated in Qiu Yun’s complaint: “He thinks I am ugly when playing male roles, but he feels upset if I play female roles.” An article

*Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 245.
published in a journal (shown to her by the man who comes to ask her to pay up her husband’s debt) says that during the Cultural Revolution her husband did not abandon her, and he now helps her with her work, so he deserves part of her honour and money. The man asks for the debt by saying threateningly, “You don’t want this to get around.” Qiu Yun remains silent in front of the media that has the power to shape her public image.

As a woman who identifies with the conventional social roles of being a subservient wife and good mother, Qiu Yun embodies unremitting contradictions in her gender performance on and off the stage. She tells her colleague, “I have always wanted to play Zhong Kui. I have dreamed of it throughout my life…I want to play the best man in the world…. ” All through her life, she is disappointed about the reality she confronts but is unable to challenge it directly. The perpetual disparity between her real life experience and the mastery of male roles on the stage intensifies her crisis of gender identification.

It is not hard to conclude that the female protagonist in Woman, Demon, Human does not contain any characteristics that might be considered typical of a Western feminist film. Rather than going against the social conventions as an external force that darkens her life, Qiu Yun has actually internalised the traditional gender discipline. It can be further pointed out that the film is all about looking for a man, as can be seen from the fact that Qiu Yun devotes herself to her career not through positive choice, but because she fails to find the ideal husband. Qiu Yun’s mother is portrayed as a negative image that brings Qiu Yun traumatic memories because of her adultery and elopement. As Cui Shuqin has argued, the mother’s behavior is immoral and therefore decadent and disgraceful. But under the discourse of
modernity, the mother can be interpreted as a brave character who resists the traditional morality that fixed woman in a passive position.\footnote{Cui, Women through the Lens, 235.} As Qiu Yun clearly comments in the film, “women should marry good men (92’02’’);” her reason for playing Zhong Kui is that he understands women’s desire—to marry well. By the same token, her mother’s betrayal of her stepfather could possibly derive from her own pursuit of a good husband.

The importance of \textit{Woman, Demon, Human} lies in its innovative film language, an aspect that has barely been noted by critics. The film eschews the melodramatic representation of social tragedy popular in films of the 1980s and resonates with the innovations of the Fifth Generation directors at the time. It is through the employment of mirrors, the cinematic representation of opera performance and the parallel construction of opera and filmic narration that Qiu Yun’s experience of love, loss, and the entrapment of gender conventions and contradictions is artistically and effectively conveyed.

\textbf{5.2.5 Woman, Demon, Human vs. Farewell My Concubine}

Made after \textit{Woman, Demon, Human}, in the early 1990s, \textit{Farewell My Concubine}, which covers such topics as commercialisation, Orientalism and artistic ambition, is considered Chen Kaige’s masterpiece. The two films are directly comparable, since Qiu Yun as a female in \textit{Woman, Demon, Human} plays male roles while Cheng Dieyi, the male protagonist in \textit{Farewell My Concubine}, performs female roles on the opera
stage. However, the two films engage with the subject of gender identification in strikingly different ways. Cheng Dieyi is made to renounce his male identity after being castrated and raped symbolically, but hesitates in his identification as a woman despite his homosexual love for his “brother.” In contrast, Qiu Yun chooses to play male roles because of her determination to escape from a woman’s lowly social status. She has a full sense of her female identity, which is confirmed by her unfulfilled heterosexual love and her pursuit of a perfect male image (Zhong Kui). Nevertheless, the desexualisation of that image testifies to the repression that persisted in Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s.

Although a man playing female roles on the opera stage does not necessarily identify directly with a woman offstage, Chen Dieyi’s feminisation is enforced by multiple castrations. The castration is first indicated when his mother cuts off his supernumerary finger in order to get him accepted by the opera troupe. Although he is trained to play Dan, a female role in the troupe, he had a clear awareness of his gender as a male, as is repeatedly illustrated by his refusal to sing an opera lyric that requires him to admit a female gender. The overturning of the recognition of his masculine gender happens when Duan Xiaolou (Little Stone) forces a pipe (a symbolic penis) into his mouth so violently that Chen Dieyi’s mouth bleeds (which is emphasised in a close-up shot). Shocked by this violence inflicted by his close “brother,” Chen Dieyi is made to identify himself as “a beautiful young girl (nǚ jiao’ě).” He then experiences deflowering by a eunuch after performing the role of
Yu Ji for him. Hence, Chen Dieyi’s femininity is dependent on this forced identity and internalises this identity under the instruction of his troupe master, and symbolic father, that people should be faithful to the way they choose. The rest of Chen Dieyi’s life is tormented by his incapability of distinguishing his self-identity on and offstage.

Qiu Yun, however, chooses to play male roles on the stage because of her determination to circumvent a woman’s pathetic and disgraceful experience, as reflected in her mother’s scandal. If she plays male roles, chiefly Zhong Kui, it is not because of her acceptance of a male identity (whereas Cheng Dieyi identifies his gender with his onstage roles, primarily Yu Ji). Qiu Yun, unlike Cheng Dieyi, is capable of distinguishing her roles on and offstage. Her motivation for playing a male figure also stems from her desire for an ideal man who is nowhere to be found in real life. It is a very ambivalent situation she is involved in: on the one hand, she longs to escape from her mother’s fate owing to her fear of being exposed to public criticism for being unchaste (as a way of identifying the conventional moral value imposed on women); on the other hand, her onstage performance as Zhong Kui challenges the gender stereotype that constrained women, for Zhong Kui is regarded as a difficult role even for a male actor. Her dedication to the ideal of playing Zhong Kui, as is emphasised in the film, is the expression of a deep sympathy for women. Qiu Yun’s sexual identification is ultimately coherent with the heterosexual

51 Yu Ji (? - 202BC) was the concubine of Xiang Yu (232 – 202BC), who was the so-called “King of Western Chu.” Xiang Yu was defeated by Liu Bang 刘邦 (256 – 195BC) in the Chu-Han War that followed the end of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC). Yu Ji killed herself in order to free Xiang Yu from worrying about her and inspired him to make a last-ditch effort to fight against Liu Bang.
conception that a woman should marry a man, while Cheng Dieyi is constructed as a homosexual man who is positioned in a homophobic environment with an imposed gender identity. In comparison with *Woman, Demon, Human, Farewell My Concubine*, which embeds the story into a grand social context, underlines the irresistible historical violence forced upon the individuals.

