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Revisiting Women's Cinema: Feminism, Socialism, and Mainstream Culture in Modern China

LINGZHEN WANG

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Lingzhen Wang's *Revisiting Women's Cinema* is the first book-length monograph on women's cinema in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It makes a timely and critical intervention in Chinese cinema and feminist film studies. Writing about women's cinema typically involves rewriting a film history. However, the book is not preoccupied with discovering erstwhile little-known Chinese women filmmakers. Rather, it aims to dismantle the research paradigms underpinning the current study of women's cinema in order to clear the way to write an alternative history of women's cinema in modern China.

Wang divides her book into an introduction and seven chapters tracing the configuration of mainstream feminist film practice from the 1950s to the 1980s. At the outset, she astutely diagnoses that the intentional neglect of socialist women's cinema in the discussion of global women's cinema and feminist culture can be attributed to three entrenched research paradigms: the Cold War-inflected analysis of socialist cultural production as propagandistic; the interpretation of socialist revolution as essentially patriarchal; and the conception of women's cinema as a marginalized practice, disruptive, or subversive of mainstream cinema. In response to the hegemony of these paradigms, the author proposes "socialist feminism" and "mainstream culture" as two structuring concepts for her study of women's cinema in mainland China. The term "socialist feminism" highlights "the integrated and interdependent relationship between socialism and feminism in the Chinese socialist revolution and construction" (p. 9). It is deliberately chosen over "women's liberation" to do away with the antithetical opposition between socialism and feminism forged by post-Cold War radical cultural feminists and to prioritize the historical process of socialist women's movement. The term "mainstream culture" (*zhuliu wenhua*) is deployed to allow for a close examination of continuity and transformation of mass-oriented culture, which is both constituted by and constitutive of feminist cinema and culture, from Mao's socialist period to the post-Mao reform era. This move is also intended to reflect upon the critical potential of "mainstream culture," a concept that has often been reified into a synonym for an intrinsically conservative, commercially motivated culture.

In mapping the contours of Chinese feminist cultural practice as the socialist mainstream culture was transformed into a market-oriented mainstream culture, Wang makes a sustained reflection on feminism as a socio-historical configuration in a specific geopolitical location and presents deeply contextualised case studies of four leading female film directors—Wang Ping and Dong Kena in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as Zhang Nuanxin and Huang Shuqin in the 1980s.

The chapter devoted to Wang Ping effectively combines biographical information with a critical analysis of a highly popular film, *The Story of Liubao Village*, to explore women's cinematic authorship in a socialist context. Its examination of Wang Ping's life story as a modern woman, a left-wing stage actor, and then the first female director in the PRC reveals

the limitations of the May Fourth liberal feminism and foregrounds the importance of national institutionalization of gender equality for enabling and sustaining women's participation in the cultural arena. Its detailed discussion of Wang Ping's individual imprints on the collaborative film adaptation project *The Story of Liubao Village* demonstrates the interconnection of the director's artistic creativity and political commitment as well as the experimental dimension of socialist mainstream culture.

Wang further explores the complex relationship between conformity and creativity in Chinese socialist women's filmmaking by turning her attention to Dong Kena's 1962 film *Small Grass Grows on the Kunlun Mountains*. She argues that Dong's attentiveness to psychological realism and her employment of first-person voice-over, a subjective camera perspective, and multiple flashback narratives—experimental techniques that have hitherto been ascribed to post-Mao Chinese cinema—make creative critiques of the official (mis)representation of the local reality while diversifying socialist cultural imaginations and aesthetics.

Chapters focusing on Zhang Nuanxin and Huang Shuqin offer radical re-evaluations of these two female directors, which are embedded within Wang's illuminating reassessment of post-Mao feminism. As Wang points out, the post-Mao feminism, in its search for independent status and a universal position, “abandoned the very socialist foundation—institutionalized gender equality and the integration of feminism into socialist political-economic and socio-cultural structure—upon which it had originally attempted to further feminist endeavors” (p. 131). Through a detailed analysis of Zhang Nuanxin's experimental film *Sacrificed Youth*, Wang suggests that the filmmaker's cultural pluralist position and unwavering social stance explains why her work was deemed by post-Mao film scholars as ambiguously incomplete and inadequate experimental cinema. Her close examination of Huang Shuqin's depoliticized revision of the socialist *xieyi* aesthetic and the central position of neotraditionalism in her highly acclaimed *Woman Demon Human* further unveils the dynamic interaction between post-Mao feminism and male-centered mainstream culture that transformed women's cinema towards the end of the 1980s.

Revisiting Women's Cinema is a rich and thought-provoking revisionist account of Chinese women's cinema. It joins Zheng Wang's recent book *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017) in reconceptualizing the CCP-led women's liberation as a form of socialist (state) feminism and broadening the purview of the socialist feminist cultural front. In addition to reinvigorating feminist theory, the book opens up new avenues for exploring the interaction of the political and the aesthetic, the mainstream and the experimental in Chinese cinema. Given the book's focus on female cinematic authorship, future researchers are welcome to explore how feminist film workers, including policymakers, actors and set designers, have shaped and continue to shape Chinese women's cinema.

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