

Please share your stories about how Open Access to this article benefits you.

Interiorized Feminism and Gendered Nostalgia of The ‘Daughter Generation’ in Ning Ying’s Perpetual Motion

by Hui Xiao

2011

This is the author’s accepted manuscript, post peer-review. The original published version can be found at the link below.

Xiao, Hui “Interiorized Feminism and Gendered Nostalgia of The ‘Daughter Generation’ in Ning Ying’s Perpetual Motion.” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5.3 (2011): 253-268. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jcc.5.3.253_1

Published version: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jcc.5.3.253_1

Terms of Use: <http://www2.ku.edu/~scholar/docs/license.shtml>

Interiorized feminism and gendered nostalgia of the ‘daughter generation’ in Ning Ying’s *Perpetual Motion*

Hui Faye Xiao, University of Kansas

Abstract

Ning Ying’s 2006 film *Wuqiong dong/Perpetual Motion* can be regarded as her first attempt to explore the genre of ‘women’s film’. Deviating from her previous neo-realist style, this film seeks to cultivate an alternative cinematic practice through developing a heavy-handed negative aesthetics. Ning Ying interiorizes the filmic exploration of female subjectivity in an enclosed time and space, which is constantly haunted by a spectral aesthetics characterized by audio-visual allusions to loss, grave, ruins and ghosts.

However, the film’s radical content and alternative aesthetics are, ironically, packaged in prevailing consumer aesthetics and commodity fetishism on and off the silver screen. All these competing drives and accounts render the film a contested narrative constantly oscillating between avant-garde feminism and domestic melodrama, and between a register of disintegrating sisterhood and a celebrity scandal of adultery. This article examines the discursive and aesthetic innovations, contradictions and limits of Ning Ying’s cinematic feminism.

Keywords

Ning Ying

Perpetual Motion

nostalgia

interiorized feminism

women's film

daughter generation

Introduction

Ning Ying's low-budget film *Wuqiong dong/Perpetual Motion* premiered on International Women's Day (8 March 2006). Seemingly a response to criticism about the lack of gender consciousness in her previous *xin xianshi zhuyi dianying/neo-realist* films such as the 'Beijing sanbuqu'/'Beijing Trilogy' (1992–2000),¹ *Perpetual Motion* explores the genre of 'women's film'. Inspired by the 1970s feminist movement, British film critics Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston first theorized and practiced the production of 'women's cinema' as 'counter-cinema', i.e. women's cinema seeks to create alternate cinematic aesthetics and narrative forms that interrogate the problematic spectator positioning and illusion of realism established by classical (mainly Hollywood) cinema conventions. In the following decades, more film theorists such as Mary Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Teresa de Lauretis and Chris Berry have joined the discussion and debate about 'women's cinema' to challenge and expand the notions of 'counter-cinema', 'gaze', 'pleasure', 'female spectator' and more.

Perpetual Motion can be situated in such a tradition of 'women's cinema' with its highly gendered perspective and alternative cinematic aesthetics. Instead of deep-focus long takes that provide viewers with a realistic impression of Beijing's urban landscape in the 'Beijing Trilogy', extreme close-up shots, violations of continuity editing conventions, constant interruptions of the narrative flow and unorthodox female images

mark the cinematic language of *Perpetual Motion*. Ning's bold experiment not only bombed at the box office but also stirred a heated debate. Some viewers applauded Ning's overwriting of 'the collective imagination of middle-aged women' and saw *Perpetual Motion* as a milestone in Chinese Women's Film; other critics lambasted the filmic indulgence in the nihilistic narcissism and affectation of the 'youxian jieji'/'leisure class'.²

Feeling distanced and estranged from this group of 'teshu de nüren'/'special women', audiences can hardly identify with the main characters and fail to establish a female viewing subject. At the same time, almost all the debates recognized the feminist initiatives of the film's alternative aesthetics and female authorship, while pointing to the centrality of the middle-aged celebrity actresses, including Hong Huang and Liu Suola. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to their background, particularly their close connections with the 1980s cultural scene, which has been neglected in the film reviews.

Hong Huang, well known as a 'mingmen pinü'/'hippie daughter of a reputable household, is Qiao Guanhua's stepdaughter and the ex-wife of Chen Kaige, a Fifth Generation film-maker who first gained his fame with *Huang Tudi/Yellow Earth* (1984).³ As one of the first group of exchange students from 'Red China', Hong was sent to study international politics at Vassar College in the early 1980s. Currently, she is the CEO of China Interactive Media Group, a multimedia advertising company targeting the Chinese middle class, particularly female consumers. Born in Beijing, currently Liu Suola is a New York-based, avant-garde musician composing and performing a 'Chinese brand of blues', 'a distinctive blend of Asian opera and folk blended with African-American blues

and jazz' (Pan 1999: n.p.). Nonetheless, Liu is better known for her novel *Ni biewu xuanze/You Have No Choice* (1985). Acclaimed for its bold linguistic experiment and dark humour, this piece of Chinese avant-garde literature portrays a group of restless music students' exploration of new forms and meanings of art and life in 1980s Beijing. Liu's trademark cynicism, parody, word games and surrealist style and her hybridized blues all found their way into *Perpetual Motion*.

Both celebrities played a critical role in pushing a wave of nostalgia for the 1980s. One of the bestsellers about the 'Golden Era' of the 1980s is Zha Jianying's *Bashi niandai fangtan lu/Interviews with 1980s' Intellectuals* (2006), which was released almost at the same time as *Perpetual Motion*. In the process of pulling together this volume, Hong presented the book proposal in an editorial meeting of her fashion magazine *Time Out*. As a pioneering figure in the 1980s literary scene, Liu was one of Zha's interviewees, the only woman. Ning Ying also contributed her efforts to the final publication of this book. Talking about *Interviews with the 1980s' Intellectuals*, Hong declares: 'There is no genuine culture nowadays. If we want to talk about culture, we have to go back to the 1980s' (Zha 2006: 5).⁴

Commenting on the 1980s cultural production, Dai Jinhua characterized its leitmotif as 'the art of the Sons' that frames 'a historic act of Patricide' (2002: 14). According to Dai, this patriarchal complex is a political allegory of the son generation's attack on official ideology in the hope of constructing a new cultural identity. Yet, in addition to the 'son generation', the 'daughter generation', which includes the woman director and leading actresses of *Perpetual Motion*, who also came of age during the Maoist era and participated enthusiastically in the high culture of the 1980s, an era fondly

remembered by Chinese intellectuals as the time of idealism and the second wave of Enlightenment, picking up where the May Fourth Movement had left off. Arousing a sense of nostalgia towards such male–female bonding in the ‘Golden Age’ of ‘High Culture Fever’, the fragmentary memories and dislocated history of *Perpetual Motion* set out ‘to recreate not a particular historical setting but the cultural experience of a particular period’ (Connor 1989: 178).