However, both *Woman, Demon, Human* and *Farewell My Concubine* reveal a traditional heterosexual consciousness that hardly goes beyond the classical Chinese practice of gender-based roles. Cheng Dieyi is portrayed as a de-masculinised male and an unreal woman who does not have a primitive feminine power as strong as Qiuju (played by Gong Li) demonstrates in the film (which is emphasised in the scene in which Cheng Dieyi peeps at Qiuju and Duan Xiaolou enjoying sexual intercourse). As Jenny Kwok Wah Lau expounded, Cheng Dieyi was characterised as an unreal woman in a love triangle who competed with a real woman (Juxian); both of these two women devoted themselves to promoting the life (secular and spiritual) of the male (Duan Xiaolou) with their feminine power. The meaning of their life depends on his response; thus their suicide is understandable after they fail to win him. Qiu Yun in *Woman, Demon, Human*, in spite of her onstage male identity, is a woman who is perfectly aware of her female identity. She is attracted by the handsome opera trainer, who evokes her sexual consciousness and arouses her wish to abandon the masculine masquerade, whereas her rejection of her mother’s sexual scandal becomes a repressive power that impedes her relationship with this man.

5.2.6 Summary

Although Qiu Yun is disappointed by the men she has encountered throughout her life, her ideal is to marry a good man rather than to become a man. Dai Jinhua straightforwardly pointed out, “The film (Woman, Demon, Human) is neither a self-conscious pose from the margins nor an effort at resistance. It is a window that has been opened in a bricked-up wall; and a new kind of landscape through the opening can be glimpsed through the aperture—the landscape of women.”53 In spite of its conservative ideology, Woman, Demon, Human is meaningful in its reflection of women’s predicament entrapped in the culture that is so brutal to females who are “created by pain and deprivation, maintained by substitute satisfactions.”54

If Woman, Demon, Human details an inward looking into a woman’s life experience that reveals ambivalence in its juxtaposition of a conscious challenge to gender stereotype and a submission to traditional gender doctrine, a film made in the same period, Peng Xiaolian’s Women’s Story (1987) demonstrates a broader view on the changes in women’s lives in a Chinese society that was undergoing a substantial social, political and economic transformation. In terms of cinematic aesthetics, Woman, Demon, Human is part of a melodramatic tradition that characterises most mainstream Chinese films, but it manifests the director’s attempt to develop an innovative form of psychological representation, as had been previously shown in the

53 Dai, “‘Human, Woman, Demon’: a Woman’s Predicament,” 153-4.

54 Lau, ”'Farewell My Concubine,’” 24.
early work of the Fourth Generation director Yang Yanjin. *Women’s Story* is made in a realistic style, with the unconventional framing characteristic of the Fifth Generation. However, the film does not turn to a primitivist portrayal of rural China in the manner of the early films of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou.\(^{55}\)

**5.3 Women’s Story: Stepping out to Cities**

“I don’t believe the traditional weak image of Chinese women is what women are. I can’t stand that. I don’t think there’s anything beautiful about that at all. I like Americans. I like their enthusiasm and their can-do spirit. That’s what women are for me. Enthusiasm and warmth.”\(^{56}\)

Peng Xiaolian

**5.3.1 Women in Motion**

Since the late 1950s Chinese films had been made to address the new life of rural people, in a way to respond to the collectivisation movement in the countryside. The rural films made during the 1950s and early 1960s “may well indicate the direction of an emerging Chinese national cinema,” as Tang Xiaobing wrote.\(^{57}\) The films foregrounded peasants with a clear distinction between positive and negative roles in


\(^{56}\) Berry, “Interview with Peng Xiaolian,” 31.

dramatic conflicts, encoding didactic messages of the state ideology: Life was good in a socialist China. The plots of these films generally progressed toward a happy ending with “a strong emotional appeal and a triumphant vision of a socialist countryside.”58 *Li Shuangshuang* (dir. Lu Ren, 1962), which is centred on the eponymous female character, exemplifies the representation of the model peasant in the socialist China who enthusiastically devotes herself to the promotion of collectivism. She is portrayed as a cheerful wife and active commune member in the local village, apparently being fitted into the socialist cinematic discourse.

In the 1980s Chinese films about rural people underwent changes both in content and in style. These films no longer embraced the idealisation of rural life that had been reflected in the films in the 1960s, in which the ideology of socialist realism was entrenched. On the contrary, the remnants of backwardness were highlighted, and an appeal was made for transformation in keeping with the Zeitgeist of a postsocialist Chinese society. Ambivalent emotions were depicted in various forms: films such as *Voice from Hometown* (*Xiangyin*, dir. Hu Bingliu, 1983) reflected nostalgic sentiments for the loss of traditional values, while others were critical of the feudal vestiges that were dissonant with modernisation (*A Good Woman*, 1985) or revealed the increasing gap between the (conservative, poor) countryside and the (modern therefore rich) city (*Wild Mountain, Yeshan*, dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986).

Peng Xiaolian said, “After shooting my first film, and after writing all those things about women, I really wanted to make a film that you could tell right away

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58 Ibid.
was shot by a woman.” She ambitiously declared what her female predecessors avoided—an active engagement in the gendered construction of her film, which, apart from manifesting the further development of individual consciousness, also reflected the cultural and political atmosphere in the late 1980s when the “bourgeois liberalism” reached its summit in China. As to what “women’s cinema” meant for her, she responded, “It’s not just that it’s about women, and that it’s made by a woman; it also has to be obvious that the film was made by a woman. I think ‘woman’s cinema’ should obviously be an expression of a women’s psychology.” However, it is not easy to define what kind of film is obviously made by a woman. The concept of “women’s cinema” is likely to produce an ambiguous understanding. *Women’s Story* provides some clues for us to trace what Peng Xiaolian means by “an expression of a woman’s psychology.”

