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# Searching for Female Sexuality and Negotiating with Feminism

## LI YU'S FILM TRILOGY

SHUQIN CUI



**THE HISTORY** of filmmaking in China does not lack women's films or female directors. But woman's cinema—marked by female subjectivity, perspective, and aesthetics—remains ambivalent, a result of the paradox that woman as gendered subject and discursive mode remains subordinated to mainstream rhetoric. In the domain of socialist politics, individual interests yield to national ideologies and class categories overpower gender difference, so the female body recedes behind a collective identity as her screen image becomes a social-political signifier. Works such as *Hongse nianzijun* (The Red Detachment of Women, 1961) and *Baimao nü* (The White Haired Girl, 1950) exemplify how class oppression can enslave women but how political ideology can enlighten them and make them vanguards of the proletariat.[1] Moreover, the cinematic image is articulated to ensure that woman's release from subjugation to emancipation occurs only when gender difference is erased.

In post-socialist China, where a market economy drives cultural production and the mainstream mass media encourage consumption, the female body image is valued for its power of sexual and visual attraction. Under these conditions, women may not need to disguise their gender identity to make films, but in a male-dominated and commercially

measured cultural production industry, women filmmakers face multiple challenges. In addition to ideological censorship, commercial expectations and distribution restraints have forced women directors to either shun the film industry or seek alternative ways to enter the mainstream. For instance, a group of filmmakers who began to make women's films in the 1980s have shifted their interests dramatically. We rarely hear much from Huang Shuqin since her highly regarded feminist film, *Ren, gui, qing* (Woman, Demon, Human, 1987). Hu Mei, after *Nüer lou* (Army Nurse, 1985), which explores the female-self split between submission to sociopolitical ideology and allegiance to personal desires, switched to historical soap operas made for television. Peng Xiaolian, who made *Nüren de gushi* (Women's Story, 1989) about three peasant women leaving the countryside for the city, now creates urban narratives. Li Shaohong, director of *Hongfen* (Blush, 1994), a film about female sexuality and prostitution, currently makes thrillers. A subjective women's cinema, let alone a feminist one, finds scant possibilities in a limited market in China.[2]



Nevertheless, recent film releases by new female directors have brought renewed interest in the making of women's cinema. Ning Ying's *Wu qiong dong* (Perpetual Motion, 2005) subverts existing conventions of female images and the image-making system. Xu Jinglei's *Wo he baba* (My Father and I, 2003) interweaves a father-daughter plot that transgresses constantly against the Oedipus complex. Xiao Jiang's *Tongnian wangshi* (Electric Shadows, 2005) returns to a social-familial past when a young girl's coming-of-age narrative was integral to film history. The return to women's cinema calls attention to the question of how women directors—a minority on the margins of the film industry—make works that run counter to the mainstream while also yielding to it. Among the young or new female directors bringing the subject of women's cinema to the forefront is Li Yu, whose film trilogy—*Jinnian xiatian* (Fish and Elephant, 2001), *Hongyan* (Dam Street, 2005), and *Pingguo* (Lost in Beijing, 2007)—emphasizes female sexuality.[3] *Fish and Elephant,* the first Chinese feature on a lesbian relationship, presents homosexuality against a heterosexual social-cultural environment. Although this cinematic representation of a homosexual identity marks the possibility of asserting sexual diversity against "regimes of the normal," the confinement of homosexual experience within heterosexual discourse inhibits a potentially queer discourse and cinema that might go beyond homo/hetero binary conventions. In *Dam Street,* Li Yu continues the search for female sexuality with a focus on the female body as a site of sociocultural punishment

and sexual spectacle. Considering the body in terms of spectacle and politics, I argue that sociocultural norms punish the female body for sexual abnormality even as the film offers resistance in a female protagonist who defies subordination. In addition, a voyeuristic spectatorship, first surveillant, then adolescent, complicates the female body as unwanted on the one hand, while desired on the other.