Situated at such a historical and cultural conjuncture, the filmic narrative centring on the daughter generation’s on- and off-screen star images are double-edged. On the one hand, their visibility not only raises the oft-overlooked issue of middle-aged and post-menopausal femininity but also evokes rich historical and political memories that are supposed to serve as an antidote to ongoing radical marketization and global consumerism. On the other, the social and cultural elite status of the celebrities problematizes the revolutionary message of the film, as attested by its controversial audience reception. This paradox links to a central problematic of ‘women’s film’: how can women formulate ‘feminine’ narratives that keep ‘the distance from official culture’, if their privileged status in the phallogentric order risks a simple reproduction of male domination? (Lauretis 1985: 174).

Struggling with this paradox, Ning Ying resorts to create a critical distance from the mainstream culture through an alternative cinematic practice. Throughout the film, the cultivation of such an alternative practice is made possible by her development of a heavy-handed negative aesthetic. In other words, the woman director chooses to desubliminate and interiorize the filmic exploration of female subjectivity in an enclosed time and space, which is constantly haunted by a spectral aesthetics characterized by

surrealist overtones of and audio-visual allusions to death, grave, ruins and ghosts. I coin the term ‘interiorized feminism’ to refer to this feminist practice of negating that takes effect within a temporal-spatial closure on multiple (physical, psychological, linguistic and social) levels.

However, the strategies of ‘interiorized feminism’ and negative aesthetics fail to fend off the penetration of the Law of the Father or the domineering market rationale of post-socialist China. On the one hand, the market rationale manifests itself through an on-screen consumer aesthetics that lingers on and magnifies each fragmented detail of the women characters’ classy domestic lifestyle. Apparently, they are privileged upper-class consumers thanks to China’s polarizing social stratification. On the other hand, the film’s marketing strategy cashes in the increasing popularity of middle-class melodramas among Chinese audiences. Selling it as *the Chinese version of Desperate Housewives*, the film’s advertising campaign encourages audiences to acquire viewing pleasures from peeping into celebrity women’s private lives.

As a result, the film’s radical content and alternative aesthetics are, ironically, framed and packaged in prevailing consumer aesthetics and commodity fetishism on and off the silver screen. All these competing drives and accounts render the film a contested narrative constantly oscillating between avant-garde feminism and domestic melodrama, and between a register of disintegrating sisterhood and a celebrity scandal of adultery. These gaps and ambivalences generate mixed messages, perpetual controversy and gnawing questions about the ‘women’s film’. Therefore, it is necessary to engage with interlocking textual, intertextual and contextual layers to examine the discursive and

aesthetic innovations, contradictions and limits of the daughter generation's cinematic feminism.

All post-menopausal women are castrates?⁵

The script of *Perpetual Motion* was composed by Ning Ying, Liu Suola and Hong Huang, the self-named 'bitch club'. This 'bitch production', as Ning Ying calls it, is abundant with spur-of-the-moment scenarios and conversations.⁶ The simple storyline of the film revolves around four post-menopausal women's disintegrating marriages and nostalgic memories. In the opening sequence, the camera zooms in and focuses on the insipid face of Niuniu (played by amateur actress Hong Huang), a middle-aged fashion magazine publisher, which happens to be Hong Huang's professional identity in real life. Lying in bed listlessly, Niuniu suddenly realizes that her husband has not come home this evening. Neither can he be reached by phone. Trying to figure out his whereabouts, Niuniu checks his laptop, where she discovers a series of love letters addressed to her husband. In these love letters, an anonymous woman describes vividly the sexual pleasures that she enjoys with Niuniu's husband and declares that she wants to drive Niuniu crazy. Hence, on the eve of the Chinese New Year (traditionally a time for family reunion), Niuniu invites friends over in order to find out which one of them might be her husband's secret mistress.

In the following segments of the film, the rhythm of the narrative slows down to such an extent that one feels the cinematic time is frozen. The slow-moving and contemplative narrative in a stagnant time frame violates the usual expectations of Chinese audiences, who have gotten used to the fast-paced narrative flow and visual

spectacles of Hollywood cinema. Into the enclosed space of a traditional *sihe yuan*/courtyard house located at No. 51 of Shijia Hutong in Beijing, enter Mrs Ye (Ping Yanni), a successful real estate woman; Qinqin (Li Qinqin), a fashion model who has experienced a series of failed interracial marriages; and Lala (Liu Suola),⁷ an avant-garde artist back from abroad. They spend a whole day eating, smoking, playing homoerotic games and immersing themselves in memories of the past. Meanwhile, Niuniu interrogates her female friends one by one about her husband's extramarital affair.

The next morning, Niuniu gets a phone call from the police, informing her that her husband has died in a car accident, with an 18-year-old girl sitting next to him. At this news, Niuniu feels utterly lost, Mrs Ye is dumbfounded, Qinqin bursts into tears, while Lala laughs hysterically and goes insane. Instead of showing sympathy at such a typical melodramatic moment, the unrelenting camera pulls away from the deranged women. Seen in a high-angled shot, the four emotional women look ludicrous and trivialized, surrounded by a circle of stylish luxury sofas. Thus, the film ends abruptly on a schizophrenic scene, showing the mad woman's entrapment between nostalgic fantasies and disillusioning reality.

The formula of women reuniting and recounting their personal lives can be traced back to the omnibus film *Nuer jing/A Bible for Daughters* (1934, dir. Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu et al.).⁸ Compared with its 'family plus revolution' formula with great emphasis on social problems and gender inequality, contemporary reincarnations, such as the commercially successful talk show *Tianxia nüren/Women Under Heaven* (hosted by the female *haigui* anchor Yang Lan), are more oriented to cashing in on exposés of women stars' private lives.⁹ Deviating from these variants of 'feminine narratives',

Perpetual Motion strikes audiences with an alternative visual aesthetics that encourages a different mode of looking at the women speakers.