The three women have different reasons for leaving their village: Laizi Ma seeks to make money in order to improve the marriage prospects of her brothers-in-law; the daughter of a family of low status in the village, Xiaofeng hopes to prove her true worth; and Jin Xiang is fleeing an arranged marriage to a deaf man. This film shows some characteristics that would be difficult to imagine in a film made by a man on the same topic: the three women are neither beautiful nor made to be beautiful; the rural women gossip about their husbands (on sexual relationship) on the way to do farm work (which Peng Xiaolian regarded as something that could


60 Berry, “Interview with Peng Xiaolian,” 29.
hardly appear in a film made by a man), and so forth.\textsuperscript{61}

*Women’s Story* also stands out for a cinematic narration that distinguishes itself from other rural films: it ceases to be a typical rural film that focuses exclusively on the utopian depiction of rural life. The gap between countryside and city is portrayed with great pathos. The vestiges of backwardness in the village are emphasised in contrast with urban life, which bespeaks the emergence of a new genre of Chinese cinema that addresses the problems in the transitional period of urbanisation. The story is set in a village where old-fashioned discipline is still popular although it has inevitably been infiltrated by the commercial influence from the city. Rural women began to go out to make money, something that seems to surprise city people as well: the ticket seller on the bus laughs at them when she sees these three rural women going to do business in town. Coupled with its pathos, the film gets into details of their travels across China (from the north to the southwest), portraying the process of their transferring from the megacity of Beijing to Chongqing, which combines both rural and urban landscape. In Chongqing, they can afford to live more comfortably in an inn rather than a crowded basement, as had been the case in Beijing, and adapt to the selling of yarn in a market, instead of drifting about in a super modern city; meanwhile, they can afford to enjoy the modern means of transport and the glittering night view, both of which denote the glamour of urban culture.

As a film with a rural theme, *Women’s Story* does not follow the conventional narrative mode that highlights grand social development; instead, it focuses on women’s experience in the social space and the unexpected adventures through

which they achieve a greater self-awareness. The story is not told from any female protagonist’s point of view, unlike Zhang Nuanxin’s *The Drive to Win* (1981) and *Sacrificed Youth* (1985) and Lu Xiaoya’s *The Girl in Red* (1985). In Peng Xiaolian’s words, “it’s shot like a documentary.” Her documentary way of shooting allows the audience to observe these three women from a third-person point of view.

If the more recent film *Ermo* (dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1994) illustrates the prevailing strategy of representing rural women and their participation in social change in New China Cinema as a way of visualising political history and economical transformation, *Women’s Story*, with a similar plot of stepping out of the rural area, emphasises women’s agency. Moreover, these women also demonstrate what Tang Xiaobing celebrates as a “crude possessive individualism” in his discussion of *Ermo*, denoting both autonomous sexuality and economic independence.

### 5.3.2 Four Women

The film portrays four types of women. The strongest-willed of the three heroines of *Women’s Story* is Xiaofeng, who comes from a family that is sneered at by neighbours for lacking a male child. (In rural China, it had been common for a woman’s position in her family and her community to be based on her ability to bear male children. The changes of the Chinese economy in the 1980s gave rural women

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the chance to escape from this convention). As the oldest girl in her family, Xiaofeng is eager to leave for the city where she can prove her ability to pursue what she desires.

When these three women move from Beijing (their first destination from the countryside) to Chongqing in order to carry out business more easily, they meet a group of construction worker customers who are fellow countrymen. These workers are attracted by Xiaofeng because she is the best-looking one among these three. It is because of her sexual attractiveness that she is regarded (by Laizi Ma) as the most appropriate person to visit these men in order to sell the sweaters. She is led to the construction site one day. Her arrival inspires feelings of homesickness among these workers. Later one man offers to accompany her back and on the way tells her he likes her very much. The film does not give a clear indication why Xiaofeng agrees to have sex after refusing his attempt to get close to her at first. Peng Xiaolian explained in the interview that “[S]he’d (Xiaofeng) never thought anyone would ever think she was beautiful or take an interest in her. But then out of the blue, a man, and a very handsome man, did, and so she was quite willing to sleep with him.”64

Compared with the evasive attitude towards sex which was attested in both the interview conducted with Zhang Nuanxin and the films she made, Peng Xianlian’s straightforwardness apparently marks the self-emancipation of women over the sexual repression. What is more provoking about this film is that this “sexual liberation” happens to a girl from an extremely conservative countryside. Without putting it in an abrupt way, Peng Xiaolian portrayed the nuances of Xiaofeng’s

64 Berry, “Interview with Peng Xiaolian,” 29.
attitude when she is confronting the man’s wooing. She becomes cautious as the man was saying something with sexual implication and asked him to leave. When he tried to touch her, she was frightened and moved back from him but never ran away—it is not hard to observe that she is also attracted by him. Finally she is moved by his words (which show his sympathy towards woman), and says to him, “Let’s go.”

However, the sexual encounter is filmed in a very discreet way, the camera lingering on the space they vacate when they go into the grass. Peng Xiaolian acknowledged that “I hadn’t made it completely obvious. First, there’s no way you can do that in China. Second, I felt it was a ‘private’ thing.”65 Peng also clarified that she filmed the scene discreetly because “our leaders (of the film studio) didn’t agree” and “they insisted that I take it out.”66 If on-screen kissing found tolerance immediately after the Cultural Revolution, the representation of sexual intercourse was still possible only if shown fleetingly, as Huang Shuqin did in her Woman, Demon, Human (1987) in the scene of Qiu Yun’s mother’s extramarital sex.

