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ARTICLE

## In Search of an Alternative Feminist Cinema: Gender, Crisis, and the Cultural Discourse of Nation Building in Chinese Independent Films

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Chinese feminist cinema in the postsocialist era is shaped by the grand narrative of nation building that glamorizes urban professional career women and their contributions to economic marketization and globalization. Such cinematic overemphasis on urban women proves inadequate as it creates a disturbing silence about the diasporic existence of non-urban women. This uneven condition demands the creation of an alternative cinematic feminism that visualizes the diversity of Chinese women and represents the heterogeneity of feminist cinematic expressions and female experiences. Using Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007, *Pingguo* 苹果) and Li Yang's *Blind Mountain* (2007, *Mang shan* 盲山) as case studies, this essay investigates how Chinese independent films re-negotiate female gender identity and crisis through commercialized visual realism and social intervention while in reality the postsocialist grand narrative of nation building redefines the living conditions of female migrant workers and women of limited resources.

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**Keywords:** Alternative feminist cinema; gender politics; identity crisis; visual realism; migrant women laborers

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Chinese feminist cinema in the postsocialist era is shaped by the grand narrative of nation building that prioritizes economic development, transnational marketization, individual consumerism, and urbanization. As a result, it also becomes the contested site in which the postsocialist cultural discourse negotiates diversified gender identities and restructures subjectivity through the portrayal of female characters. The postsocialist conditions in China, therefore, refer not only to a historical period that starts roughly in the 1980s and lasts through the twenty-first century, when China witnessed unprecedented economic development and industrial modernization (since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in Deng's era), but also to a cultural politics in which "the residual socialist past and the emergent capitalist present concoct new imaginaries of a transitional society" (Lu 2007, 208). Postsocialist conditions in China are characterized by "the radical disintegration of traditional social fabric, the decentralization of power, the loss of moral and theoretical authority" (Zhang X. 2008, 7). Therefore, while postsocialist China prioritizes its rapid integration within the global capitalist system through economic marketization and modernization, it must also confront the challenges of maintaining both social stability and the legitimacy of its communist government.<sup>1</sup>

Cinematic representations of female gender identity in the last decade, contextualized within this postsocialist prioritization of economic globalization and urban consumerism, highlight the rising social and economic significance of what

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of postsocialism in the Chinese context was first used in the anthology *Marxism and the Chinese Experience* by Arif Dirlik, and has since been used by many scholars and cultural researchers in their investigations on such diversified topics as film studies, arts and media, literary criticism, Chinese modernity, and popular cultural production. For detailed discussion of the social, cultural, political, and aesthetic significance of this concept, please see Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 1–24); Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 1–24); Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004, 1–26); Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2007, 201–210); Haomin Gong, *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2012, 11–31); Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2010, 42–72).

is popularly referred to as the Office Lady (OL 女白领). Representing a desirable part of the workforce in this newly globalized market economy, Office Lady characters are professional women from middle-class families who are well-educated, hardworking, and living in an urban environment. Such glamorization of urban women continues the politically correct, official gender discourse of the Mao-era, which emphasizes gender equality and women's rights with such socialist slogans as "Women Hold Half of the Sky" (*Funü neng ding banbiantian*. 妇女能顶半边天). Yet this cinematic urban-feminism proves conspicuously inadequate as the increasingly widening gap between urbanity and rurality in social, economic, political, and cultural conditions renders the concept of "women's cinema" deceptively homogenous. The majority of Chinese women, much like the majority of the entire population in China, live in rural areas or small towns, far away from and left out of economic and sociopolitical centers such as Beijing and Shanghai. Compared to their more fortunate sisters in the city, women from rural areas and underdeveloped regions enjoy far less social mobility and material comfort because the almost impenetrable class barrier that has resulted from the hierarchized dichotomies of urban and rural, postsocialist and socialist, and affluence and poverty. Living under the twin shadows of urban expansion and rapid transnational consumerism, women who come to the city from rural areas and small towns are restricted by the rigid *hukou* (户口) system of registered permanent residence, alienated by their awkward provincial dialects, commodified by their positions as menial laborers, and marginalized by the cultural and social vacuum that manifests a disturbing silence about this diasporic existence within the grand national narrative of modernization. With only slightly better financial circumstances than their rural sisters back in their hometowns, these migrant women drift from city to city in search of better work opportunities and living conditions. Deeply displaced by postsocialist economic development, migrant women laborers are disenfranchised during an urbanizing process that is embedded in the nation building initiative, and they are invisible from a popular cinema that glamorizes globalization, transnationalism, and metropolitanism. Because of their low socioeconomic status, these women are disproportionately underrepresented

in contemporary films and therefore deeply marginalized in cinematic gender representations.