Finally, this chapter analyzes how Li Yu's new release, *Lost in Beijing,* locates female sexuality against a commercial society in which the female body is commodified for its exchange value. The displacement of a female migrant, especially her pregnant body, between two men—her boss and her husband—constitutes a transaction made through the female body/sexuality. Analysis of Li's three works, taken together, demonstrates why women's filmmaking in China persists on the social-cultural margins while remaining ambivalent about feminist representation. As feminist theories and film practices cross the lines between local and global, national and transnational, what they say to and about one another requires a rethinking and rereading of feminism(s) from transnational and translocal perspectives.



## NEGOTIATING HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONS WITHIN HETEROSEXUAL DISCOURSE

Female sexuality, especially homosexuality, is a subject that film directors in China hesitate to address. Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant,* the director's debut, is the first feature from mainland China to portray a lesbian identity and relationship, a sexuality normally invisible and unspeakable in social-cultural discourse and cinematic representation.[4] Unlike new queer cinema in the independent circuit that deals openly with queer culture and identity politics,[5] *Fish and Elephant* shows how lesbians negotiate their identities and relationships *within* the heterosexual system. The film is neither a popular lesbian romance nor a coming-out film, but rather, in the director's words, an "exploration of how a lesbian relationship deals with family and society."[6] Or, in the view of Carol Guess, the representation attempts "to incorporate lesbian existence into a world view that excludes it, and to expose the mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality."[7]

Familial pressures and social denial act to negate lesbian identity and silence lesbian voices. Heterosexual conventions of marriage and sexuality permit little room for alternatives. The film interweaves narrative

sequences of Xiaoqun, the lesbian protagonist, dating an assortment of males. The mother has arranged these meetings for Xiaoqun, ignorant of her daughter's sexual identity, and Xiaoqun participates out of filial piety, thus dislocating the lesbian narrative within heterosexual conventions. To reinforce the dislocated homo-and-hetero encounter, the film director sent out actual date-seeking advertisements, and a number of men responded to the ads without knowing that the offer was a ruse for filmmaking. The dating scenes become real-life engagements. Each of the potential dates says that his girlfriend should be virtuous, beautiful, and feminine. By having the lesbian protagonist confront compulsory heterosexuality, the film allows her to affirm her lesbian identity and voice: "I'm interested not in man but in woman." "Embracing the word 'lesbian,'" as Carol Guess cites Adrienne Rich, "is a political imperative, a brave and necessary gesture which serves as a speech act, challenging the hegemonic forces opposing the identity the speaker claims with the very act of speaking."[8] But no male partner finds the lesbian voice comprehensible. The denial of lesbian identity in the face of its declaration reflects how social-cultural perception remains willfully blind to lesbianism in contemporary China.



The dual identity and lifestyle that the lesbian embodies becomes apparent in cinematic juxtapositions between homosexual and heterosexual engagements. The spatial mise-en-scène of public places and underground space divides and defines the shifting identities. The dating scenes occur in public settings—tea houses, restaurants, and parks—and the dates are often accompanied by family members. The public setting suggests that finding a date and getting married are not simply personal choices but also familial and social obligations. The film crosscuts frequently from public to private spaces, however, such as basement apartments and the elephant house, as the lesbian relationship unfolds. The divided spaces indicate an identity split: a legitimate heterosexual in public but an unacceptable homosexual in private. The lesbian figure oscillates between spatial and gendered boundaries.

In addition to spatial divisions, the hetero/homosexual contrast is also marked by a mother-daughter relationship, with the daughter subordinate to the maternal figure's heterosexual regulation. As Xiaoqun narrates her mother's story, she explains why her mother cannot acknowledge a homosexual identity. Xiaoqun reveals that her mother divorced because of her husband's affair with another woman. As a single mother, she raised two children: Xiaoqun and a son who dies in a car accident. The film shows

the mother, victim of marital conventions, expecting her daughter to marry and settle down. The heterosexual maternal discourse is demanding and places the lesbian daughter in a difficult situation: maintaining her lesbian identity while fulfilling a daughter's piety. Xiaoqun's former lover, Junjun, reveals how *her* mother pretended until the last moment of her life not to acknowledge that her husband was sexually violating their daughter. The mother's silence about the incest further victimizes Junjun and pushes her to retaliate against the heterosexual hegemony. The film's mother-daughter narratives suggest that while the mothers rely on the heterosexual discourse of marriage and family to regulate the daughters' sexuality, the daughters' homosexual behavior subverts such norms within the limits of heterosexuality.