Xiaofeng does not return to the inn where the three women stay that night, and she appears a little flustered when she meets Laizi Ma with her clothes covered with mud the following morning. The shot is taken from Laizi Ma’s point of view, the camera is tilted from Xiaofeng’s feet to her head. This is an imitation of an interrogative gaze by an authoritative figure—an older woman who takes her authority and responsibility for granted. Laizi Ma understands what happened to Xiaofeng and reproaches her for her “immoral behavior.” Without feeling ashamed

65 Berry, “Interview with Peng Xiaolian,” 29.

66 Ibid.
of her behavior, Xiaofeng is angry about Laizi Ma. Jinxiang points out that Laizi Ma has Xiaofeng’s interests at heart and is worried that Xiaofeng will suffer from the loss of her virginity. Xiaofeng is enraged, speaking out about the humiliation that has long been buried in her heart—her family is so despised by the villagers; even when they went to visit their father’s tomb they were cursed with harsh words related to gender discrimination against women. She goes on to say that a woman is worthless in many people’s eyes, but she will depend on herself and live as a real human being. Her choice of having a one night stand declares her autonomy over her own body and becomes a trope for her independent personality. Xiaofeng’s experience of being sneered at and discriminated against calls to mind what Qiu Yun in Women, Demon, Human suffers: discursive violence against individuals in the form of sexual humiliation.

Patriarchal society seeks to impose on young women the social supervision of their bodies; Xiaofeng’s one-night stand is a challenge to this imposition. It had long been a deep-rooted custom in China that a woman is her husband’s property; therefore, virginity had long been fetishised, and women were warned to keep their virginity for their future husbands. In taking control of her own body, Xiaofeng rebels against two forces: one is the call for a return to the traditional “virtuous wife and good mother” in the 1980s; the other is the upsurge of commercialisation that objectifies a woman’s body. For Xiaofeng, the voluntary one night stand is a resistance against the sexism that haunts her. The construction worker is like a nameless sexual object that only fleetingly appears in her life. She does not ask for any promise from him because she is aware that there is no future for them. He functions mainly as Xiaofeng’s passage to freedom from the biased conventions.
regulating women’s sexuality. Though overt sexual scenes are absent in this film, the representation of a rural girl’s confidence in commanding her own sexuality and fate was audacious at that time.

Historically, the socialist revolution in the 1950s put into force the elimination of the practice of selling girls or women as concubines or forcing them into marriage. *Women’s Story* unfolded the uncomfortable truth that the implementation of this law remained problematic over the next thirty years.

Xiaofeng’s experience discloses the pathetic fate of a female heir who is forced to sacrifice herself in order to save her family from financial predicament and maintain the patriarchal order. The opening part of the film shows Jinxiang’s resistance when being forced to marry a deaf-mute in order to fulfill the arrangement for the marriage of her brother. As a good daughter, she tearfully submits to her mother’s request after a struggle. Jinxiang’s mother is sad for her daughter, but she persuades Jinxiang that their family will be “a laughing stock” if the son cannot marry and they do not have male heirs. But later Jinxiang escapes to join Xiaofeng and Laizi Ma when they are leaving the village to sell yarn in the city (the film gives little indication of her final decision to escape from her family). Hence Jinxiang’s revolt is directly triggered: she resists the forced marriage that makes her a bargaining counter for her brother’s marriage and family finance; then she escapes to do business as an independent money-maker. When Laizi Ma finds out about her escape and worries about the marriage of Jinxiang’s brother, Xiaofeng replies first by asking who even cares about Jinxiang anyway, a point of view with which Jinxiang totally agrees. She joins the group and steps decisively into the outer world.

Among these three women, Jinxiang is the one who pays the most attention to
the beauty of the urban women. She is very keen on the urban fashion and make-up that women wear in the city. During the time when they relocate to Chongqing to find a better chance to sell yarn, she leaves the stall to buy herself a pair of western style trousers which are very tightly tailored. By putting on the pants she gets a new recognition of the fact that she has shapely legs which were covered by the old pants she wore in the village. This participation in urban women’s fashion intensifies her desire as a fast-learning consumer. Moreover, the director shows this incident in a humorous way: Jinxiang splits the new trousers on the bottom soon after purchasing them. The shot in which this occurs does not avoid showing Jinxiang’s embarrassment, but neither does it deliberately ridicule her; instead, it makes her image more genuine and believable. The director asserted, “I’m sure a man wouldn’t depict women like that.”67 At the end of the film, both Jinxiang and Xiaofeng appear in a fashionable urban style when going back to their village (Jinxiang curls her hair and Xiaofeng has a stylish coat and bag).

Jinxiang believes that money will free her from sexual oppression and give her access to a joyful life. Similarly, Xiaofeng does business to win freedom from the sexism she endured in her village. On the other hand, Laizi Ma earns money in order to help solve her family’s problems.

Traditional and conservative, Laizi Ma is completely identified with the patriarchal system, as her name implies (it was common in rural China for women to be addressed merely by their role in the family: wife or mother, for example), and as her pride for having borne a son reveals clearly. Her motivation for selling yarn in

the city is the need to earn money so that her brothers-in-law can marry “decent women.”

During their journey to the cities, she is disappointed at the young women’s self-centred behaviour. Feeling angry about Xiaofeng’s one night stand with a man in Chongqing city, she blames Xiaofeng for being shameless—she considers chastity as something crucial for a woman and the reputation of her family. However, Xiaofeng’s outspokenness of the prejudice she suffered challenges Laizi ma’s belief system. Her account of her humiliations in the village touches Laizi Ma and makes her gradually learn to understand and respect the younger women’s choice. Nevertheless, the film does not portray her as undergoing a radical change, since the latter part of the film also shows her belief in traditional values through emphasising the closeness between her and her son. When men appear fleetingly in the film, Laizi Ma’s son is shown as a treasure for helping her to maintain the dignity of a woman in a community that identifies with patriarchal values.

Apart from these three women, a mad woman they come across when traveling through the cities mysteriously appears at certain times. This ghostly woman is an overly obvious symbol for the piteous situation of women in China. She is pregnant and desperately wanting a baby boy after having given birth to two girls in her village. For her, only a baby boy can save her from a miserable life.