The best example of this eccentric aesthetics is a six-minute sequence of a scene in which the four dressed-up elite women eat chicken feet with relish, which disgusts many viewers.¹⁰ Investigating the connection between food practices and social order, Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr suggest that women serve food for men to express their affection, making it such that their 'own tastes and preferences are subordinated and those of men are privileged' (Charles and Kerr 1988: 225). Intriguingly, rather than create associations with the domestic comforts, interpersonal warmth and 'life-affirming pleasures' of conventional cinematic meal scenes, *Perpetual Motion's* prolonged eating sequence is totally unappetizing and counter to conventional aesthetics (Bell-Metereau 2001: 107). In a series of close-up shots from different angles, the chicken feet appear lifeless and ugly, evoking visual associations of death and decay. Viewers are forced to face the augmented and fragmented body parts: the long-nailed chicken feet and the long-nailed hands and chewing mouths of the consuming women. Their performance of the most primitive means of eating greedily with hands and teeth gives them animal-like looks, shattering the glamorous image of *zhixing nüren* (well educated and beautiful woman) that can be found in numerous commercials, fashion magazines and popular melodramas. In the spirit of what Teresa de Lauretis calls 'feminist deaesthetics', i.e., deidealizing and defetishizing the female body on the screen, this particular sequence of deaestheticizing the female body denounces the usual connection between women and consumable food and destroys the scopophilic pleasures of film viewers (1985: 174–75).

Analysing the motif of eating in world cinema, Rebecca Bell-Metereau suggests

that women are supposed to be nurturers feeding men, while men eating unusual foods ‘signals virility and robust courage’ (2001: 93). In this sense, the excessive visualization of women’s incessant chewing and swallowing chicken feet in *Perpetual Motion* places them in the privileged (usually masculine) position of a desiring and daring subject who asserts the right to unsightly ‘dirty’ pleasures with an explicit sexual connotation. Their non-stop chewing and swallowing, accompanied by orgasm-like moaning, indicates their unrestrained good appetite and uninhibited desire, which runs contrary to cultural expectations for women to curb their craving for food in order to keep a shapely body and to serve their family. The four voracious women eat not for survival, or as what Lévi-Strauss terms ‘the group’s existence as a group’, but for the pleasure of consuming delicacies (1969: 32). This anti-kinship, anti-domestic gesture is echoed by another detail – the four middle-aged women have no children out of their failed marriages. If raising her child into the symbolic order is one of woman’s functions in forming the patriarchal unconscious, then these childless women fail to perform the maternal role of reproducing the patriarchal symbolic order (Mulvey 2000: 483). Rather, what they yearn for is an open display of their non-reproductive oral desire.

Matching this unsightly food scene, the visualized materiality of the unruly middle-aged woman’s body is highlighted throughout the film, encouraging different viewing positions that counter the mainstream cinema’s ‘cod[ing of] the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order’ (Mulvey 2000: 485). For instance, in the opening bathroom sequence, the camera invites the voyeuristic gaze into the most private space, but not for visual pleasure. Instead, it follows Niuniu’s intense gaze at her self-reflection in the mirror, lingering relentlessly on her entangled hair, swollen face,

drooping breasts and bulging midsection. Here, the middle-aged woman's contemplative self-scrutiny flirts with the voyeuristic gaze. Rather than fulfilling its visual pleasure, the mirror image resorts to a highly self-reflective exhibitionism that demystifies and desexualizes the female body. Resonating with this flirtatious flavour of the mirror scene, Niuniu and her female friends further explore their bodily experiences of menopause. They show unusual interest in this taboo subject rarely discussed in public or represented on the big screen since medical discourses and traditional folklores often represent menopause as 'a pathological and degenerative process' easily leading to mental disorder (1995: 46).

Denouncing the cultural stereotype about 'castrated' middle-aged 'abandoned women' (*yuanfu* or *qifu*), Lala claims that 'Postmenopausal women are the sexiest, at the height of their desires'. Footnoting Lala's statement, the women characters flirt with each other and crack dirty jokes, referring to the man as '*wujian*'/'the thing' to be exploited for the fulfilment of their sexual pleasures. Thus, they turn the tables on the man and objectify him in their imaginary gaze. Since it is usually reserved as men's privilege to tell dirty jokes as an essential means of reinforcing their masculine power, the four middle-aged women's provocative conversations challenge the traditional 'active/passive heterosexual division of labor' (Mulvey 2000: 488). Their indulgence in homoerotic fantasy, linguistic games and verbal pleasures implies the repudiation of the conventional connection between sex and reproduction, suggesting possibilities of new rules of intimate relationships against the normative gender roles of middle-aged women.

What happens after daughter gets married?

Ning Ying's emphasis on post-menopausal femininity breaks new ground for the development of Chinese feminism. Since its birth, few Chinese films have shown genuine concern for middle-aged women's gender- and age-specific problems. As Lin Danya, a feminist critic based at Amoy University, pointed out, the May Fourth '*funü jiefang*'/'women's liberation' was actually '*shaonü jiefang*'/'girls' liberation', with its focus on 'free marriage'.¹¹ Nicole Huang also points out that the most powerful May Fourth symbol is 'the image of a daughter who left her patriarchal family in pursuit of free love' (2005: 42). Through the means of heterosexual courtship and 'free marriage', the father's daughter was saved by the male, entered a conjugal family, and thus completed the cycle of 'girls' liberation'. However, women's subjugated status within the confinement of domestic space remained largely intact, as Lu Xun's short story 'Regret for the Past' demonstrates.¹²

Similarly, during the socialist campaign of 'women's liberation', middle-aged women were not the focus of 'state feminism'. The Maoist '*tie guniang*'/'Iron Girl', the role model of the socialist 'women's liberation', referred to unmarried young girls who participated actively in social production. The naturalized feminine roles of being a wife and a mother within domestic space remained a prominent marker, indicating a radical rupture between one's girlhood and womanhood and consequently exiled the married post-reproductive women outside the political agenda of 'women's liberation'. The question 'What happens after daughter gets married?' was rarely raised or discussed.