Compounding the maternal restrictions over the lesbian daughter's sexual choices is the authority imposed by father figures, individual or collective. Junjun is a criminal suspected of murdering her father. The film inserts Junjun's voice to explain how her father sexually violated her body since childhood. Memories of the rape scenes drive Junjun to seek justice through violence and to turn to lesbian relations for support. She relies on Xiaoqun and uses the elephant house for shelter. Junjun fails to realize that using violence against violence makes her the target of another fatherly authority, the police. In a confrontational mise-en-scène, the single lesbian figure is trapped inside the elephant house, facing the armed police outside. Junjun owns a handgun, symbol of social and phallic power, and fires at one policeman. The critical moment comes, in a close-up, when Junjun confronts the police officer, both with guns drawn, and she runs out of bullets. The officer persuades her that it's unwise for a woman to challenge armed force. The suppression of female criminality in the name of security implies similar consequences for displays of lesbianism: any overt challenge to heterosexual orthodoxy will be punished. Thus the possible utterance of a woman and her control over her body is blocked by sexual abuse by the father and silenced by the state. Junjun's intention to rebel and fight the forces of heterosexuality ends in tragedy.



In contrast to the violent heterosexual world, we see a peaceful homosexual space shown in cross-cutting from gunfight sequences to scenes of lesbian lovemaking. Sexual gestures, a fish tank, sounds of rain, and the color red all forge a moment of intimacy (fig. 9.1). The accelerated sequences reinforce the contrast between love and death, violence and peace. Nonetheless, homosexual interaction in a private, hidden place presents only a fleeting pleasure and moment of escape from the



**FIGURE 9.1** Homosexual intimacy (*Fish and Elephant,* 2001)

dominant heterosexuality. The constant cross-cutting emphasizes how the world of the homosexual is surrounded by heterosexual regulations. Like Junjun confronting the police, anyone who crosses the line faces punishment. Thus the film implies that in China lesbian identity and practice remain pushed underground.

*Fish and Elephant* also raises the issue of spectatorship: what happens when the spectator identifies with the lesbian-as-spectacle? With two lesbians playing themselves, and as the first Chinese feature on the subject of lesbianism, the film allows the spectator to project empathy outside heterosexual conventions. Placement of the lesbian relation within a heterosexual framework, however, inhibits this identification, and spectatorship as well as the lesbian relationship shifts between the two realms of sexual identity. A succession of scenes dramatically juxtaposes hetero- and homosexual spaces. Xiaoqun, for example, regularly goes on blind dates in public at her mother's request, but in private she falls in love with a young woman. Her lover, Xiaolin, oscillates between their relationship and one with her boyfriend. Similarly, spectatorship also alternates, identifying with the "homoerotic" at one moment and heterosexual norms at another.

The accentuated juxtapositions destabilize spectatorship, especially female spectatorship, as the lesbian image/identity shifts across boundaries. As Rosemary Hennessy describes lesbian identity, it can be

considered "as an ensemble of unstable and multiple positions, [which] contests traditional formulations of identity politics by challenging the array of assumptions on which empiricist notions of the person depend."[9] In *Fish and Elephant,* the director uses an observing, nonintrusive camera lens to locate the audience's position, although shifting and uncertain, at a distance in respect to the lesbian images. "It's a perfectly poised distance," as Shelly Kraicer points out, "one that ironizes without alienating, observes without fetishizing."[10] The film ends happily for the mother when she marries one of her daughter's older dates, thus returning to the tradition of heterosexual mating after years of divorce. Meanwhile, the lesbian daughter(s) remain hidden from the public eye.