Towards the end of the film, when the three women are going back to the village after having sold all the yarn, she happens to show up on the way. Standing on the staircase which is higher than where the three women are walking, she yells repeatedly with ecstasy, “I have a son! I have a son finally!” Laizi Ma is deeply touched by this woman and feels relieved for her because she has given birth to a
boy. The reaction of the other two younger women is different. Jinxiang is busy counting the money she earned and casts a contemptuous look. Xiaofeng shows sympathy, saying “good luck” with an uncertain expression. From a low angle, the shot follows the mad woman as she climbs the stairs slowly, emphasising the symbolic meaning of the stairs which occupy almost the entire frame. The camera frames these two groups of women on the edges of the picture: when the mad woman stands high up on the stairs, the three women stay at the bottom of the stairs. Metaphorically, a woman holding a baby boy climbing towards the top of a stairway signifies a process of approaching the top stratum of the power hierarchy. The invisible but ubiquitous patriarchal phantom that shadows the self-emancipation of the three women is represented in this very direct style of cinematic narration. The shot declares that, even though women were encouraged by the economic changes in the 1980s and went outside their native villages to pursue wealth, their self-actualisation was still restricted by the old conception, especially regarding their marital situation.
The process of searching for a better place to sell yarn metaphorises their way of looking for the value of life. For Xiaofeng and Jinxiang, who possess a certain self-consciousness, the experience of leaving their hometown involves the heightening of self-consciousness as a way to gain the confidence to command their own fate; for Laizi Ma, who goes out with the hope of helping her brothers-in-law get married, the interaction with the two younger women enables her to understand more about the younger generation and the possibility of changing her own life (though it may happen unconsciously).

### 5.3.3 Sisterhood

The film also emphasises the sisterhood through which the women have bonded. While sisterhood is not a very common theme in the films made by Chinese female directors in the 1980s, Women’s Story provides a positive view of the bond among women (In contrast, men usually remain off-screen in the film, and when they are present, they look clumsy and stupid). Before going out to sell yarn the three women barely knew each other, but after this journey they have cultivated a sisterhood in spite of their different motivations and views of life. Chris Berry notices that in Women’s Story “[t]he importance of sisterhood is heavily emphasised. None of the women turn to men for help or expect men to help them. Rather, they and the other women they encounter on their journey already take it for granted that women must
rely on each other." The sisterhood that gradually develops in their stepping out from the restricted space to a larger world is important as a communal spirit of mutual support.

The women’s divergent views on issues cause argument and misunderstanding; at the same time, outspoken disagreement functions both as a means of self-expression and a way to reach a mutual understanding. It is noteworthy that they do not come into conflict or split apart because of economic interests. After the yarn is soaked by heavy rain, they work out a way to sell the sweaters made from the yarn. They all realise the power of money which frees them from the troubles they encountered at their rural home; in other words, money helps them to be strong. An old-fashioned woman like Laizi Ma also feels powerful after earning money by herself. She dares to ask her son to get her husband to help carry the goods she has bought from the city, ignoring the rural women who make fun of her by saying that she cannot even carry a package now because she has become frail after the journey in the cities.

The ending of Women’s Story fully demonstrates the power of sisterhood. The problems that entrapped Jinxiang at the start of the film have not yet been resolved—the deaf-mute husband comes to get her back (the obvious violence is signaled by the rope he carries). But this time she is not alone before the threat from a man: Xiaofeng and Laizi Ma join her, supporting in her struggle against male violence. The medium shots of the upper parts of their bodies when they are walking towards the camera manifest the martyr-like spirit that aspires to a justice of their own. Interestingly, the

film freezes at this moment when women refuse to submit to patriarchal threat and step forward to confront it. Xiaofeng suggests that Jinxiang should divorce her deaf-mute husband. The film freezes here, leaving questions open to audience as such: Will Jinxiang be successful in seeking to divorce her husband? What kind of future will these three women have?

Coincidentally, the framing of the women’s images with a close-up of their faces as they move towards the camera resembles the shots in some postrevolutionary films in which the close-up functions pedagogically, exhorting the spectator to perform self-sacrifice for the revolutionary cause. As Berry and Farquhar wrote about such films, “The key tropes are the admiring look, often from slightly below, much as a pupil seated at a desk might look at a teacher, followed by the character’s look, either downward in reflection and thought, or off screen past the camera and the spectator in anticipation of the revolutionary future.” In *Women’s Story*, the look of these three women is off screen past the camera, aimed at the two men who are coming to bring Jinxiang back home. In this case there is no reverse shot of those two men, while the women’s look is also directed elsewhere beyond the threat of the two men and into a future that is free from oppression and justice.

Figure 5.7. Xiaofeng and Laizi Ma stand by Jinxiang whose husband is coming to get her back.

### 5.3.4 Women Participating in the Marketisation

In the age of marketisation, as Tang Xiaobing pointed out, apart from continuing to be wife and daughter, rural women became wage earners and fast-learning consumers with the “restless desire to change their lives for the better.”70 *Women's Story* does not push women to the foreground so as to probe the project of social change; rather, it examines the change of women who participate in this process. Laizi Ma takes on the traditional role of the good mother, doing her part to protect the dignity of the family by venturing out to earn money so that the male siblings can marry “decent women.” She fails to realise that she too is one of these “decent

women” who function as mere exchange objects in the patriarchal system. Her understanding of her role and of the situation of women in her society develops as she leaves her village, encounters a more advanced form of commercialisation, and interacts with younger women who are not bound by the old traditions. After she returns back to the village, instead of showing off the money she earned for her brothers-in-law’s marriage, she happily tells other women what she has got for her own family.

As for the two younger women, Xiaofeng and Jinxiang prove that they can do well without having to rely on men. The importance of virginity, which weighs heavily for women (especially in the countryside) in the traditional notion, is “trivialised” by Xiaofeng who breaks the hypocritical concept that a woman will suffer a “loss” if she has sex with men. Her one night stand is a conscious resistance against the sexist spell imposed on women. Neither has she sold her sex as an exchange for any profit. Jinxiang rebels against the forced marriage and steps out on an adventure of seduction, through which she finds a way of freeing herself from the bond to poverty and marital tragedy (albeit temporarily). An awareness of her own body is aroused, as a part of her self-consciousness which has been obstructed by the closed space and conventions within which she was helplessly imprisoned.