As post-Mao China has witnessed unprecedented urbanization and modernization, the female image has often been represented as 'the timeless object of male desire' or the embodiment of the modern, the new and the progressive (Zhang 2000: 95). A whole

cultural industry in the name of ‘*meinü jingji*’/‘beauty economy’ has focused on how to look young and keep young, ideally forever. Countless rounds of beauty contests and pageants have objectified the female body as the eroticized target of the male gaze and the bewitching glamour of urban façade. The ‘son-generation’ film-maker Zhang Yimou showcased hundreds of youthful female bodies as the image of ‘New China’ during the grand opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. For his latest romance film *Shanzha shu zhi lian/Under the Hawthorn Tree* (Zhang Yimou, 2010), Zhang again emphasized *chunmei* (literally pure and pretty, an adjective normally used to valorize the beauty of young girls with a strong implication of virginity) as the essential virtue of the female protagonist Jingqiu, who has come of age during the Cultural Revolution (the same generation as Ning Ying and her middle-aged women characters in *Perpetual Motion*). The celebration of Jingqiu’s *chunmei* places her above historical specificities and ensures that her feminine essence remains uncontaminated by dominant (masculinized) ideologies.

The constant reproduction of the fetishization of feminine youth in mass culture leads to a misogynist demonization of the post-menopausal woman. While the sexualized and fertile youthful female body is set as the ahistorical gender norm, the middle-aged woman’s body is considered to be abnormal, unfeminine, deficient, dirty and pathological – it ‘can contribute neither to the continuity of the species nor to the pleasure of men’ (Lock 1993: 366). Subject to the regulation of medical science, psychoanalytic theories and popular discourse, ‘the Menopausal Woman remains essentialized, a universal figure who smells faintly of old age, decrepitude, and death’ (Lock 1993: xxxii).

Instead of being invisible like men's ageing bodies, post-menopausal and post-reproductive female body is often represented in recent cultural productions as an indication of women's 'dangerous age'. The characterization of ugly and hysterical middle-aged women in popular melodramas such as *Kewang/Yearnings* (dir. Lu Xiaowei, 1990), *Qianshou/Holding Hands* (dir. Yang Yang, 1999) and *Zhongguoshi lihun/Chinese-Style Divorce* (dir. Shen Yan, 2004) has reinforced the cultural stereotype of an abhorrent *pofu*/shrew's physical repugnance and mental disorder, frequently dubbed as typical post-menopausal symptoms. In *Perpetual Motion*, the final revelation of the fact that Niuniu's husband has an 18-year-old mistress confirms this prevalent male obsession with feminine youth. In China's paradigmatic shift, age has become an index of the repositioning of different social strata and the accumulation of gender-divided capital.

Born in 1959, Ning Ying is particularly concerned with the gender-related problems faced by women of her generation, the middle-aged daughter generation. Talking about *Perpetual Motion*, Ning Ying explained that her generation has witnessed the compressed development of modern China, and as a result, they have developed a distinctive subjectivity and cultural psyche. In her 'Director's Statement', she writes:

Look at the women living around us, particularly those mature Chinese women. They are the condensed embodiment of historical experiences of several generations. Having participated in the resistance against the feudal forces, the revolution for gender equality and the Western feminist movements, however, all of sudden, these descendents of the 'Half of the Sky' (*banbian tian*)¹³ succumb to the commodity aesthetics of the

capitalist commercial economy. Before we know it, we have returned to the traditional path of conforming to male-centered feminine beauty.

Otherwise, we are seen as ugly. (Ning et al. 2006: 1)

Spectral aesthetics or consumer aesthetics?

Although referencing landmark historical events and women's political agency, Ning Ying chooses to circumscribe the master narrative by exploring individualized history and fragmented memories. At odds with the assertive speaking subject position reconstructed in a 'new language of desire' and excessive (oral) pleasures, the visual aesthetics of the film is marked by a dehistoricized spectral surrealism dominated by temporal stagnancy, physical decay, supernatural nightmares and (self-)imprisonment (Mulvey 2000: 285).

Throughout the film, except for the final sequence, the camera rarely explores beyond the boundary of the self-contained space of the courtyard house. The opening credits are superimposed on a freeze-frame shot from the inside of the window: the window frame dissects the still view of the courtyard and a phallic high-rise in the distance. Destroying the symmetry of the frame composition, the modern high-rise seems to pose a threat to the cavernous feminine interior. This freeze-frame shot is repeated in later sequences and complemented by multiple long takes strictly framed by doors, walls, mirrors, windows and furniture. In the following sequences, a series of bird's eye shots of the rooftop constantly frame the courtyard like the sealed space of an oversized coffin or tomb. A traditional-style heavy gate guards its entrance and seals out the rapidly changing and chaotic outside world.

Marking a private interior, this highly introspective and retrospective space is enveloped in such greyish and misty lighting that one can easily lose track of time, failing to tell whether it is day or night, past or present, dream or reality. Frequent shots of overimposition and merging of women's bodies, domestic items and courtyard trees on windowpanes enhance the sense of disorientation. Lost in the flow of time, the isolated and self-contained feminine space is reminiscent of the mother's womb, 'secret and sealed like the tomb' that buries alive the women's yearnings, desires and memories (Beauvoir 1952: 165). This spatial interiorization goes hand in hand with the film's focus on female desire, which reverts the root of the daughter generation's anxiety to the biological, the corporeal. Images of goldfish imprisoned in a fish tank, a dying chicken struggling in the kitchen sink and a lonely sparrow entrapped in the attic highlight the vulnerability and decline of the powerless and immobilized body.

This visual spectrality is further stressed with the soundtrack of the women's fragmented narratives. Throughout this women's psychodrama, despite the man's physical absence, the figure of a male spiritual mentor (a father, a brother, a husband and so on) takes the form of a ghost that haunts the nostalgic women, occupying the central position in their disjointed memories. In her melancholic and dreamy voice-over, for example, Lala recollects the plight of her parents, her fingers moving frantically, as in a trance, to create a 'feminine writing' of history. Her father was imprisoned during the Maoist era. Waiting for him in despair, her paralysed mother lay in bed for years until the dirt under her bed piled as high as a grave. In a similarly confessional manner, Qinqin talks about her ex-husband, a Japanese man who died in a car accident (an uncanny prophecy of the demise of Niuniu's husband), and came back to haunt her.