Among non-urban women, there is an even greater multiplicity and diversity of ages, regional differences, ethnic backgrounds, marital statuses, levels of education, and sexual orientations than female migrant workers. The experiences, challenges, crises, and expectations of a young, unmarried, heterosexual Han woman from a rural area who attends college in the city are drastically different from those of a middle-aged, married, ethnic minority woman who can barely write her own name. While some films do depict the former—those women who “made it” in the cities—few, if any, films position the latter group at the center of their narratives. Such geo-economic, social, anthropological, and political inequalities characterize the social reality of the majority of Chinese women, who live in a non-urban environment. What such a diversified and heterogeneous population of women do share in common, however, is that they are rarely visually represented in commercial cinemas, or even on popular TV, and are conveniently reduced to the background of social development, both in real life and in popular media. As a result, their desires, crises, social identity, and gender consciousness become not only invisible but also irrelevant in the cultural production and articulation of female discourse. Such stereotypically flattened and dismissive misrepresentation of the heterogeneity of women in China has transnational relevance and urgency. As Pratibha Parmar succinctly points out, media reconstructions of Asian women are politically contextualized and racially specific in the sense that “whereas white women are visible through the imagery provided through mass advertising and the popular media, Asian women either remain invisible or appear within particular modes of discussions which utilise assumed and unquestioned racialised gender roles” (2010, 388). In other words, the global unevenness of feminist conditions is determined by the combined hegemony of a Eurocentric ethnic discourse and a patriarchal racist narrative, which inevitably hierarchizes according to an intricately layered algorithm that privileges according to race, ethnicity, economic status, social mobility, gender orientation, and cultural identity. Therefore, the specificities of contemporary Chinese cinema notwithstanding, its

formulaic prioritizing on metropolitan women is unmistakably symptomatic of a globalizing commercial cinema.

The media's overemphasis on urban women and disregard of their non-urban counterparts in contemporary feminist cinema demands an alternative cinematic feminism that visualizes and engages the pluralized, fragmented, and diversified conditions of Chinese women. While a growing number of alternative feminist films have recently given significant expression to female characters whose life trajectories are triangulated by the intersections between urbanity and rurality, globalization and tradition, and desire and crisis, most have sunk to anonymity due to little critical attention and negligible box office revenues.<sup>2</sup> However, among these films, Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007, *Pingguo* 苹果) and Li Yang's *Blind Mountain* (2007, *Mang shan* 盲山) prove particularly critical, because they are not only commercially successful and politically aggressive, but more significantly socially engaging.

Both films were released in 2007, a year which marks China's unprecedented economic boom—a result of a nationwide investment fever and grand-scale infrastructure development for the 2008 Olympic Games, hosted in Beijing. Given the context of a dominant (masculine) social discourse centering on real estate development, stock markets, and private ownership, these two films' unusual focus on non-urban women and their gender and social crises is especially provocative. In other words, *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* reflect conscious and deliberate intellectual resistance to and reaction against urban-centrism in the uneven cultural production in postsocialist China. Both films obtained high visibility, commercial success, and international recognition via broad media coverage of their daring portrayals of female sexuality and gender consciousness, and both have been subsequently banned in China for this reason. *Blind Mountain* received wide international acclaim, winning the Grand Prix at the Bratislava International Film Festival in 2007, and FACE award at the Istanbul International Film Festival in 2008 for director Li Yang.

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<sup>2</sup> Among these films are *Lizhi hongle* 荔枝红了, directed by Yong Zhou and Yunping Du, 2002; *Nuan* 暖, directed by Jianqi Huo, 2003; *Warm Spring* 暖春, directed by Wu Lan Ta Na, 2004; *Tuya's Wedding* 图雅的婚事, directed by Quan'an Wang, 2007; *Shouwang nv* 守望女, directed by Long Xiao, 2015.

*Lost in Beijing*, meanwhile, attracted major viewership thanks to its stellar cast of Fan Bingbing, Tong Dawei, Tony Ka Fai Leung, and Elaine Jin, all hugely popular film and TV actors whose star power in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan guaranteed not only box office profits, but also critical and scholarly attention. Most significant to our investigation, however, is that both films were made by independent filmmakers whose cinematic style, social critique, aesthetic representation, and political discourse become especially poignant due to their outsider vantage point and relative creative freedom. *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain*, therefore, mark a significant shift for Chinese independent films in terms of problematizing the cinematic homogeneity of women's representation and challenging the dominant narrative of nation building and a globalized consumer economy.

Using *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* as case studies, this essay investigates how Chinese independent films re-negotiate female gender identity and crisis through commercialized visual realism and social intervention, while the post-socialist grand narrative of nation building redefines the living conditions of female migrant workers and other women of limited resources. In these films, urbanity and rurality are represented in terms of social space and economic status as shaped by the frictions between rapid marketization and metropolitanism in the cities. Such frictions are symptomatic of an “*incompleteness* of modernization in the countryside” (McGrath 2008, 116, italics original) where the achievements of marketization come with the burden of limited productivity and resources in less developed areas. This incomplete and uneven state of modernization and economic development in rural regions is often characterized by *cinéma vérité*-style realism in Chinese independent films that attempt to present the unadorned truth of the struggles, desires, and crises of non-urban females as they encounter postsocialist changes to their country in their interactions with urbanites.

*Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* represent two different moments in independent Chinese cinema: while *Lost in Beijing* attempts to maintain a balance between high production value, commercial success, and artistic independence, *Blind Mountain* insists on visual realism and creative independence without appearing to be radical

in its social and gender critiques. As “the first fully commercialized production” (Yu 2008, 62) by producer Fang Lizhi, *Lost in Beijing's* all-star cast and high-profile marketing campaign made it a commercial success, with a box office revenue of RMB 20 million (USD 3 million). The cast of *Blind Mountain*, on the other hand, consisted of only one professional actor (a new graduate from Beijing Film Academy), and almost no marketing, so its reputation was achieved primarily via word-of-mouth advertisement. These dissimilar approaches notwithstanding, both films became models for emulation in their own sub-genres, and sources of inspiration for Chinese independent filmmakers.