From this analysis, one can conclude that the content of the film stresses homosexual negotiation *within* heterosexual norms. While the lesbian protagonists search for recognition of their homosexual identity, the women's film tries to assert a homosexual discourse. Both, however, situate the representation of homosexuality within rather than against heterosexual normality. In a culture and society where familial order regulates sociocultural positions and heterosexual marriage defines gender roles, issues that concern homosexuality are less a question of sexual orientation than of a lifestyle that seeks recognition or acceptance by adherents to conventional norms. Cinematic explorations of homosexuality, including Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant,* thus seek screen space where social outsiders perform their sexual identities while the audience comprehends the mechanism of sociocultural regulation.[11] With origins in neither a political movement nor a theoretical position, the subject of homosexuality and its representation in China continue to negotiate with rather than directly challenge heterosexual conventions. Homosexual identity and sexuality thus appear shifting and multifaceted in the context of changing social-cultural conditions.



## BODY POLITICS AND SEXUAL SPECTACLE

In *Dam Street,* Li Yu continues her search for female sexuality but with a focus on punishment of the female body and the body as spectacle. From its opening, *Dam Street* situates the deviant body against the social-political era of 1980s' China, when teenage pregnancy was seen as "moral decadence." Various parties with different concerns punish the female body for its sexuality; together they compose a network of force, institutional

or familial. The question of how a social network exercises power over the female body, specifically the teenage pregnant body, is answered in visual tropes. Xiaoyun, the teenage protagonist, is hidden in a public toilet, with contrast lighting and a confined mise-en-scène. A tracking shot, through the teacher's point of view, leads our gaze to the frightened young girl, wrapping her belly with belts of fabric. The revealed pregnant body receives official condemnation as the diegetic sound of a loudspeaker denounces the pregnant student for her deviant sexual activity. The film then situates the disgraceful figure under the watchful eye of the local townspeople in a domestic setting, where the enraged maternal figure expresses her anger by lashing the pregnant girl.

The film foregrounds the body as a site where institutional disciplinary and sociocultural norms are inscribed and reinforced. The punishment meted out in school and at home recalls Michel Foucault's "culture of spectacle," which equates public punishment and torture with the exercise of power.[12] When the punished body is not a prisoner but a pregnant girl, the culture of spectacle foregrounds female sexuality or the sexed body against a network of disciplinary practices. The film demonstrates how the female body, especially the pregnant one, becomes the site of cultural inscription and social regulation. In gendering the Foucauldian notions of the body and power, this Chinese woman's film displays teen pregnancy and its consequent social punishment to bring sex and gender into the discourse of power, adding a feminist perspective.[13] Although the film director invites us to rethink issues of body and power, she does not re-vision women themselves as subversive and empowered bodies. The film forecloses the unspeakable teen pregnancy with a rupture. The mother figure arranges an adoption but tells her daughter that the baby has died.



*Dam Street* uses an inter-title explanation to move ahead ten years in the female protagonist's life and further explore the question of the female body and sexuality in the China of the 1990s. We learn that in a commercially driven society a woman with a "history of inappropriate sexual conduct" faces fierce hostility when she tries to regain good standing in terms of heterosexual norms. Now a Chuan Opera singer in her local town, Xiaoyun embodies a theatrical image as she performs and sings on stage. Despite her transformation from pregnant teenager to opera singer, her status as a sexual spectacle for viewers on and off screen has not changed, however. The on-screen audience refuses her theatrical persona and requests that she sing popular songs. Performing pop songs

but in a traditional mask, the female body has to enact her gender identity for the collective and commercial spectatorship.

One may read the sequence in light of Judith Butler's statement that "Gender reality is performative . . . it is real only to the extent that it is performed."[14] The performance of gender, sex, and sexuality derives from "regulative discourse," whereby the body is expected to repetitively act according to social-cultural norms. While locating its female protagonist within the regulative discourse and depicting gender performativity, the film seeks an alternative. Xiaoyun ignores the compulsory heterosexuality of getting married and has sexual relations with a married man, despite the social gossip. By refusing to act according to social and sexual norms, the female body rejects phallocentric readings and problematizes the viewing of women's bodies. The subversion is temporary, however, as the heterosexual hierarchy does not permit alternatives. The film presents a striking mise-en-scène; performing on stage, Xiaoyun is humiliated by a family. The film positions Xiaoyun on an open stage performing pop songs for the street audience. Three members of a family force their way through the crowd and attack Xiaoyun with verbal and physical violence. They bite her arms, strangle her throat, tear off her clothes and call her a hooker who has seduced the man in their family. In a bird's-eye shot, the bruised Xiaoyun is nakedly displayed in public under bright daylight (fig. 9.2). Once again the female body becomes a public spectacle, punished and humiliated for its deviant sexuality.