These three women are positioned as an alternative group consensus resisting the deep-rooted traditions and mainstream representation in 1980s China. The film gets rid of the romanticisation of rural life that was popular in the socialist Chinese films. It also avoids the representation of women as vehicles for demonstrating social changes, which was and probably will always be a film strategy employed by male directors. Furthermore, the film differs from the “women’s cinema” in the early
1980s in which women like Sha’ou in *The Drive to Win* (1981) and Li Chun in *Sacrificed Youth* (1985) immersed themselves in a melancholia of loss. The women in *Women’s Story*, on the contrary, actively involve themselves in the process of changing their fate and the turbulence of social transformation so as to act out their agency.

The later film *Ermo* (1994), however, criticises commodity fetishism. Driven by consumer desire, the title character buys an expensive color TV set. To pay for it, she begins an extramarital sexual relationship with a neighbor, Blindman; he helps her find a job but never thinks of divorcing his wife and marrying Ermo. Ultimately, the purchase of the TV set almost costs Ermo her life and fails to improve her existence. Her relationship with Blindman, mostly based on utilitarianism, ends unsurprisingly. Not only her labour, but also her body, that has become a counter in the chain of commercialisation, a fact which she didn’t realise until Blindman provides her with money. She is disappointed to find that Blindman views her as a prostitute rather than someone he loves.

What *Women’s Story* depicts, by comparison, is the promising future that awaits women who will benefit from being involved in the trend towards commercialisation. As was discussed earlier, the film also leaves an open ending, indicating the difficulties those women may encounter in the near future. But the optimism embraced by the director is clearly shown in her implication of a possible change for the rural women who still stay in the village and remain to be the major labour power in the farming field. They admire the novel things that the returning three women brought back and notice the change they demonstrate. As Gao Xiaoxian writes, “Changes in peasant concepts of gender also include changes in women’s
sense of self-worth … The awakening of women’s self-consciousness has been an intrinsic driving force in the changes in women’s status. Its effect should not be underestimated." Although very few films seized this rural ethos, at least Peng Xiaolian’s film enables the audience to observe the possibility of changing women’s status through evoking their sense of self-worth.

Figure 5.8. Jinxiang is encouraging her fellow rural women to do business in the city.

5.4 Conclusion

Both Woman, Demon, Human and Women’s Story reflect women’s experiences in the new social and economic milieu of the late 1980s. The cinematic methods practiced

in these two films resonate with the new changes that marked the films of the middle and late 1980s. In terms of thematic concerns, *Woman, Demon, Human* focuses on the more internal experience of women who are aware of the predicament in which they are entrapped, namely the split gender identification operating on and off stage. Targeting patriarchy as the chief impediment to women’s emancipation, *Women’s Story* optimistically envisions the possible empowerment of women by the commercialisation that has gradually engulfed rural China. At the same time, both films present a feminist perspective rarely seen in Chinese cinema. However, in spite of the gender consciousness embedded in *Woman, Demon, Human*, the film reveals a more conservative attitude than *Women’s Story* by asserting that a woman’s greatest ambition is no more than marrying a good man, and that women are frustrated merely because “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Comparatively, *Women’s Story*, with its clear celebration of women’s independence, expresses a broader view of the possibilities of women’s self-control of their own fate.

My analysis of these two films reveals the gradual changes in female directors’ representations of sexuality from the early 1980s to the late 1980s. Huang Shuqin in *Woman, Demon, Human* reflected the traumatic memory of a girl who witnessed sexual intercourse between her mother and a “strange” man (which was visualised in the film), and depicted its negative impact upon the girl’s adult life. One year later, Peng Xiaolian went further in representing self-emancipation from sexism, in which women had been constantly enmeshed. Sexual repression was partially removed in *Women’s Story* and replaced by the confidence to combat against it, demonstrated by Xiaofeng’s voluntary one night stand. In fact, as commercialisation became further entrenched in China, the emancipation of women from domestic space could
be possible as a by-product of that commercialisation; at least women were encouraged to set themselves free to enjoy life. Towards the end of the carnival of the 1980s, sexual liberation was pushed forward as “bourgeois liberalism” was approaching its acme (before being wiped out in 1989).
Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the mainland Chinese women’s cinema of the 1980s. In contrast to the extensive work Western critics have done on “women’s film,” female directors and feminist films, the substantial research exclusively addressing Mainland Chinese women film directors has been confined within a narrow critical perspective. So far the academic research on Chinese women’s cinema has mainly centred on the discussion of feminist consciousness (whether fully mature or still at a tentative stage of development), a discussion that owes much to gender studies and that has been encouraged by the popularity of that field in the global context. While commenting on the increasing awareness of female consciousness female directors projected in the films, scholars have largely neglected the fact that submissiveness to the authoritative ideology resulted in an unfulfilled feminism and testified to the sexual repression that persisted in Chinese women’s cinema of the 1980s. While extolling the growing visibility of female directors in China, many scholars have failed to maintain a critical view on the external oppression and internal repression embodied in the narrative of films.

My research has bracketed films made from the early to the late 1980s, a period when many of these films remained, to a certain extent, outside of the mainstream critical focus. All the films I have discussed were made by female directors, most of whom started their directing career during the 1980s. I have argued that their films combine two ideologies: on the one hand, the dominating discourse of CCP imposed on cinema, and on the other hand the more secret voice of the filmmakers as the undercurrent. But their submission to the bureaucratic ideology blocked a further
expression of their self-conscious voices. In short, this study illustrated the tension between the expression and repression of women’s sexuality and subjectivity in China.

Before entering into the discussion of the films I have chosen, I briefly introduced the socio-historical background of the 1980s which directly enabled a greater number of female directors to emerge in the film industry. It was rare to find women who directed films before the establishment of the PRC. After the CCP ascended to absolute power in 1949 and implemented the reformation of the film institute, a small number of women embarked on directing films in socialist China. The number of female directors increased in the 1980s when the national policy of equality between women and men was reinforced. As Zhang Xudong has described, it was also the time when the “environment left tremendous room not only for an innovation of cinematic language in the form of an aesthetic breakthrough, but also for competing ideologies to claim their own territory in a secularized no-man’s-land.”¹ The films that I discussed in my research were those films in which, to a large degree, female directors had a personal interest. All those films demonstrated how the process of relative depoliticisation in Chinese cinema allowed filmmakers to turn towards the ideology of humanism.