Resonating with the women characters' overflowing memories, souvenirs from the past invade the enclosed space as haunting ghosts that frequently interrupt a linear evolutionary narrative. In their nostalgic backward gazes, each moment of the past is frozen and objectified into floating icons: traditional-style painted screen, dusty thread-bound Chinese books, piling records of revolutionary songs and palm-size Chairman Mao badges. Analysing the spectral aesthetics of ghost films, Bliss Cua Lim suggests that 'the idea of ghostly time in relation to a radicalized idea of noncontemporaneity [...] refutes the empty, homogeneous time and modernity and the universalizing narrative of progress' (2001: 289). With its gendered nostalgia and surrealist spectrality, *Perpetual Motion* fits what Paul G. Pickowicz terms as a 'Post-Socialist Cinema' that projects a dystopian and critical vision of contemporary China's modernization.¹⁴

Buried in the finely designed and stylized *mise-en-scène* of the sealed-off space, the ghostly existences are reified as privatized and collectible artefacts. As a 'replay of empty stereotypes', they are displayed side by side with costly antique pieces, imported red wine, a Turkish coffee pot and a speechless domestic servant (Jameson 1998: 189). The political and cultural critique implied by these ghostly existences are colonized by consumer aesthetics and displaced into a silent testimony to the female elites' class lifestyle and accumulation of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1984: 291). Deprived of its dangerous edge, the consumable spectral aesthetics leads to a perpetual reproduction of decontextualized, deterritorialized and self-referential fragments and phantasmagoric memories.

This spectral aesthetics of consumption also permeates the chicken-eating scene. The poetic name, sumptuous packaging, exquisite tea sets and silverware, and meticulous

service of a bunch of delivery women and men of this unsightly dish resonate with many other signs of commodity aesthetics in the *mise-en-scène*. Rather than assert an autonomous desiring subject, the intrusion of the commodity aesthetics makes the consuming women an essential link in the operation of the consumer economy. In a sequence of oversized blow-up visuals that take up the whole screen, the well-trimmed, long-nailed and pallid chicken feet look like an extension of the bodies of the voracious women. Lala's admiration of the chicken feet complements this visual effect of doubling. Sucking gently the chicken feet and then her own fingers in a flirtatious manner, she makes a self-referential observation of the four women's gluttonous consumption and the chicken's dead body to be consumed: 'Look at these long nails! The chicken must have had an insatiable desire before it was killed'.

This grotesque sequence of self-consuming and self-scrutinizing cannibals not only resonates with the earlier sequence of Niuniu in the mirror but also hearkens back to Lu Xun's iconic metaphor of 'wandering spirit' in his essay 'Mujie wen'/'The epitaph'. As a double of the narrator, the spirit 'takes the form of a serpent with poisonous fangs. Instead of biting others, it bites itself, so it perishes'.¹⁵ Ban Wang reads this self-consuming allegory as a failed act of self-anatomy and self-understanding, 'a doomed effort to wrest some vestiges of "subjectivity" from a corpse' (1997: 88).

As if a gendered re-enactment of the gruesome scene of self-biting, the chicken-feet sequence also smacks of intellectuals' anxiety around soul-searching and subject-building. The animal corpse acts as an exteriorization of the interior desire of the consuming woman, visualizing the self-destructive relationship of the desiring subject of consumer and their desired object of consumption. Enmeshed in the consumerist culture

as both the consumer and the consumed, these women are destined to fail in their endeavour to inscribe stable meanings through their self-indulgent act of consumption. The interchangeability of the desiring subject and the desirable object calls into question the binarism of subject vs object. Just like the self-consuming 'wandering spirit' under Lu Xun's pen, the bold practice of self-exploration and self-anatomy has only brought a profound sense of futility and contradiction that destabilizes the effort of establishing a coherent and assertive subject.

This sense of futility and loss comes back to haunt the characters and audiences in the last scene, the only sequence shot outside the courtyard house. In this final sequence, the camera cruises the wide, empty highway that extends endlessly and merges into Beijing's skylines, dotted with high-rises and omnipresent construction sites. This panoramic view of the vast urban space of a modernizing Beijing hints at the final erasure of the spectral existence of the courtyard house, which contradicts Lala's disembodied voice-off 'How come the world remains the same after one hundred years have passed?'

Holding their heads high, three of the four fashionable female characters, except for Lala who has gone insane, are walking on a broad street. Instead of forming an intimate group, they keep distant from each other and wear no expressions on their exquisitely made-up faces. Unlike the male *flâneur* in *I Love Beijing* (dir. Ning Ying, 2000) 'who takes visual possession of the city', the three women are at loss, like aimless drifters with aimless visions floating over the urban façade (Wilson 1992: 98). In the closing crane shot, the camera slowly pulls upward and moves away from the three isolated women walking alone in an urban a space of emptiness, highlighting a sense of melancholy and alienation rather than togetherness. Accompanying this long take of

bleak visuals unfolding in the disenchanted time of modern Beijing, a non-diegetic 'Chinese blues' composed by Liu Suola swells, reminding the viewers of schizophrenic Lala left behind, the spectral Other to the three women marching forward. This imagined 'wandering spirit' lurking between postmodern high-rises reveals the daughter generation's profound sense of 'nostalgia for nostalgia', a 'wish to be haunted; to long for the great passions that now exist only in the past' (Jameson 1998: 189).

Class, market and re-domestication

Analogous to the disconnection between the excessive verbal pleasures of an assertive desiring subject and the spectral visual aesthetics of decay and dissolution, the film reveals a tension between the leading characters' non-stop talking and a linguistic blockage that disrupts effective interpersonal interactions and sisterly bonding. Although the four female characters are busy talking all the time about the important male figures in their lives, they are more absorbed in their otherworldly monologues than in establishing female solidarity through effective inter-subjective communication.

This bleak picture of an impossible sisterhood is even more conspicuous with to the solid fraternal bond depicted in Ning Ying's previous films. According to Jerry White, Ning's earlier works such as *Zhaole/For Fun* (1993) and *Minjing gushi/On the Beat* (1995) 'are throughout concerned with evoking the details of male-to-male intimacy' (1997: 8). Set in the vast open space of labyrinthine *hutong*/back alleys in old quarters of Beijing, these films place an emphasis on male characters' constant actions and interactions captured by Ning Ying's observant camera from an 'anthropological/third person perspective' (White 1997: 8).

