

CHINESE WOMEN'S CINEMA

TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS



EDITED BY LINGZHEN WANG



Chinese Women's Cinema

FILM AND CULTURE
JOHN BELTON, EDITOR

Edited by Lingzhen Wang

Chinese Women's Cinema

TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

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* The Nanjing-Brown Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities is a major transnational collaboration between the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanjing University and three academic units at Brown, namely: the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, the East Asian Studies Department, and the Cogut Center for the Humanities.

conference, hosting up to 150 international scholars, filmmakers, and graduate students for the four-day event. Brown University's Office of the Provost also provided an internationalization seed fund for the Program in 2008, paving the way for translations and editing of two critical anthologies on Chinese female filmmakers and gender issues in Chinese cinema, respectively.

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Chinese Women's Cinema

Introduction

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST RECONFIGURATION
OF FILM DISCOURSE AND WOMEN'S CINEMA

LINGZHEN WANG

THIS ANTHOLOGY centers on Chinese women filmmakers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora from the 1920s to 2007. It studies twenty-five women filmmakers, while offering critical comments on many others. The sixteen contributors provide critical insights and interdisciplinary dialogues to this volume, which is the first dedicated to Chinese female filmmakers and their films. Foregrounding Chinese women's complex negotiations with global and local politics, cinematic representation, and issues related to gender and sexuality, the anthology aims to reassess and revise theoretical, political, and academic frameworks for transnational feminist research on women and cinema.

Three issues are the central concerns of this anthology. First, despite their large number and historical significance, few English-language studies have been devoted to Chinese women filmmakers or their films. This is particularly disconcerting considering the rapid development of Chinese film studies and the increased establishment of feminist film studies in Western academia. This volume interrogates the gendered nature of Chinese film studies, its long-term focus on national cinema, and its recent trend in global media. Second, classical feminist

film theories have undergone crises since the mid-1980s. The advent of poststructuralism and the theories of semiotics and psychoanalysis have restrained conceptions of female authorship and agency. Furthermore, exclusive reference to Hollywood productions and Western avant-garde cinema rendered classical feminist film theory blind to its complicity in perpetuating racial, heterosexual, and cultural hegemony. This anthology joins recent feminist endeavors within and outside film studies to reevaluate established film theories, remap feminist film discourse, and engage neglected but diverse practices of women filmmakers around the world.

Finally, American studies of “non-Western” women and feminist practice have been relegated to area studies, which is predicated on the framework of the nation-state. The women who are objects of these studies have been marked as the other, isolated from the “center” with a fictive cultural essence.¹ Today’s accelerated global circulation of capital, people, commodities, information, and media (including Hollywood films) has led to questions of the suitability of area studies as the site for, and the nation-state as the organizing principle of, studies on transnational gender and cinema. Challenges from different economic and political positions can, however, lead research in different directions and produce radically different meanings. Instead of viewing globalization as a means of erasing existing borders and differences for the sake of a future cosmopolitan utopia, this anthology engages with transnational feminist practice, which views globalization processes as inherently gendered, sexualized, and racialized, as erecting new borders even while erasing old ones,² and as continuously generating uneven relationships. Today, feminist film studies must step outside the restrictive framework of the nation-state and critically resituate gender and cinema in a transnational feminist configuration that enables the examination of relationships of power and knowledge among and within cultures and nation-states.

In the following, I first provide a critical overview of the history and limitations of established feminist film theory, particularly in relation to female cinematic authorship and agency. I move next to existing critiques of established feminist film theory and of feminist theory generally, before turning to recent developments in feminist practice to remap feminist film discourse in transnational and interdisciplinary contexts. Finally, I redefine women’s cinema and offer a brief history of women’s diverse cinematic practices in modern China.

FEMALE AUTHORSHIP AND FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Female cinematic authorship—and its controversial history—occupies a central place in the development of feminist film theory. Judith Mayne states, “Virtually all feminist critics who argue in defense of female authorship as a useful and necessary category assume the political necessity for doing so.”³ This statement indicates that the political significance of female authorship makes it a central concern in feminist film studies and that the study of female authorship requires defending. But against what forces must feminist critics defend female authorship, and what discourses are available for such a battle? Since several important reviews of feminist film theory exist already,⁴ I will not provide another detailed study here, but will survey the most critical issues concerning female film authorship in feminist film theory’s development.