Highly controversial subject matter, focus on non-urban women, poignant social critiques, and strong sexual content are *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain's* most salient points of intersection. The critical discourses on both films are reflective of the government's distaste for explicit female sexuality and sexual violence, and the social and intellectual debate on how the issue of feminism should be visualized in popular entertainment. Many scholars and popular culture critics question the social values and gender politics portrayed in *Lost in Beijing*, pointing out the film's excessive sex scenes (Wang H. 2008, 27–28; Xie 2008, 10–11; Wang Z. 2008, 132–136), negative representation of contemporary Chinese society, and degrading morality (Ding 2008, 55–57; Lu 2007, 55). While no less daring in its representation, *Blind Mountain* receives little protest against its blunt visualization of sex and violence, but is faulted for oversimplifying the cause of its protagonist's abduction (Yu 2008, 31; Wong 2012, 66), an evasive political stance, and an ineffectual condemnation of social injustice and crimes against women (Zhang J. 2007, 84; Ye 2007, 62). However, these critics overlook the deeper implications of *Lost in Beijing's* audacious sex scenes and *Blind Mountain's* refusal to impose moral judgment: both films employ a commercialized realism as a politicized representational strategy that exploits female gender issues for their embedded socio-economic discourses and transnational marketability.

Though daring and relentless in their employment of documentary-style visual realism to simulate authenticity and immediacy, *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* fall short of initiating an alternative feminist cinema that reflects the realities of the



non-urban women whose identities are in constant crises as they negotiate class, gender, and autonomy in a postsocialist world “fraught with experiences of fragmentation and anxiety in addition to the awakening of new desires and identities” (McGrath 2008, 2). More specifically, while both films contextualize their narratives within disjointed postsocialist realities, they prove inadequate in their representations of women as subjects with social gender agencies, since both films fail to explore non-urban women’s conditions as shaped by the intersectionalities of these postsocialist realities. Rather, *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* are powerfully reminiscent of films about women in the last century in their self-orientalizing and performatively eroticizing cinematographic techniques and visual styles, similar to Zhang Yimou’s earlier productions, including *Raise the Red Lantern* (1997) and *Not One Less* (1999), and other Fifth Generation directors’ works, such as *Ermo* (1994) by Zhu Xiaowen. Thus, as Shuqin Cui rightfully argues, non-urban women “remain a body image rather than a subjective entity” (2010, 191). Despite *Lost in Beijing*’s bold visualization of sexuality and *Blind Mountain*’s stark portrayal of rural lives, their stylistic and artistic expressions nonetheless reveal narrative and thematic resemblance to women’s cinema in the 1990s. The women in Li Yu and Li Yang’s films are still eroticized, silenced, and commodified.

### **Commercializing Realism: Visual Economy and Social Critique**

Set in a mountainous village in Northwest China, Li Yang’s *Blind Mountain* continues the director’s critical attention to rural populations and lives interwoven with poverty, criminality, and crises that he began with his debut movie, *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing* 盲井 2003). Based on a true story, *Blind Mountain* presents an acutely persistent social issue: the abduction and selling of women as brides to villagers who are too poor to find wives in poverty-stricken, semi-isolated rural communities. Bai Xuemei (Huang Lu), the film’s protagonist, is a credulous college graduate who is easily convinced by two strangers that she can make good money by working for their company as a purchaser of herbal medicines from local growers. In desperate need of cash to pay for her brother’s college education, as well as other family debts, Bai gladly goes to

a remote mountain village, supposedly to buy herbs. After drinking a cup of tea, Bai suddenly finds herself drugged and abandoned by her smiling “business associates.” Her ID is gone and, to her horror, she is now married to Huang, an ugly, middle-aged man. With documentary-style proficiency and precision, *Blind Mountain* visualizes its social critique of sexist rural traditions and local protectionism that victimize women through Bai’s unwavering determination and numerous attempts to escape.

*Blind Mountain* commercializes its entertainment value by strategically accentuating a quasi-documentary visual style while adopting a lineal storytelling technique that echoes that of popular entertainment cinema. As director Li Yang’s first officially released film in China after he was banned from filmmaking for three years by the China Film Bureau, *Blind Mountain* maintains the signature cinematic realism that characterized *Blind Shaft*, the first installment in Yang’s Blind Trilogy.<sup>3</sup> In both films a handheld camera is adopted as a primary representational tool, and long takes are used to reveal the austere rural environment in an open form. However, unlike art house realism that uses long takes, random shots, and extensive real-time sequences, Li Yang’s visual style can be more accurately described as commercial realism, which utilizes smooth editing, dramatic narratives, and lineal plot development to appeal to a broader audience despite a minimalist, subdued, and grainy visual representation that favors natural light and muted colors. The film’s structural strategies all contribute to the kind of fluid and transparent storytelling technique often found in Hollywood films and popular commercial cinema in China. In other words, *Blind Mountain* exemplifies the “transnational aesthetic” and is “itself a commodity within