This highlighted male–male friendship strikes a sharp contrast with the absence of female–female bonding in *Perpetual Motion*. Furthermore, the failure to communicate, interact and bond with each other also marks the alienated relationship between the four elite middle-aged women and Zhang Mama, the only working class elderly woman in this film. The maternal role defied by the childless elite women is displaced onto the image of this domestic servant who acts as a caretaker, always busily labouring to arrange everything needed by Niuniu and her friends. Thus, gender hierarchy is displaced onto class hierarchy as the normative gender role of maternal nurturer is relayed to other working-class women (and men), whose labour guarantees the fulfilment of the classy *suzhi* (quality) displayed by the cultured female elites.¹⁶

Zhang Mama, in her monochromatic clothing, is often shown as a nearly indistinguishable part of the dark background, standing side by side with furniture, household items and appliances. Compared with the four elite women’s endless and self-indulgent talking, Zhang Mama speaks few words throughout the film, like the ubiquitous but silent body of the large group of *dagongmei*/migrant women workers in urban space. As a result, Zhang Mama’s expressionless face remains an impenetrable surface with no psychological depth or female subjectivity. To the audiences, the camera simply reveals the physical movements of the laboring body of an aged working-class woman. Her inscrutable corporeality visualizes more about ‘*differences within women*’ than sexual differences between men and women (Lauretis 1985: 165, original emphasis). There is no way that her post-menopausal experience can be articulated.

On the one hand, her silent existence highlights the fact that the introspective exploration of ‘the perpetual motion of the inner world’ is a privilege enjoyed by the

social elites who have accumulated cultural capital and linguistic currency. On the other, the omnipresent yet speechless labourer disrupts the narrative flow like another haunting ghost who constantly brings back the traces of social stratification outside of the courtyard house. This sociolinguistic hierarchy is further enhanced by a smattering of English words in the four elite women characters' conversations, which marks their *haigui* identity as the owner of 'a *lingua franca* of a global order of power relations' (Yan 2003a: 94).

This penetration of the exterior into the interior is further reinforced by the marketing strategy of the film, which capitalizes on selling celebrity women's private lives. For instance, on the poster of *Perpetual Motion*, five women characters (including Zhang Hanzhi) occupy the centre of the frame, displaying their 'to-be-looked-at-ness' with chic dresses, well-groomed hairstyles, exquisite make-up and coquettish facial expressions. The uniform black colour of their fashionable garments not only boosts a visual contrast with the crimson lips, sofa, scarf and buttons but also implies a female solidarity built on a 'consuming bond', resonating with the chicken-eating scene (Negra 2008: 29).

The caption in the middle part of the poster reads 'zhongguo ban *Juewang zhufu*'/'Chinese version of *Desperate Housewives*'. On the top, another line of bold-faced characters appeals to audiences with an alternative film title '*Shei dong le wo de laogong*'/'Who Seduced My Husband?'. Obviously, seduction, sex and celebrity women's domestic lives are marketed as the selling points of this film. This marketing strategy of re-sexualizing and re-domesticating the daughter generation softens the feminist edge of the film and makes it safer and more enjoyable for the voyeuristic gaze.

By the same token, the blurb provided by dangdang.com, one of the biggest Chinese online bookstores, summarizes the plot of the film thus: ‘Four *haigui* women fight for one man with their wit and strength. [Let’s listen to] Chen Kaige’s ex-wife talk about their past!’¹⁷ Apparently these seductive lines refer to an extended sequence in the middle part of the film in which Niuniu vividly describes all the details of her first date with her husband and concludes that Chinese men are good at ‘mind fucking’. Her following cynical lines: ‘Back then he could be counted as an avant-garde artist. Now he is just a bestselling writer’ are also read as the ‘abandoned’ middle-aged woman’s revenge on her ex-husband Chen (Podvin 2006: n.p.).¹⁸

This kind of marketing strategy places the film back in the popular melodramatic mode, re-domesticating Ning Ying’s experimental use of non-professional actors/actresses. Unscripted conversations, improvised performances, fragments of real-life stories, together with the similarity of character names to the actresses’, conflate the actresses and the characters. This type of ‘life-like’ acting style ensures that the distance between actor and character is minimalized, creating the illusion that we are dealing with a ‘real person’ (Ang 1986: 30). As a result, film viewers tend to identify Niuniu with Hong Huang and Lala with Liu Suola, savouring great pleasure in identifying Niuniu’s confession as a revelation of intimate details of Hong and Chen’s romantic relationship in real life. Similarly, Li Qinqin, the only professional actress in the film, is often invited to trendy ‘women’s talk shows’ to discuss her failed cross-cultural marriages. One episode of such ‘women’s shows’ made up a sexy title ‘*Li Qinqin houhui jia laowai*’/‘Li Qinqin regretted marrying foreigners’ to attract TV audiences and boost viewers ratings.

Although *Perpetual Motion* is intended to be anathema to this type of middle-class melodrama, it stumbles back into the model it aims to transcend.

While posing as unabashed ‘consumers’ of men, these celebrity women are at the same time consumed by the entertainment section of tabloids thriving in contemporary China’s commercial culture. The enclosure of an interiorized niche of the upper class is constantly penetrated by a voyeuristic gaze, which mocks Ning Ying’s denouncement of a male-centred viewing position. As a result, the feminist exploration of the ‘perpetual motion’ of women’s inner worlds turns out to generate ‘perpetual stereotypes’ about middle-aged women of domestic melodramas (Podvin 2006: n.p.). No wonder a male critic shows sympathy to Lala’s mental breakdown at the end of the film, and suggests that the solution to post-menopausal women’s problem is to build more modern psychiatric clinics so they can become more healthy, feminine and civilized (Jin 2006: 22).

Conclusion

Discussing the ‘Fourth Generation’ film-maker Xie Jin’s *Furong zhen/Hibiscus Town* (1986), Nick Browne argues that unlike western melodramas emphasizing sexual differences and women’s domesticity, Xie’s political melodrama acts as ‘the nexus between public and private life, a mode in which gender as a mark of difference is a limited, mobile term activated by distinctive social powers and historical circumstances’ (1994: 43).¹⁹ Deviating from the aesthetics of classic cinema, the Chinese New Wave has modified this politicized melodramatic tradition. Transcribing sexual differences in spatial politics, recent award-winning films such as *Piaoliang mama/Breaking the Silence*

(Sun Zhou, 2000), *Tuya de hunshi/Tuya's Marriage* (Wang Quan'an, 2006) and *Zuoyou/In Love We Trust* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2007) tend to reduce complex social problems into domestic melodramas about women's marital crises and moral dilemmas. Even the acclaimed 'women's film' *Nüxing shijie/The Feminine World* (1991) directed by Dong Kena, another daughter generation woman film-maker, also represents middle-aged women's 'excessive *shehuixing/sociality*' as a gendered disease that needs to be cured for the maintenance of 'their physical and emotional "home"' (Yan 2003a: 88). This spatial segregation and enclosure reduce the complex relations of women and history into a singular mode. While history has been decontextualized and deterritorialized into a cultural sign, signifying the universal and eternal male-centred power structure, women are abstracted as the embodiment of the pure feminine interior uncontaminated by the 'dirty' politics or money of the 'masculine' outside. Seeking to resist the hegemony of a male-centred 'master narrative', this type of introspective narrative has become so prevalent that it turns out to be a new 'master narrative', rendering women pre-discursive and apolitical animals situated at the heart of the domestic interior. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it, "the personal is political" all too often translates into "the personal instead of the political" (1985: 167).