The world framed in *Dam Street* is a female one, with women left behind or divorced, striving to survive on their own. By contrast, the male figures are either absent or ambiguous. The mother-daughter dyad thus becomes a central subject. *Dam Street* may be called a daughterly film, as the relationship unfolds from the daughter's point of view. She tries to recover what has been oppressed as she struggles to find a voice of resistance through the visual reconstruction of mother-daughter conflicts. Nonetheless, in the representation of the conflict the mother and the daughter are subject positions characterized not by clarity and stability but rather by confusion and contradiction.

The film's authoritative maternal figure participates in the network that disciplines through punishment. As the mother lashes her daughter's pregnant body with a feather duster, the maternal voice speaks in the law of heterosexual discourse. In the violent mise-en-scène, for instance, the film cuts to a photographic image of the father on the wall. The mother challenges the daughter to explain her "immoral" deeds to



**FIGURE 9.2** Public display of the female body (*Dam Street,* 2005)

her father and accuses her of ruining the family reputation. In this sequence, the film situates the maternal figure as the voice of heterosexual mores; she exercises power over her daughter's body at the end of a lash. The single mother is a lonely figure, consigned to the social-sexual periphery of her world. As the unhappy and mad mother figure imposes the culturally dominant notion of gender discipline on her daughter's sexed body, she doubly reinforces female victimization: first her own, then her daughter's. The conflict thus indicates the link between a mother and daughter hemmed in by the harsh limits of their social world.

Conflict or alienation is not the only problem vexing the mother-daughter relationship. The paradox of psychological distance and filial commitment complicates the dyad. Xiaoyun brings money home regularly but chooses not to live a life like her mother's. With a past that includes a teenage pregnancy and an affair with a married man, the daughter refuses to settle into heterosexual marriage and normality. By rejecting her mother's expectations and social regulations, Xiaoyun raises the possibility of a daughterly autonomy. Such defiance, however, brings the daughter figure to the social-sexual periphery, where men take her for sexual pleasure and audiences see her as a stage commodity. Her confrontation with and denial of the maternal figure fails to foster a daughterly subjectivity, as woman's body remains in a patriarchal and commercial economy

that denies the possibility of achieving a subject position. Xiaoyun leaves her mother behind to go to Shenzhen. The departure from the maternal house does not imply entrance into the law of the father, however; the film has already hinted that local women who go to Shenzhen end up as prostitutes.

The film critiques a society dominated by sex and commerce, where women find neither space to settle down nor men to trust. In parallel to the mother-daughter narrative, however, the film introduces a young boy who takes Xiaoyun as the desiring subject and acts as her protector. In so doing, the film establishes an adolescent gaze through which Xiaoyun's personal life unfolds. As the relationship between Xiaoyun and the boy grows, each finds in the other the love and care missing from their lives. The choice of an adolescent for the roles of voyeuristic spectator and Xiaoyun's young lover frames a scopophilic gaze through which adolescent curiosity and erotic desire find a site of projection. Through the adolescent point of view, the camera reveals intimate moments of the female protagonist: nude in the shower, a sexual affair with a married man, and lonely moments backstage. The voyeuristic acts of the young boy in his observation of the female body challenge the "male gaze" as an exclusive and monolithic concept. The adolescent gaze leads to different possible viewing positions: curiosity of the young innocent, voyeurism of the adult pervert, and recognition of female spectatorship. Different positions in looking, in Kaja Silverman's argument, engender "differentiation between the look as a carrier of desire and lack and the gaze as a carrier of symbolic patriarchal dominance."[15]