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<sup>3</sup> Li Yang’s first feature film, *Blind Shaft*, is banned in China because its script was not approved by the Film Bureau before shooting, nor did it obtain a permit to film from the Film Bureau. As a consequence, Li Yang was not permitted to make films in China for three years. In an interview with Beijing Metro Daily (北京娱乐信报), Yang said, “Next month I will discuss the possibility of releasing *Blind Shaft* in China with the Film Bureau. Because this film was funded by foreign investment, so it did not represent China at the Berlin Film Festival . . . Even if I have to make revisions in some details, that is acceptable with me. For this I have prepared four different endings at the beginning of the shooting.” (“下个月便会和电影局商讨《盲井》在国内公映的可能。由于该片由海外投资，所以并非代表中国在柏林参赛……即使在一些细节上做出修改也可以接受。为此我在拍摄之初准备了四个结局。”) (Ding, C. 2007. *Beijing Metro Daily*. 64.) Li Yang’s Blind Trilogy includes *Blind Shaft*, *Blind Mountain*, and *Blind River* (Mang liu 盲流), which is currently in production.

the specialized market” in postsocialist China (McGrath 2008, 156). Therefore, Li’s cinematic realism becomes a commercial method that capitalizes on the transnational appeal of independent cinema, rather than a critical intervention that problematizes autonomy, reality, and truth.

Such commercial realism effectively de-politicizes *Blind Mountain’s* otherwise radical critique of the social crises, gender inequality, moral degradation, and cultural disorientation that have resulted from China’s rapid globalization and capitalist economy. *Blind Mountain* disassociates its narrative from contemporary China by establishing a carefully maintained visual and representational distance from the present from the very beginning of the film. In the opening scene the protagonist, Bai Xuemei, is introduced in a close shot as she sits in a crowded passenger van, her lower class social identity unmistakably represented by her plain clothes and the absence of either makeup or jewelry. Bai’s naiveté is subtly hinted at when she is amazed by a simple trick in a finger game she is invited to play with a female trafficker pretending to be a manager at an herbal medicine company. This detail skillfully foreshadows the misplaced trust, poor judgment, and lack of social experience that will lead to Bai’s abduction. Juxtaposing Bai’s innocent youthfulness with a nondescript open rural setting, the camera cuts to a point-of-view shot that emphasizes the inaccessibility of the rural area as the van carefully negotiates a narrow turn. Then, the camera pulls back to a long shot to reveal that the vehicle is driving deeper into a mountainous area that appears to be primitive and untouched by modernization. To further enhance this visual de-familiarization, the intertitle reveals the temporal-spatial setting to be the “early 1990s, some remote mountainous area in Northwest China.”<sup>4</sup> As indicated in the opening scene, Bai’s tragedy is magnified by the isolation and remoteness of the village, swiftly underscored by the changes of geographical terrain following the beginning scene of the film, in which an old tractor travels along narrow asphalt roads among enclosing mountains, over rivers on dilapidated stone bridges, and finally on a dirt road shared with flocks of sheep. This transition of location further visualizes a “native, touristic fantasy about the

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<sup>4</sup> The Chinese original is: 二十世纪九十年代初, 西北某偏僻山区。

unspoiled China,” which, however, as Manohla Dargis is quick to point out, “comes with a brutal price tag” (2008).

Such a socio-historical background creates a fictional space that successfully weakens the film’s potentially critical tone against the inadequacy of the current political regime, and thereby provides it with desirable political capital and marketing opportunities for its domestic release. More significantly, setting the film in the past century taps into the audience’s memory of “images of regionalism, primitivism, and exoticism that have become not only paradigmatic and symptomatic of the Fifth Generation, but also intrinsic to global conceptions and receptions of Chinese art cinema” (Lu and Ciecko 2001, 92). Thus, *Blind Mountain* evokes a historicized visual imagination that pre-conditions spectatorial expectations for a China that is characteristically portrayed as a patriarchal rural community, where family traditions dictate everyday life, and women are both otherized and eroticized.

*Blind Mountain* employs its socially isolated rural environment contrapuntally in order to highlight the commodified values of Bai’s gender and underscore her sexual oppression and eroticization. Bai’s sexuality occupies a central position at the conjunction of exotic sexual attraction, masculine rape fantasy, and voyeuristic spectacle. At the beginning of the film, Bai is fully aware and comfortable with the idea that her desirability is an effective marketing tool in her interaction with old medicine farmers; she assumes that when she uses her sexuality as a sales strategy, those old farmers will become infatuated with her.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Bai overlooks the fact that it is precisely because young women like herself are in short supply in these remote regions that she is the object of such intense sexual and social desire. The film poignantly visualizes Bai’s objectification, and hence her gender, as consumable in the scene when she sits in the middle of the village crowd awkwardly being looked at, examined, and scrutinized like a piece of expensive furniture. It is the depiction of Bai’s rape, however, that epitomizes her body’s complete consumption both as a voyeuristic spectacle and site of sexual violation. While Bai has to endure her rape under the patriarchal gaze of her husband Huang’s father, who holds her

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese original is: 只要你对那些采药的老农一笑, 他们的魂都被你勾跑了。

down during the act, her body becomes a site of sexual violence, male dominance, and erotic fantasy. Juxtaposed with Huang's post-coitous celebration and satisfaction, Bai is shown in a full shot with only a torn sweater to cover her body while she sits against the wall in a highly eroticized posture. Her body is put on symbolic display again in a later scene when the wedding banquet takes place in the courtyard outside. Through a point-of-view shot of a group of young boys, Bai is seen tied up by ropes and lying on the bed, her incapacitated body sexualized, fantasized, and victimized under the collective gaze of the villagers.