Displaying an ambivalent relationship with this narrative of feminine interiority, *Perpetual Motion* best illustrates the daughter generation film-maker's strategies for and predicaments in dealing with the profound tensions between the film's radical anti-domesticity gesture and its marketing orientation towards re-domestication; between elitist self-expression and cross-class female solidarity built on inter-subjective communication; and between reconstructing the daughter generation's subject position

and historical agency and projecting a strong sense of futility and (self-)imprisonment embedded in spectral aesthetics and interiorized feminism.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to the following colleagues and friends for their constructive criticism: Robin Visser, Jiang Haoshu, Lin Danya, Keith McMahon, Maggie Childs, Hannah Britton and Ann Schofield. Finally, yet importantly, my thanks are due to Ke Qianting, who invited me to Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou to give a talk on this article. I gathered valuable feedback from her students and colleagues, which contributed greatly to the refinement of my central argument.

References

Anagnost, A. (2004), 'The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*)', *Public Culture*, 16:2, pp. 189–208.

Ang, I. (1986), *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London: Routledge.

Bell-Metereau, R. (2001), 'Eating and drinking, men and women', in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 91–107.

Berry, C. (1988), 'Chinese "Women's Cinema": Introduction', *Camera Obscura*, 6:3, pp. 5–19.

Beauvoir, S. d. (1952), *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parsley), New York: Vintage.

Browne, N. (1994), 'Society and subjectivity: On the political economy of Chinese melodrama', in Nick Browne et al. (eds), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 40–56.

Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice), Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Charles, N. and Kerr, Marion (1988), *Women, Food and Families*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Cheng N. (2003), *Shanghai Lady*, Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe.

Connor, S. (1989), *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Cui, S. (2007), 'Ning Ying's Beijing Trilogy: Cinematic configurations of age, class, and sexuality', in Zhang Zhen (ed.), *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at*

the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 241–63.

Dai J. (2002), 'Severed bridge: The art of the son's generation', in Jing Wang and Tani Barlow (eds), *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, London and New York: Verso, pp. 13–48.

Dikötter, F. (1995), *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Doane, M. A. (1982), 'Film and masquerade: Theorising the female spectator', *Screen*, 23:3/4, pp. 74–88.

Hong H. (2007), *Wo de fei zhengchang shenghuo/My Non-Normal Life*, Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe.

Huang, N. (2005), *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*, Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Jameson, F. (1998), *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998*, London and New York: Verso.

Jin C. (2006), 'Nüxing minmi ziyou'/'Woman destruction freedom', *Dianying pingjie/Cinema Survey*, 17, p. 22.

Johnston, C. (1973), 'Women's cinema as counter-cinema', in Claire Johnston (ed.), *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London: Society for Education in Film and Television, pp. 24–31.

Kaplan, E. A. (1983), *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, New York and London: Methuen.

Lauretis, T. d. (1985), 'Aesthetic and feminist theory: Rethinking women's cinema', *New German Critique*, 34:Winter, pp. 154–75.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969), *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham), Boston: Beacon Press.

Li Ren (ed.) (2006), 'Wuqiong dong, shenme zai dong'/'Perpetual Motion, what is in motion?', *Dianying yishu/Film Art*, 3, pp. 79–84.

Lim, B. C. (2001), 'Spectral times: The ghost film as historical allegory', *Positions*, 9:2, pp. 287–329.

- Lin W. (2006), 'Zhongguo nüxing dianying xin langchou de juqi'/'The rise of Chinese women's film New Wave', *Dianying yishu/Film Art*, 4, pp. 126–28.
- Lock, M. (1993), *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lu, X. (1981), 'Mujie wen'/'The epitaph', *Lu Xun quanji/The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, vol. 2, p. 207.
- Mulvey, L. (2000), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller (eds), *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 483–94.
- Negra, D. (2008), *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, London: Routledge.
- Ning Y., Liu Suola, Hong Huang, and Zhang Hanzhi. (2006), *Niuren wuqiong dong/Women's Perpetual Motion*, Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe.
- Pan, K. (1999), 'Red China blues woman', *Beijing Scene*, 5:2,
<http://www.beijingscene.com/V05I002/feature/feature.htm>. Accessed 15 January 2010.

Pickowicz, P. G. (1994), 'Huang Jianxin and the notion of postsocialism', in Nick Browne et al. (eds), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 57–78.

Podvin, T. (2006), 'Perpetual stereotypes/weak female leads in Chinese film', <http://blog.hkcinemagic.com/thomas-podvin/index.php/2006/05/04>. Accessed 8 June 2010.

Wang, B. (1997), *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Wang X. (2007), "'Exin!' – Ping nüxing dianying *Wuqiong dong*/'Disgusting!' – On the feminist film *Perpetual Motion*", in Zhu Dake and Zhang Hong (eds), *21 shiji zhongguo wenhua ditu/The Map of the 21st-Century Chinese Culture*, Changchun: Jilin chuban jituan, pp. 103–11.

White, J. (1997), 'The films of Ning Ying: China unfolding in miniature', *Cineaction*, 42:1, pp. 2–9.

Wilson, E. (1992), 'The invisible flaneur', *New Left Review*, 1/191:January–February, pp. 90–110.

Wu T. (2008), 'Hong Huang zi pu shengfu chushu dihui Zhang Hanzhi'/'Hong Huang accuses her biological father's new book of slandering Zhang Hanzhi', *Chongqing wan bao/Chongqing Evening Post*, 12 May, http://news.ifeng.com/history/1/jishi/200805/0512_2663_534140.shtml. Accessed 11 August 2011.

Yan, H. (2003a), 'Tropes of "Home": The gender of globalizing markets in Chinese urban culture', *The China Review*, 3:1, pp. 77–114.