In this thesis, I have studied different groups of films made by female directors, and also compared some of these films with films made by male directors sharing similar aspects or topics, such as Sacrificed Youth with King of the Children, Women, Demon, Human with Farewell My Concubine, and Women’s Story with Ermo. In the

¹ Zhang, Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms, 222.
following I’ll summarise the ways in which women’s cinema addresses issues related to female sexuality and subjectivity.

My inquiry centred on sexuality and subjectivity embedded in those films either through explicit or implicit narrative. As one of the first directors to delve into the innovation of cinematic language, Zhang Nuanxin practiced what she advocated in her article, especially by rejecting dramatic representation and learning from Western art-house cinema. Therefore she was targeted in my research as the first important female director in the turning moment of Chinese cinema in the 1980s.

Examining Zhang Nuanxin’s theoretical exploration and cinematic practice in the early 1980s, I emphasised her importance for the innovation of cinematic expression, pointing out how her experiment with film language was closely related to her awareness of individuality which was simultaneously relevant to gender consciousness. The Drive to Win, Zhang Nuanxin’s first independently-directed film, exhibited a documentary style and a de-dramatisation of the plot, both of which distinguished her work from the conventional filmmaking of the socialist period. I observed that the more mature usage of these devices was illustrated in her second feature film Sacrificed Youth. This adaptation of a novella written by Zhang Manling was filtered through Zhang Nuanxin’s own understanding of the female protagonist by projecting her own feeling through the female voice-over narration.

It is Zhang Nuanxin who first stood out as a self-conscious woman who made films that were conspicuous not so much for their political connotations as for their apolitical point of view. To use her own words, this point of view led to a poetic style of Sacrificed Youth, that was similar to “prose poetry.” As I have expounded, First-person narration and a highly subjective perspective contribute to the expression of
women’s consciousness which was emphasised in *Sacrificed Youth* through the protagonist’s awareness of gender identity and her heterosexual relationship with two men. Interestingly, the germination of the sexual consciousness of the woman protagonist on the one hand was manipulated in a romantic way, while on the other hand her self-identification was disturbed by her refusal to accept her own sexual desires. Her discovery of her subjectivity was repressed in the end as the narrative voice indicated that the whole representation had been a dream or an imagining of the past.

This kind of revelation of sexual awareness and eventual repression was witnessed in many films made by women at that time. Lu Xiaoya, who had been an actress, directed her prize-winning feature film called *The Girl in Red*, characterising a girl who questions authority and speaks for the zeitgeist of the new era. I pointed out that the image of the girl was not only distinguished for the symbolic meaning she embodied, but also for the subjectivity she was aware of. However, when the individual volition of the protagonist was fully confirmed by the characterisation, her sexual consciousness was ambiguously portrayed. In contrast, Shi Shujun’s *A Missing High School Girl* pioneered the representation of “young love” of a teenage girl, adopting a positive attitude towards the emergence of sexual desire of her who fell in an unrequited love with a college student. The director’s courage in the representation of the young love, inspired a backlash from many who watched the film, reflecting a deeply conservative attitude towards the phenomenon of adolescent sexuality. Although the director stood up to the pressure, unfortunately, the second part was nothing but a didactic narration of how adults should respond properly to the problem of teenagers’ “young love.”
In addition to representing unconventional images of young girls, female directors also characterised “new women,” notably in films about women in the army. When they moved away from the clichés of heroic narrative, Hu Mei’s *Army Nurse* and Liu Miaomiao’s *Women on the Long March* created unique portraits of women whose private lives contrasted greatly with the highly restricted environment in the army. In the war films of the socialist period women were always marginalised as assistants or maternal figures, whereas *Army Nurse* positioned a woman and her love story in the centre of a narrative with her subjective feelings uttered in the voice-over. The sequence of the woman’s sexual encounter with a soldier in *Army Nurse* was one of the most unusual moments in Chinese cinema of the 1980s, which, as I explained in detail, was highlighted by the use of sophisticated camerawork. This sequence also epitomised the tension embedded in Chinese women’s cinema of the 1980s: uncontrollable sexual desire versus unsurmountable repression.

*Women on the Long March* is a film that has been largely ignored by film critics. Focusing on a group of women soldiers who try to catch up with the main Communist army on the Long March in the 1930s, the director explored their individual experiences rather than propagated collectivism in this community as previous films had done. The struggle was launched not just between them and the atrocious conditions in the harsh natural environment, but among themselves, resulting from their different opinions of life, political views and jealousy towards each other. The narrative of the female experience and consciousness that were exclusive to women reflects the humanistic thinking over the individual who was obviated in the historical narration of war.

The late 1980s witnessed another turn of Chinese cinema. Firstly, the Fifth
Generation amazed the world with their more complete break from the Chinese filmic tradition. Their identification with avant-garde artists challenged the viewing experience of the common audience, and also raised different opinions through their unconventional approaches to film. Moreover, Chinese society was undergoing changes owing to the development of the market economy, which inevitably affected the film industry (I have only focused on the changes in terms of themes and narrative). Although no female directors of the Fifth Generation joined the alliance of ambitious directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou who intensified the revolution of film language and rebelled against the ideological attachment to the mainstream, some of these female directors went further in their representation of women.

Made during the Fifth Generation directors’ heyday in 1987, Huang Shuqin’s *Woman, Demon, Human* has been underestimated by scholars of Chinese cinema in terms of its aesthetic importance. Unlike Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*, in which opera mainly served as visual spectacle, I considered that opera in *Woman, Demon, Human* was fully integrated into the surrounding narrative, providing new narrative information and contributing to the unfolding of the heroine’s personal history. Moreover, *Woman, Demon, Human* depicted opera in a cinematic manner rarely seen in Chinese cinema. Qiu Yun, the female protagonist, had a full sense of her female identity, which was confirmed by her unfulfilled heterosexual love and her pursuit of a perfect male image (Zhong Kui in the film). Nevertheless, the desexualisation of that image testified to the repression that persisted in Chinese women’s cinema in the 1980s.