In addition to putting Bai Xuemei's gender subjectivity in crisis, *Blind Mountain* problematizes her social agency by giving her the cultural identity of college graduate. As many Chinese critics are quick to observe, since well-educated women, such as college graduates, are not typical among abducted women, *Blind Mountain* intensifies Bai's tragedy and the dramatic conflict between civilization and barbarism by using her education as a symbol for modernity, civilization, and social progressiveness.<sup>6</sup> Thus Bai becomes an atypical stereotype whose association with urbanity and uneven social conditions makes her even more marginalized and powerless as a subject entity. Specifically, Bai's abduction results in her symbolic suspension between two worlds: unable to adapt to the urban environment and reconfigure her identity by finding a job in the city after graduating from college, Bai is socially displaced and economically marginalized, and yet, through repeated attempts to escape to the city, rejects the forced reality of rural life. Thus, suspended between the city that

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussion of the socio-political, cultural, and representational implications of Bai Xuemei's identity as a college graduate see Yunlei Li and Suo Pan, "Blind Mountain, Sex and the 'Chain of Culture'" 《盲山》、性与文明的链条, 2008, *Huanghe Literature* 黄河文学, no. 4: 119–121; Shijia Zhao, "Individual's Helpless Pursuit in the Ordered Environment in *Blind Mountain*" 《盲山》中个体在环境秩序中的无力追寻, 2009, *Movie Literature* 电影文学, no. 21: 74–75; Jiayu Yang, "Visual Expression and Mirror Existence in Li Yang's Films" 李杨电影中的影像表达与镜像生存, 2009, *Movie Literature* 电影文学, no. 13: 49–50; Zhiwei Li and Qun Ren, "The Competition between Civilization and Barbarism: The Tragic Revelation of *Blind Mountain*" 文明与蒙蛮的较量——《盲山》的悲剧性启示, 2008, *Movie Review* 电影评介, no 22: 30–29. Qiang Wong; "The Combination of Enlightenment Perspective and Commercial Strategy: Li Yang's Films and a Reading of *Blind Mountain*" 启蒙视角与商业策划融合——李杨的影片及其电影《盲山》解读, 2012, *Fujian Arts* 福建艺术, no 4: 64–66; and Chunhua Gu, "A Woman's 'Prison Break': On *Blind Mountain*" 一个女人的'越狱': 评电影《盲山》, 2008, *Movie Literature* 电影文学, no. 17: 77–78.

rejects her and the village that she despises, Bai is doubly victimized by a pervasive yet absent urban modernity.

Bai's exclusion from urban life and the better financial and social prospects that come with it serve as a subtle yet powerful indicator of her marginalization in the masculine cultural discourses of nation building and social advancement. *Blind Mountain* inscribes a nuanced moral ambivalence and uncertainty to its plot development; Bai Xuemei is not portrayed as a stereotypical victim of social injustice and institutional inadequacy, but rather of the uneven economic conditions that ultimately cause her tragedy. Furthermore, mirroring the masculine, unwelcoming city, the village is even more hostile as a strictly patriarchal society, epitomizing a close-knit, pre-liberation rural community that binds its members through patrilineal familial connections. This carefully portrayed social context invites comparison to the favored social settings in Zhang Yimou's early films, where the psychologically claustrophobic rural setting becomes symbolic of gender oppression and an eroticizing objectification of women. This debilitating social environment is strategically underscored by Bai's inability to articulate her life in the city once she is living in the village: when asked to talk about her college experience, Bai coldly refuses, saying, "There is nothing to talk about." Thus, Bai's diasporic existence and her floating life between city and country epitomize a gender crisis that is symptomatic of social "blindness" to non-urban women.

### **Commodifying Gender: Crisis and Body Politics**

If *Blind Mountain* presents an unsettling gender discourse that employs erotically charged female visibility to exemplify the unchanging gender power dynamics that are intensified by the uneven postsocialist modernization when urban meets rural, *Lost in Beijing* foregrounds an even more radical commodification of the female body in a dramatic reenactment of deeply embedded regressive gender politics at the junction of local and global. In its portrayal of the floating population of migrant workers (*mingong* 民工) and their encounters with the radical unevenness of socio-economic realities in an increasingly consumerized, postsocialist, metropolitan Beijing, *Lost in Beijing* further problematizes the embedded, nation building cultural politics that

debilitate non-urban women as subject entities. Thus, the feminist gender crises becomes secondary to *Lost in Beijing's* "radical contemporaneity and its localized critique of globalization" (Zhang 2007, 6). In other words, the issues of women's subjectivity, feminist cinematic expression, and female gender identity are represented as a necessary result of nation-wide problems that are global and transnational in scale and intensity. Therefore, the urgency and singularity of non-urban women and their discontent in postsocialist China are effectively displaced and de-legitimized.

*Lost in Beijing* dramatizes the disintegration of two marriages: that of migrant worker couple An Kun (Tong Dawei) and Liu Pingguo (Fan Bingbing), and the more affluent Hong Kong couple Lin Dong (Tony Leung Ka Fai) and Wang Mei (Elaine Jin) as they cross paths with each other in the changing social and economic landscape of Beijing. The film's plot revolves around how the couples' lives are brought together by a drunken incident. When Pingguo, who works as a foot masseuse at Lin's Gold Basin Massage Palace, becomes drunk and tries to rest in the massage room, Lin's attempt to remove her turns into a rape, which is witness by Pingguo's husband An Kun, a window washer who happens to be cleaning the building's windows when the incident occurs. When Pingguo finds out that she is pregnant, Lin, whose wife Wang is not able to have children, sees the perfect opportunity to solve everyone's problem: he offers to pay An Kun and Pingguo 100,000 RMB (15,000 USD) to keep this child as his own. Meanwhile, An Kun and Wang Mei develop an illicit relationship to avenge their spouses' infidelity. Magnifying the disorienting urbanism to a painful degree, *Lost in Beijing* "relates a tale that is at once representative of the social and economic tensions afflicting 21<sup>st</sup> century China and ripely, improbably melodramatic" (Scott 2008). The problem is that such representation turns migrant workers like Pingguo and An Kun into familiar cinematic stereotypes, whose life trajectories in the city are circumscribed by their alienated social status and an unsympathetic economic system. In other words, *Lost in Beijing* obscures the diversity and heterogeneity of migrant workers' urban experiences by succumbing to such representational patterns.