The innocent loving relationship or friendship is destroyed when the film reveals—except to the boy—that he is Xiaoyun's son, the child said to have died shortly after birth. Thus *Dam Street* complicates the film narrative and the character relationship with the Oedipus complex: a loving bond between friends becomes a mother-son relationship. The transgression jeopardizes the established adolescent perspective and the unconventional friendship. Nonetheless, the film rejects a potential construction of Freudian mother-son narcissism and forecloses the narrative with Xiaoyun leaving the boy/son behind for another city. Her exit eliminates the possibility of identification with the mother as lover. The separation ends not only the boy's desire for his loving subject but also the audience's desire for the scopophilic gaze. The questions of what a woman can do after she chooses to leave her problems behind and how much further a woman's film can explore remain ambiguous.

From *Fish and Elephant* to *Dam Street,* Li Yu's films clearly take women and sexuality as central concerns. *Dam Street* positions the female body against restrictive social-economic conditions when sexual alternatives to the heterosexual hierarchy meet with punishment. The film also locates the female protagonist in a psychological confusion that problematizes female self-identity. Feminist Foucauldian interpretations help us to understand how social-cultural disciplinary practices exercise power over the sexed body. But feminist assumptions do not bring empowerment to this Chinese women's film, as the director expresses her concern for women's issues but rejects a feminist position. This reluctance is difficult to explain, and the film and its protagonist are left disillusioned with reality.



## *LOST IN BEIJING* AND LOST IN REPRESENTATION

Li Yu's recent release, *Lost in Beijing,* considers how rural migrants, especially females, feel lost in the metropolis as they struggle to survive. The spatial mapping of the rural onto the urban raises the question of how a woman's film negotiates the relationship between gender identity and urban space. In assuming that urban space is gendered, one realizes that gender relations and spatial divisions manifest each other.[16] The credit sequence in *Lost in Beijing,* for instance, uses rapid handheld camerawork and accelerated montage to connect the audience immediately to radically changing Beijing, where proliferating high-rises and highways make one's head swim. Against the setting of an urban center, the camera lens focuses on a migrant couple on the social and spatial margins. The husband is framed as a high-rise window cleaner and the wife Pingguo (Apple) as a massage girl, whose responsibility is to wash and massage customers' feet. Both occupy positions on Beijing's urban periphery; the husband sells his labor in public places while the wife offers a bodily service in a confined private space.

Foot massage centers have recently emerged in China as commercial places where customers often seek sexual pleasure as well as physical relaxation. The young and unmarried girls employed there are expected not only to massage feet but also to provide sexual services. A massage girl embraces a customer's feet with her bare hands, soaks the feet in an herbal medicine bath, and massages them along acupuncture points. As the business bespeaks a new luxury in Chinese lifestyle, it poses issues

of sexual exploitation and gender politics. The bodily engagement between hands and feet or legs allows customers, especially males, not only to engage their sexual imagination but also to make sexual requests. The paying customer gains temporary ownership of the massage girl, who often becomes a sex worker, a thinly disguised prostitute in this urban space.

The film director understands and visualizes how "the social construction of gender difference establishes some spaces as women's and others as men's; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity."[17] But the film does not see "the space or spatial politics of difference as central both to masculinist power and to potential feminist resistance."[18] The film narrative thus neglects a potential feminist construction. The gendering of space and the woman's position in it make the rural female migrant doubly displaced: onto the social-economic margins on the one hand and into the sexual domain on the other. Although a site of opportunity for migrants, the city can also become a place of imprisonment and exploitation. The film's protagonist feels trapped; the imperative of social-economic survival comes at the cost of sexual exploitation. The film director seems uncertain about how to portray this dilemma, in effect how to negotiate her woman's film within or against the mainstream discourse. In other words, the film feels lost about whether to foreground the female character as a socially and sexually exploited victim or as a woman with her own voice and perspective. The directorial ambiguity renders the protagonist as a passive character: one who appeals to her boss not to fire her after he rapes her, who advises her co-worker to let a customer touch her hands if he wants her breast. A moment of resistance does occur when the film introduces a foot-massage girl who takes off a customer's toenails after he sexually harasses her. But the director presents this behavior as inappropriate; the rebellious girl becomes a prostitute, selling her body as a profession.