Yan, Hairong (2003b), 'Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: Organizing suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks', *Cultural Anthropology*, 18:4, pp. 493–523.

Yang H. (2006a), 'Zhongguo dianying yu shijie nüxing zhuyi yujing jiegui de changshi'/'An attempt of connecting Chinese cinema and world feminism', *Dianying yishu/Film Art*, 4, pp. 85–90.

Yang X. (2006b), 'Nüquan zhuyi zitai xia caochi zhe nanqing huayu de nüxing—Wuqiong dong zhong nüxing xingxiang chuyi'/'The women who produce male-centered discourse under feminist disguise—A preliminary analysis of the female image in *Perpetual Motion*', *Dianying wenxue/Film Literature*, 6, pp. 2–4.

Zha, J. (2006), *Bashi niandai fangtan lu/Interviews with the 1980s' Intellectuals*, Beijing: Sanlian shudian.

Zhang H. (1994), *Wo yu Qiao Guanhua/I and Qiao Guanhua*, Beijing: Beijing qingnian chubanshe.

Zhang, Z. (2000), 'Mediating time: The "Rice Bowl of Youth" in fin de siecle urban China', *Public Culture*, 12:1, pp. 93–113.

Contributor details

Hui Faye Xiao teaches modern Chinese literature, pop culture and cinema at the University of Kansas. Her recent publications have appeared in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Chinese Films in Focus II* and *Gender and Modernity in Global Youth Cultures*. Currently, she is working on her book *Family Revolution in Post-Revolutionary China: Popular Narratives of Divorce, 1980–2010*.

Contact:

2109 Wescoe Hall, 1445 Jayhawk Blvd., University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045,
USA.

E-mail: hxiao@ku.edu

Notes

¹ Jerry White and Shuqin Cui noted this conspicuous lack in their close analysis of Ning Ying's earlier cinematic works (see White 1997; Cui 2007).

² *Dianying yishu/Film Art* conducted a survey of eighteen women audience members working at the *Zhongguo dianying jia xiehui/Chinese Association of Filmmakers*. Some respondents considered *Perpetual Motion* a truthful reflection of gender-specific problems in contemporary China while others questioned the effectiveness of Ning's 'aristocratic' feminist strategy (see Li 2006). For more debates about the film, see Yang (2006a, 2006b) and Lin (2006).

³ Qiao Guanhua (1913–1983) served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (1974–1976) of the People's Republic of China. Often dubbed Qiao Laoye/Master Qiao, this high-ranking CCP cadre has become a legend in popular imagination for his scholarly talent, diplomatic charisma and romantic relationship with Zhang Hanzhi, his second wife. Zhang is the daughter of Zhang Shizhao, a cultural and political luminary, and the English teacher of Mao Zedong. Zhang's elite background earns her the fame of the *mingyuan*/famous madam of socialist China. Hong Huang is Zhang's daughter with her first husband, Hong Yanjun. For more information about the celebrity household, see Cheng (2003: 266–67), Zhang (1994) and Hong (2007).

⁴ Translation is mine unless otherwise noted.

⁵ The original phrase, without question mark, is part of the title of the article 'The fate of the nontreated postmenopausal women' by Robert A. Wilson and Thelma A. Wilson (1963), quoted in Lock (1993: xvi). For more discriminatory quotes against postmenopausal women, see the prologue of Lock's book.

⁶ Both terms 'bitch club' and 'bitch production' were put in English when Ning Ying

talked about this film. No Chinese translation was provided by the director or actresses.

In a later part of this article, I will discuss the women characters' use of English vocabulary in their casual conversation as a sociolinguistic marker of their elite status and international background.

⁷ Lala is a nickname of lesbians (also called *nü tongzhi*, literally women comrades) in Chinese. A number of lesbian forums (e. g. lalacub.net) use this term in their names. In this film, we see Lala caress and gaze at Niuniu's body several times, which seems to suggest physical intimacy and homoerotic desire between the two women.

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this film to my attention.

⁹ The term *haigui* literally means returning from overseas. It is used to refer to the group of Chinese people who return to China after studying or working abroad for a certain period of time. The *haigui* label is often closely associated with upward mobility and international background, conjuring up popular imagination about an allegedly cosmopolitan lifestyle and self-entrepreneurship. All four actresses and the director can be labelled *haigui* for their overseas experiences.

¹⁰ Representative of this type of review is Wang (2007).

¹¹ Thanks to Lin Danya for bringing this point to my attention.

¹² 'Shangshi'/'Regret for the Past' was published in 1925 and included in Lu Xun's collection of short stories *Panghuang/Wandering*. As Lu Xun's only fictional piece dealing with the son-and-daughter generation's pursuit for free love and marriage, it addresses the discursive boundaries of May Fourth romantic individualism and women's liberation.

¹³ 'Half of the Sky' is normally used to refer to the collective political subject of *funü*

(women) in high socialism because Mao declared that women could hold up half of the sky.

¹⁴ Paul G. Pickowicz first used this term in his analysis of Huang Jianxin's earlier works that lampoon the absurdities of contemporary Chinese society and question the idea of progressive modernity with caricatured characterization, unorthodox narratives and surrealist style (see Pickowicz 1994).

¹⁵ 'Mujie wen'/'The epitaph' was first included in his collection of essays *Yecao/Wild Grass* and then reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji/The Complete Works of Lu Xun*. The English translation is quoted in Wang (1997).

¹⁶ As a 'value-coding' discourse, *suzhi* plays a key role in constructing the urban middle-class domestic culture and shaping subject positions in post-Mao China. Ann Anagnost's and Yan Hairong's studies have offered insightful analyses of how *suzhi* encompasses the connection between *ziwo jiazhi*/self-value and a neo-liberal body politics (see Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003b).

¹⁷ http://product.dangdang.com/product.aspx?product_id=9149475, accessed 15 November 2010.

¹⁸ This marketing strategy also caused the breakdown of the off-screen sisterhood between Ning Ying and Hong Huang. For more details, see Wu (2008).

¹⁹ With its political message and explicit reference to the KMT-sanctioned '*Xin shenghuo yundong*'/'New Life Movement', the abovementioned 1934 melodrama *Nüer jing* set on the evening of the KMT National Day (10 October) can be seen as an indicator of historical and aesthetic continuity between 1930s Shanghai cinema and the much-discussed Xie Jin model.