As with *Blind Mountain's* eventful domestic release, *Lost in Beijing* experienced severe censorship for similar reasons: according to the notification from the State

Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), *Lost in Beijing* contains pornographic content, attended the fifty-seventh Berlin Film Festival without passing the SAPPRFT censor, and was inappropriately marketed during its commercial campaign (Lv 2008, 66). Due to its bold and frequent sexual content, *Lost in Beijing* also received controversial critiques from film scholars and government officials, many of whom criticized its “insulting representation of our society and times” (Lao 2008, 60; Wang 2008, 27). Such negative responses reflect the unsettling implications of visually explicit sexuality and the cinematic commercialization of sex in public cultural narratives, and the government’s reluctance to address social issues resulting from an urban sex industry and increasingly commercialized sex in popular media portrayals. Thus, as a result of its overt cinematic depiction of sex, *Lost in Beijing’s* gender expression and feminist pursuit of women’s subjectivity have inevitably been overshadowed by critical controversies.

While *Lost in Beijing* confronts female sexuality, the urban sex industry, and marital violence with unwavering candor, it fails to move beyond visual exhibitionism of sexuality, and therefore the film’s interrogation of the marginalized existence of female migrant workers in the city proves inadequate. The film’s exposé of the dynamics between identity and class, money and relationships, and sex and power continues a familiar stereotype of the female protagonist’s gradual degeneration into a complete victim of her gender and social marginalization without offering a solution to her crisis or providing an alternative representation of female subjectivity. To a certain extent, *Lost in Beijing’s* representation of non-urban women not only commodifies their sexuality in the masculine postsocialist grand narrative of nation building, but more significantly contributes to a self-otherization and performatively negates female gender agency. Thus, the film’s daring sex scenes become mere visual sensationalism that positions the female body under the cinematic male gaze and capitalizes on the masculine body politic that hyper-sexualizes the female body, so that female nudity becomes a visual spectacle; “femininity [is] synonymous with the pose” (Doane 2000, 88), and looking is necessarily fetishizing.



*Lost in Beijing* projects a masculine fantasy of the female body as the site of transaction and consumption that is anticipated, outlined, and regulated by the syntax of the phallic urban cityscape. This gender representation is strategically established in the opening scene through a point-of-view tracking shot that follows a young woman by handheld camera as she walks, creating both an “on the spot” immediacy and a voyeuristic fetishizing gaze. The camera resists the spectatorial desire to see the woman’s face by maintaining its position behind her throughout the long take, thereby building a sense of anticipation and curiosity. This faceless and nameless young woman, already under the camera’s gaze, is dressed as a typical college student, wearing jeans and sneakers, carrying a backpack, and with her long hair tied up in a ponytail, but later, much to the surprise of the audience, she is revealed to be a sex worker and has apparently provided services to Lin Dong. The opening scene, therefore, subtly alludes to the commonality and ubiquity of women commodifying their bodies by de-stereotyping the physical look of the female sex worker. More significantly, the objectified female body as a commodity whose exchange value is determined by the masculine consumer in the business transaction is unmistakably highlighted when Lin Dong refuses to employ the woman because she requests him to “be quick” as she has a dinner date later. Displeased, Lin Dong tells her to leave, complaining that “I can’t make love in a hurry.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the prostitute’s female body fails to become the site of transaction as it discourages the consumer’s masculine fantasy in its consumption.

This thwarted transaction is contextualized in the following credit sequence by Beijing’s high-rise skyscrapers cartographically surveyed in disjointed panning shots, and the camera’s assumption of Lin Dong’s point of view from his luxury car, capturing Beijing’s ceaseless urbanizing with “a raw documentary effect, project[ing] fantastic kaleidoscopic images” (Y. Zhang 2010, 78). In a shifting yet seamlessly coordinated style, this pastiche of images of both iconically imagined Beijing (historic City Gate Tower, Tian’anmen Square, Landmark Restaurant) and Beijing as lived urban space in

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese original is: 这事儿是急事儿吗?

transition (tower cranes at construction sites, street signs, traffic) re-conceptualizes the city as a globalizing "*postspatial chronotope*" (Braester 2010, 284) predicated on a gradual erasure of memory and mobilization of the invisible floating population of millions of migrant workers. The cinematic juxtaposition of Lin Dong's unfulfilled sexual desire with Beijing's phallic cityscape not only adroitly alludes to urban power dynamics that normalize the commercialization of female sexuality, but further illuminates the gender politics that render migrant women deeply marginalized and commodified.