The concept of the film *auteur* is usually traced to a group of young French critics and film directors who contributed to the magazine *Cahiers* in the 1950s. They sought to elevate film to the status of art, and called for a cinema distinguished by visual artistry that would express the director’s individual personality, in contrast to traditional script-based French films adapted from works by established writers.⁵ Holding that only geniuses could produce the new art cinema, they adopted the traditional romantic and literary conception of the artist. This contradiction, according to some, led to productive debates that eventually shifted the analysis of *auteurism* from a critical policy of the 1950s and 1960s to a theory of authorship in the 1970s.⁶ During the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced by the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the study of film authorship transformed into “*auteur-structuralism*.” The attraction of structuralism for film criticism lay in its “scientificness,” which allowed “critics to practice a descriptive mode of analysis that moved them beyond the impressionistic declarations of value that characterized Romantic *auteurism*.”⁷ The intervention of semiotics and psychoanalysis in the field of film theory in the 1970s moved this structuralist endeavor in the direction of poststructuralism, calling into question the unity of the author exterior to or prior to the text.

Feminist film theory developed during the 1970s’ and 1980s’ heyday of structuralism and poststructuralism. Semiotics, which concentrated on the structures, systems, and conventions by which cultural texts signify, helped feminist film theory “shift its focus from the critique of the ideological content of films to the analysis of the mechanisms and devices

for the production of meaning in films.”⁸ It transformed the perception of film as a reflection of reality to an active, systematic reproduction of dominant patriarchal cultural values, especially through its construction of subject positions for viewers’ identification. Concerned with the gendered effects of the dominant mode of film production typified by Hollywood, feminist scholars appropriated Lacanian psychoanalysis to account for the internal logic of sexual difference coded in dominant cinema. Structuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis helped feminist scholars break with the previous empirical and sociological study of films as realist texts. Furthermore, they led to the critical revelation of film as a coded cinematic reproduction of a phallogocentric system representing woman either as nonexistent and nonmale⁹ or as the object of the male gaze and desire¹⁰ without desire of her own.¹¹ But in the process, feminist scholars faced the danger of collapsing overdetermined structures, or structuralist specificities, into a universal, ahistorical homogeneity¹² that

4 overlooked the contradictions and interplay among different structures and subjects and inadvertently reinforced the coded condition of woman as a nonsubject. This is evident in feminist scholars’ original theorization of Hollywood cinematic spectatorship as a relation involving one-way identifications with the central male subject positions,¹³ leaving little space for resistance and difference, and none for female subjects.

Feminist film theory of the 1970s and 1980s became especially vulnerable when coming to terms with female authorship, historical agency, and socially embedded subjectivity. Psychoanalysis, although providing a way to discuss sexual difference, bases its system on male desire and subjectivity, allowing little room for assessing female desire, sexuality, and subjectivity in the symbolic and cinematic narrative structure. As some feminist critics have argued, sexual difference in psychoanalysis is fundamentally a pseudodifference, because it centers exclusively on the male and reduces the female to its symmetrical other.¹⁴ French feminists have responded with the concept of radical feminine difference, which, according to Lacan, can be perceived only as something already repressed and thus unrepresentable in the symbolic order. Though it might erupt or disturb the order, the feminine never positively appears in the symbolic and linguistic order.

The more significant challenge to the study of female authorship in any field came from poststructuralist theory and practice. The 1970s anti-humanist structuralist and poststructuralist claim of the death of the author in literary and cultural studies has paradigmatically reconfigured the

critical focus from “the concept of artist as a self-expressive personality to the concept of subject positions within the text”¹⁵ occupied mostly by readers. Poststructuralism invalidated any consideration of authorial intent or of the external author’s relation to the text’s production of meaning. Despite the need to foreground women’s and other minorities’ cultural practices as well as their agencies and voices, feminist scholars have encountered difficulty bridging the gap between the author outside the text together with specific social, cultural, and political positions and experiences in history, and the author within the text, who can only be traced or re-imagined through circumvented means, like recurring styles, images, and other textual evidence. In addition, antiessentialism has questioned the stability of individual identity and the uniqueness of female representation,¹⁶ further dissolving the significance of the woman author’s relation to the text.

Since the 1970s, feminist scholar-filmmakers and critics have attempted to address the political issue concerning feminist cinema and women’s historical and social agency. For Laura Mulvey, a feminist film should promote experimental and avant-garde film practice to imagine radical alternatives and shun classic Hollywood narrative technique, which centers exclusively on male voyeuristic and fetishist desire and pleasure. While the iconoclastic style and film language of avant-garde cinema departed from that of traditional commercially oriented films, it introduced new problematic implications for the feminist political agenda. For instance, avant-garde cinema had been practiced mainly by male elites for a small, exclusive audience. Its individualistic style and association with high culture drew on the model of authorship associated with male-centered arts.¹⁷ Additionally, as some feminist critics point out, given “the institutionalized ways in which cinema functions, and how individuals are acculturated to respond to it, it is difficult to know to what extent a truly alternative cinematic practice is possible.”¹⁸