As a woman's film with a marginalized female migrant at the center of the narrative, *Lost in Beijing* has possibilities for alternative representation. "To be in the margin," bell hooks writes, "is to be part of the whole but outside the main body . . . a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse," and here one has "the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."[19] *Lost in Beijing,* however, seems disinterested in the "production of a counter-hegemonic discourse," and rather than "a radical perspective"

the representation of female body signifies a desiring or sacrificing object. Because the woman is trapped in the gendered spatial confinement of her workplace and in the transactions of sexual commodity exchange, the central narrative and cinematic configuration fail to provide a fresh perspective. Exploitation of the female body as a commodity in the sex/money nexus leaves the film fatally flawed.

The entanglement of Apple, the female migrant, between two men, her window-washer husband and the owner of the foot-massage parlor, illustrates the crude enactment of sexual exchange. Apple gets drunk and passes out in one of the massage rooms. The film uses a telephoto lens to foreground a scene in which the boss rapes the unconscious Apple. As the boss forces himself into the female body, Apple's husband happens to witness the rape through a window. Male force claims the female body as sexual property, one man physically, the other with his gaze. The following montage sequence through a handheld camera concerns not the victim so much as the collision between the two men. The husband yells: "How can another man rape my wife!" The boss declares that the act is accidental, not intentional. The film casts Apple as property of common ownership: wife in a heterosexual marriage and victim of sexual violence. Framing the female protagonist so she is silent and off screen, the film misses an opportunity to insert a woman's voice, let alone a feminist perspective.



In addition to presenting woman as a sexual commodity, *Lost in Beijing* further reinforces her use and exchange values. Apple becomes pregnant, but who is the father? A two-shot of the husband and the boss on a rooftop shows them agreeing that the one whose blood type matches the baby's will be the father. The marginal figure of the migrant and the successful entrepreneur share possession of the female body, but for different desires. The boss of the foot-massage parlor wants to claim fatherhood to fulfill his desperate desire to have a child, so he offers to buy the pregnant body to possess woman and child. In the transaction sequence, the film cross-cuts between the two men signing a contract guaranteeing that the parlor boss will pay the husband 22,000 yuan after the birth. For the husband, the exchange of 22,000 yuan for his wife's body and the baby is the easy road to wealth. Money is power. The social conditions in the film certainly illustrate Luce Irigaray's claim that "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men . . . a commodity" and, as such, she is "a dualistic entity," possessing her own "natural body" as well as a "social and cultural body . . . imbued with a symbolic

**FIGURE 9.3** Two men signing a contract to exchange the pregnant female body (*Lost in Beijing*, 2007)



value because of its exchangeability."[20] The female protagonist, present but silent, watches her pregnant body and unborn baby turned into a transaction between men (fig. 9.3).

The film presents explicitly how the female body is exploited to satisfy male sexual desires and exchanged for its reproductive capacity. But the question of how the woman responds to the sexual-political economy needs explanation. The film allows the female protagonist a temporary possession of her own body. After discovering that she's pregnant, Apple pursues an abortion. She announces to her husband, "This belly is not yours!" but her declaration of self-possession indicates an intention, not a fact. Unable to afford medical expenses, Apple tries to obtain an illegal abortion. At an unauthorized clinic, the off-screen sound of a teenage girl screaming makes Apple realize that a botched abortion puts her life at risk. Thus she acquiesces to the deal between husband and boss, a film narrative governed by male desire. Her submission reflects, on the one hand, the social-commercial reality in China, and, on the other, the visual construction of the film. In a market-driven society that treats the female body as a sexual commodity, *Lost in Beijing* feels lost, with Li unsure how to configure her female protagonist. The question of how the image of female migrant might appear when prevailing social-economic

conditions offer her hardly any choice or autonomy remains open. A further challenge is how a woman's film can negotiate with mainstream film production without invoking either censorship or subordination.[21] The possibilities for a feminist cinema or practice in China remain uncertain, no matter how woman-centered the film might be.