*Lost in Beijing* effectively reinforces a dichotomizing gender relationship that ultimately disempowers women and objectifies them as the pleasure-giving other, whose sexuality and social value are measured in material terms. The film's protagonist, Pingguo, epitomizes an otherized woman who symbolizes sexual desire, erotic attraction, and immoral temptation. That her Chinese name literally translates to "apple" provides a powerful allegorical link to the biblical fruit in Western imagination. Her character is strategically introduced as a foot masseuse in the highly erotically charged setting of the foot massage parlor that trades on the commercialization of both her bodily mechanism and her physical labor. Foot massage is considered "one of the most striking and fetishistic examples of 'Chinese' rituals" (Lu and Ciecko 2001, 92), and as such Pingguo notably becomes a sexualized object under the male gaze. Her rape, though it ambiguously alludes to an alternative feminist bodily autonomy because it acknowledges her sexual pleasure during the rape, quickly turns into her exploitation and a deeper commodification of her female body. Not only is Pingguo's body a site of male eroticism and sexual temptation, but the carefully negotiated and contracted merchandising of her baby completely subjugate her bodily function to the normative patriarchal gender politics that render women powerless. The film spares no detail in presenting the amount of compensation after Pingguo's rape and the farcical negotiation between Lin Dong and An Kun about the transference of her unborn child. In these negotiations Pingguo loses both her gender and her social identities as she mutates into a commodity whose exchange value is clearly marked in monetary terms and whose sexual body and physiological mechanism both become products that circulate in the open market.

This commodifying gender politics debilitates Pingguo's gender agency and crystallizes her identity crisis at the end of *Lost in Beijing* when she leaves Lin Dong and her husband, taking both the baby and the money. Although Yingjin Zhang believes that the film "ends on a triumphant note of female agency" (2010, 180), the ending remains evasive of the deeper social, moral, and political circumstances of Pingguo's dilemma, in addition to ignoring the problematic legitimacy of her sole custody of the baby. More significantly, that Pingguo takes Lin Dong's money, which is intended as payment for her baby, serves as a de facto completion of the transaction, and thereby ultimately subjects her to the commodifying masculine gender politics. The visual politics of this scene further accentuate Pingguo's fragmented identity as only Pingguo's hands and the bag of money are included in the *mise-en-scène*, signaling her regressive gender consciousness and disintegrating agency. If Pingguo still had any hope to reclaim her gender agency by taking her social marginalization and gender objectification as a politically empowering position from where she could consciously resist such oppressions, then her leaving cancels out such a possibility and puts her identity in flux. Therefore, the ending solidifies Pingguo's identity crisis as she becomes homeless, powerless, and voiceless.

### **Politicizing Discourse: An Alternative Feminist Cinema**

Contextualized within the political narrative of economic transnationalism and national modernization, *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* form a poignant diptych whose juxtaposition accentuates the regressive gender politics and fossilized gender inequality in China. Both *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* exert their claim on realism by adopting true stories as the films' plots, but neither adequately interprets or illuminates non-urban women's identity crises in their gender discourse. Each film dramatizes socially marginalized and economically disenfranchised female characters that are hopelessly and helplessly at odds with their social conditions, permanently suspended between the enclosure of centripetal rurality and the exposure to centrifugal globalization. While *Lost in Beijing* explores female migrant workers' identity crisis as a result of physical displacement, emotional estrangement, and psychological disassociation buried under the grand narratives of economic development

and nation building, *Blind Mountain* magnifies the invisibility of rural women and the shockingly uneven development of contemporary Chinese society to a painful degree, as the victim-turned-victimizer protagonist is caught between an urban feminism and patriarchal gender stereotypes deeply ingrained in agricultural rurality.

Both *Lost in Beijing* and *Blind Mountain* are laudable attempts to remap contemporary Chinese cinema's feminist exploration and practices, but neither initiates public attention for the right reasons: both use daring sex scenes that involve female nudity, which serves as an ironic proof of women's commodification and subordination to masculine social expectations and conventions, as a marketing ploy. While the lack of audience interest, which often results in unsatisfactory box office returns, may be one explanation for commercial and mainstream cinema's disinterest in featuring migrant workers as protagonists, independent films become a fitting production mode for an alternative feminist cinema because of their shared focus on politicized identity, peripheral position, and unconventional visual representations. As the career trajectories of several contemporary Chinese filmmakers, such as Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, demonstrate, independent films provide a necessary detour on the journey to mainstream commercial films. The intrinsic gender politics, class discourses, social hierarchies, and power dynamics that contextualize the representation of underrepresented, underprivileged, and undervalued female migrant workers and country women guarantee a moral high ground that legitimizes independent films and attracts international film awards and critical recognition from abroad. Such socio-political consciousness is often visualized in cinematic and cinematographic realism, in the sense that the camera facilitates a raw, unedited visuality that closely mimics the immediacy and transparency of documentary and news broadcast. By creating a cinematic realism that manifests as faithful to and critical of reality, independent films consciously attempt to promote an alternative feminist cinema using women in the periphery of market economic discourse as tropes of uneven social change and its debilitating consequences.