Feminist critics since the late 1980s have attempted to retheorize cinematic female authorship within the general frame of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. Most significantly, they have reconceived cinema as a discourse and not a fixed structure, reformulated female desire within the symbolic order, and regarded Hollywood cinema as diverse rather than monolithic. According to John Caughie, the introduction of semiotics to the analysis of film generally took two forms. The first, typified by Christian Metz’s early work and found largely in English-language scholarship, centers on the structure, form, and codes

of narrative. The second, influenced by Emile Benveniste's work and concerned with signifying practice and film as discourse,¹⁹ addresses the problem with the formalism of the first approach by reconceptualizing film "not simply as a statement (something already formulated, 'given'), but also as an enunciating practice, an 'utterance' (something in process at the moment of projection)."²⁰ This analysis privileges the enunciating subject who speaks or provides visual representation from her or his particular perspective. Feminist psychoanalysis also shifted its focus from the critique of the patriarchal apparatus in dominant cinema and the question of spectatorship to the exploration of female desire, fantasy, expression, and authorship.²¹

6 Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* combines the reformulation of female desire and identification in psychoanalysis with the discursive turn in film studies described above.²² Returning to Freud, she stresses maternal loss as the original loss for boys and girls and reconfigures female desire and identification through the concept of the negative Oedipus complex (a girl desires and identifies with the mother). Silverman concentrates not on the male gaze and visual image but on female and maternal voice in her critique of male dominance in classic Hollywood cinema, bringing issues of subjectivity to the discussion of female authorship. In discussing the female authorial voice, she extends her attention from the constructed subject and the spectator "to consider the ways in which the Benvenistian model might help us to rethink authorship, as well."²³ Her reformulation of authorship relies on the idea of an enunciating subject and of film as an enunciation process. But situating her project in poststructuralism, especially in linguistically based semiotics and psychoanalysis, Silverman must argue that the author is constructed in and through discourse and can only be inferred, traced, or imagined through textual and libidinal enunciations and inscriptions in the text: "an author 'outside' the text who would come into existence as a dreaming, desiring, self-affirming subject *only* through the inscription of an author 'inside' the text"²⁴ (my emphasis). Accordingly, authorial inscription assumes several textual forms: through voice-over and points of view, namely through the subject of speech in the film, through formal expression of the more general "libidinal coherence" or desire circulating in a single author's films, through "second identification" with a fictional character that stands for the film's director, or through a "nodal point"—a sound, image, or scene to which the film or films repeatedly return.²⁵ Her re-theorization of female desire,

identification, and unconscious fantasy in the pre-Oedipal realm helps her launch, to a certain extent, (one type of) sexual difference into the discussion of enunciating subjects and authorial inscription at the textual and formal level; it furthermore aids in projecting a bridge that gestures toward the extratextual gendered speaking subject.

Silverman's work has advanced theories of female authorship within feminist film theory. But her achievement has also revealed the historical incapacity of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory to address women as historical, social, and cultural subjects outside or in relation to the text. Although Silverman demonstrates her awareness of the political significance of the biographical author when she states: "the libidinal masculinity or femininity [in the text] must be read in relation to the biological gender of the biographical author, since it is clearly not the same thing, socially or politically, for a woman to speak with a female voice as it is for a man to do so, and vice versa,"²⁶ the model she provides for "conceptualizing the relation between the author 'inside' the text and . . . the author 'outside' the text"²⁷ is, as some critics have pointed out, based on a vague assertion.²⁸ Though she attends to the authorial inscription and enunciations within the libidinal economy of the film text, it remains unclear to what extent "the fact of female authorship gives a particular or distinct inflection to the representation of female desire."²⁹

In "Female Authorship Reconsidered," Judith Mayne is preoccupied by precisely these questions of female authorship and the representation of female desire. She continues the work Claire Johnston began in her study of the director Dorothy Arzner, who made eighteen films in the Hollywood studio system during the late 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. One of the first feminist critics to shift the sociological and realistic focus in feminist film criticism to structuralist (semiotics and psychoanalysis) and ideological (ideology defined as the system of representation via Louis Althusser) film studies,³⁰ Johnston has left a controversial legacy over the concept of female political agency in film production. She rejects the concepts of artistic creativity and authorial intent by embracing the structuralist approach to auteurism, which took an individual director's preoccupations (generated by her or his psychoanalytic history) in the text to decode the unconscious structure of the film and its unintended meanings.³¹ At the same time, however, as a feminist and Marxist critic, she promotes the development of political and subversive strategies in female filmmaking. The contradiction—between textual and unconscious structure and political agency—embodied in Johnston's position is both