While Huang Shuqin manifested the predicament of women in the face of the
double identifications of being both male and female and the inescapable discursive violence in the form of sexual humiliation, Peng Xiaolian set the story of Women's Story in a village where old-fashioned discipline on women's position still prevailed, while the commercial influence from the city gradually influenced the life style of rural people. Along with the booming economy and its dominating power in social relations, women enjoyed the freedom to command their own fate. As in Hu Mei’s Army Nurse, there was also a sequence of shots in Women’s Story that shows the tension of sexuality. One of the three protagonists was touched by a man’s confession of his crush on her feminine beauty and therefore became willing to have a one night stand with him, which was not only a shocking event for her friends, but also for the audience at the time. Due to the censorship upon representation of sex, the sequence was filmed in a very discreet way, showing nothing about sexual intercourse but with a lingering shot on the bushes.

Sexuality as a part of humanist concerns has seldom been discussed in Chinese women’s cinema. When most people talk about the female consciousness of films made by women in China, sexuality has not been central in their reference to women’s subjectivity. I have claimed that the representation of sexuality in women’s films of the 1980s provided a critical look at social oppression and the internalised self-repression of subjectivity. If many directors in the 1980s turned to make “scar films” that embraced humanism as the major ideology to combat the ultra-leftist ideology that had prevailed in the previous decade, female directors’ films were no exception in their concern about how women represented on screen. As a reflection of humanism, female directors and women in their films came to speak for themselves and think of their positions in the historical narrative.
Apart from having demonstrated different thematic concerns, my study also highlighted the importance of female directors’ innovations in film language. Zhang Nuanxin was without doubt a pioneer in her use of documentary and prose-poetry style while Huang Shuqin was an innovator in the representation of opera performance. However, all in all, a tension between self-consciousness and self-censorship in the face of strong top-down ideological supervision was always present. Therefore, in spite of the possibility of inserting different discourses in films, the way towards self-emancipation was suspended in the struggle between different ideologies. Repression has become a collective symptom of the cinema of these female directors.

My research has mainly based on the close reading of films. Instead of paying much attention to the film policy and institutional reform of the Chinese cinema during the 1980s, which would be another interesting research topic, I have focused on cinematic narrative while at the same time avoiding restricting my work only to textual analysis. Social and historical context has been taken into consideration in order to examine the mechanism of repression in women’s cinema.

This study makes several contributions to the understanding of women’s cinema in China. Firstly, it formed part of the studies conducted on Chinese cinema of the 1980s which to date have been far from extensive in terms of film aesthetics and gendered representation. Secondly, my research addressed the neglected discussion around sexuality and subjectivity from women’s perspectives spanning from the early 1980s to the late 1980s when most scholars were more inclined to talk about the male Fifth Generation directors. Finally, I emphasised the importance of female directors’ work in the modernisation of film language, and how they came to terms
with censorship, concluding that their subjective expression was always something in between: self-aware narration of sexuality and the repression of it. In addition, my thesis also suggested possible topics for future research on how the repression of female sexuality in women’s cinema mirrored the political and sociocultural changes of contemporary China.
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Appendix 1: Filmography

A Girl from Hunan (Xiangnü xiaoxiao), dir. Xie Fei & Wu Lan (Beijing Film Academy Youth Film Studio, 1986)

A Good Woman (Liangjia funü), dir. by Huang Jianzhong (Beijing Film Studio, 1985)

A Missing High School Girl (Shizong de nü zhongxuesheng), dir. by Shi Shujun (Shanghai Film Studio, 1986)

Dislocation (Cuowei), dir. by Huang Jianxin (Xi'an Film Studio, 1986)

Ermo, dir. by Zhou Xiaowen (Shanghai Film Studio, 1994)

Faraway from War (Yuanli zhanzheng de niandai), dir. by Hu Mei (the PLA August 1st Film Studio, 1987)

Farewell My Concubine (Bawang bieji), dir. by Chen Kaige (Beijing Film Studio, 1993)

I Am with Them (Wozai tamen zhongjian), dir. by Cong Lianwen & Lu Xiaoya (Emei Film Studio, 1982)

King of the Children (Haizi wang), dir. by Chen Kaige (Xi'an Film Studio, 1987)

Me and My Classmates (Wohe wode tongxuemen), dir. Huang Shuqin (Shanghai Film Studio, 1986)
My Memories of Old Beijing (Chengnan jiushi), dir. by Wu Yigong (Shanghai Film Studio, 1983)

Narrow Street (Xiaojie), dir. Yang Yanjin (Shanghai Film Studio, 1983)

Sacrificed Youth (Qingchun ji), dir. by Zhang Nuanxin (Beijing Film Academy Youth Film Studio, 1981)

The Black Cannon Incident (Heipao shijian), dir. by Huang Jianxin (Xi'an Film Studio, 1986)

The Dadu River (Dadu he), dir. by Lin Nong & Wang Yabiao (Changchun Film Studio, 1980)

The Drive to Win (Sha’ou), dir. by Zhang Nuanxin (Beijing Film Academy Youth Film Studio, 1981)

The Girl in Red (Hongyi shaonü), dir. by Lu Xiaoya (Emei Film Studio, 1985)

The Herdsman (Muma ren), dir. by Xiejie (Shanghai Film Studio, 1982)

The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (Tianyunshan chuangi), dir. by Xie Jin (Shanghai Film Studio, 1979)

Troubled Laughter (Kunao ren de xiao), dir. by Yang Yanjin (Shanghai Film Studio, 1979)

Voice from Hometown (Xiangyin), dir. by Hu Binliu (Zhujiang Film Studio, 1983)

Women, Demon, Human (Ren·Gui·Qing), dir. by Huang Shuqin (Shanghai Film Studio, 1987)

Wild Mountain (Yeshan), dir. by Yan Xueshu (Xi'an Film Studio, 1986)
Women on the Long March (Mati sheng sui), dir. by Liu Miaomiao (Xiaoxiang Film Studio, 1987)