However, stereotyping non-urban women and their anxiety and crises as symptomatic of social injustice and economic inequality incurs the danger of normalizing

a “women-nation polarity” where “woman serves as a figure of the oppressed, bearing external invasions and domestic problems . . . and a symbol of a component in the building of the new nation-state” (Cui 2003, 174–175). In other words, when non-urban women are conceptualized and represented as merely reflecting and exposing socioeconomic problems as a default position, they forfeit any hope of negotiating subjectivity and constructing gender identity with agency because such demands become synonymous with generalized national discourses on social stability, institutional intervention, and government involvement. Thus what appears to be a postsocialist cinematic feminism that addresses non-urban women’s issues becomes inseparably embedded in the universal masculine nation building discourse, re-incorporated within the existing framework of dichotomizing gender politics, and de-legitimized from its pursuit of an alternative cinematic feminism that engages women whose subjectivity is both compatible with the changing socioeconomic landscape and reflective of female agency.

In light of these political, social, and gender inadequacies, the creation of a truly alternative feminist cinema demands a paradigmatic shift that de-iconizes women as representative of social problems. In other words, when female characters’ pursuit of subjectivity and feminist gender agency are subordinate to normalizing discourses that explain away women’s issues with generic references to social unevenness, such issues are necessarily rendered invisible. Specifically, an alternative feminist cinema engages non-urban women and their gender crises through the “criterion of class and not the particular criterion of nationality or nativism” (Grossman 2009, 146) to acknowledge the diversity of women even as their social identity and gender subjectivity are increasingly circumscribed by the socio-political indicator of class. Despite the plethora of scholarly discussions on Chinese cinema, there has been a collective critical aphasia on class representation and how actual class differentiation (resulted from uneven economic formations) effectively changes the cultural landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema. This is largely because of the official narrative’s reluctance to define Chinese society with class distinction in political terms. Instead, the rather ambiguous, politically correct term “people” is adopted to homogenize a

society that is rapidly stratified by diverse economic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. Yet this political homogenization proves lacking for accurately describing the acutely present issues of increasingly greater gaps between the rural and the urban in all aspects of people's lives, particularly when rural poverty and social backwardness become the primary reason for rural women's migration into metropolises where their physical labor, female bodily autonomy, and personal desires become marketable and consumable.

This conscious focus on socio-political class stratification and mediated representation of recognizable class differences captures the underlying cause of non-urban women's crises and unveils the politicizing nation building discourse that regulates non-urban women's negotiation for gender agency. While such a thematic shift employs cinematic realism for its transnationally marketable visuality and affective aesthetics, visual realism should be used only as a formal device and not a substantive expression of the narrative; that is, a documentary-style visual representation should be the medium rather than the message itself. Thus, while visual realism renders gender expression "unsettling," as director Li Yu proudly announces (Sun 2007, 70), an alternative feminist cinema must also cognitively translate such raw and disruptive visuality into analyzable gender narratives and expressions in order to build its own gender and political discourse. The alternative feminist visual discourse obtains vitality and sustainability not by positioning non-urban women at the opposite end of dominating masculine gender dynamics and reducing the diversity of this population, but by recognizing that the cause of the crisis is complex and multifaceted (and sometimes nebulous and problematic), and engaging the issue of non-urban women's gender consciousness as embedded in the nation building discourse.

A strategic disengagement with such genderized dichotomies of urban/rural, center/marginalized, and privileged/disenfranchised potentializes a polycentric and pluralistic feminism and its visual expressions within a transnational context. The refusal to adhere to such essentializing and simplifying binary oppositions creates a critical space where discourses of female identity, feminism, and gender politics as historicized and relational, rather than totalitarian and conclusive, can flourish.

Therefore, a conceptual departure from these regulative and normalizing logocentric systems that seek to contain a progressive feminist discourse within the perimeters of the isolated constants of gender, class, ethnicity, nation, and sexuality promises to lay the foundation for an alternative feminist critique that is truly empowering and liberating. While feminist cinema is inevitably contextualized by narratives of nation, subjectivity, and crises, an increasingly polycentric world demands a reimagining of the female identity as palimpsestic and always in flux. This critical approach “asks for a transnational imaginary that places in synergistic relations diverse narratives offering prospects of crucial community affiliations” (Shohat 1998, 52), so that the investigations of gender plurality, heterogeneous feminism, and polycentric female identities within a national cinema become mobilizing analytical apparatuses that are crucially relevant in a global context. While our current investigation of an alternative Chinese feminist cinema relativizes the global and the local, it proves illuminating to other communities of feminine articulations beyond the dissolving confines of geopolitical nation-states.

In light of this relational feminist critique, *Blind Mountain* and *Lost in Beijing*'s attempts to defy the monolithic masculine narrative of nation building and economic globalization collapse because they fail to dismantle the debilitating gendered binaries that cease to be paradigmatic in the transnational world. Each film utilizes visual realism for its respective political agenda: *Blind Mountain* commercializes Bai Xuemei's struggle to escape her captivity by exploiting the shocking visceral representation of her devastation, and *Lost in Beijing* commodifies Pingguo's female body via sexual excess and gender subordination. Neither film transforms cinematic realism into empowering articulations of gender subjectivity. Bai Xuemei and Pingguo represent two different trajectories in a centrifugal momentum that characterizes the process of urbanization and industrialization: while Pingguo's hinted-at departure from the city seems an ever-so-slight suggestion of her disengagement with the subjugating urban masculine gender politics, Bai's violent relief from captivity without her child potentializes a far more nuanced social critique of the institutional cause for her sufferings. Thus, *Blind Mountain* and *Lost in Beijing* manifest cryptically orchestrated cinematic representations that strategically equate the gender crisis

with social crises, and thereby remain evasive on the ultimate issue of non-urban women's problems. This silence neutralizes the films' power for a potentially disruptive gender politics.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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