While *Lost in Beijing* draws our attention to the issue of woman reduced to her exchange value, the film further configures the female image as a signifier of lack. What power has the migrant woman apart from her working, reproductive body? And the rich man's wife, consigned to idleness, unable to get pregnant, what value has she? Thus, the former's lack of social-economic status and the latter's lack of children pose the question of how a woman's film deals with the notion of lack and its symbolic meanings. A psychoanalytical perspective considers lack "one of the primary concepts that has structured female identification and desire"; moreover, lack has "haunted women's attempts to enter a representational economy in which our only mandated positions are either invisibility, or object rather than subject of the gaze."[22]



Indeed, *Lost in Beijing* represents woman as defined by lack, with the female body as a split signifier: the lack of social-economic status, on the one hand, and reproductive capacity, on the other. Thus the film captures a reality in contemporary China where women are subordinated to class-specific gender norms. The woman who does not bear children or the woman without material means are both marked as failed, devalued, disempowered. In the sequence in which the two men sign their contract, for instance, the pregnant woman up for sale and the manager's wife are present but silent. Significantly, however, the woman's film rejects gender conventions to include a scene of potential resistance. The boss's wife initiates sexual intercourse with the migrant woman's husband. In the mise-en-scène of the woman on top, the man on bottom with eyes covered by sunglasses, the wife figure revenges her husband by "fucking" another man. She may be childless, but she retains the sexual power to challenge male privilege. Exchanging sexual partners as a means of revenge and punishment subverts conventional gender norms and replaces the woman's lack with a phallic power.

In another scene of resistance, the film ends with Apple leaving the two men behind as she walks away from the boss's house with her newborn baby. The final sequence suggests that Apple's refusal to go back to her husband or her boss signifies her ownership of her body and legitimizes her motherhood over her baby. At that moment, the film presents the

migrant woman in a position of agency and offers a feminist gesture in representation. Nonetheless, the closing scene calls to mind Lu Xun's classic inquiry, what else can a woman be after she leaves her husband's house?[23] The question remains as the female image fades off and the final credits fade in.

The representation of female experience reflects problems in gender politics and the conditions for woman's filmmaking in contemporary China. As the market economy turns migrant bodies, male and female, into commodities in the accelerating urbanization of China, the female body carries a double value, labor and sex. While the female migrant struggles to survive economically as well as sexually in the urban milieu, women directors face the challenge of how to make a woman's film when mainstream production is so male-dominated. Whereas making a woman's film may compromise commercial success, achieving commercial success may require rendering the female body as a commodity. In addition, woman directors must deal with administrative censorship and the absence of an art-house network. The dilemma has trapped directors within survival strategies rather than the subjective pursuit of feminist filmmaking. As Li Yu oscillates between her concern for women's issues and for audience/market reception, female sexuality serves both ends. Women's films thus find it difficult to claim a subjective position or an independent sexual identity within the Chinese filmmaking industry.



## CONCLUSION

Li Yu's film trilogy is an example of how female moviemakers are working persistently, albeit on the margins, to negotiate their presence in the male-dominated, commercial film industry. By foregrounding issues of female sexuality and homosexuality, directors have been able to create female images and voices counter to the mainstream. In spite of its significance, however, women's filmmaking in contemporary China presents paradoxical problems. Li's *Fish and Elephant* has to frame the lesbian relationship within the discourse of heterosexuality. *Dam Street* attempts to insert daughterly insubordination against heterosexual regulation and maternal discipline but ends in frustration; circumstances change only by fleeing them. In *Lost in Beijing,* while the migrant becomes lost in the social-economic upheaval of China's urbanization, the director is drawn toward the conflicting imperatives of commercial or feminist

representation. The concern for female sexuality combined with uncertainty about feminist rhetoric leaves Li Yu's films with the contradiction of woman-centered narratives in the context of social-economic regulation. In addition, women's filmmaking faces pressure from censorship and market expectations. *Lost in Beijing* had to submit to more than fifty cuts before it could be sent to the Berlin Film Festival.[24]

The dilemma that female directors encounter is how to deconstruct the conventional representation of woman while also defining "what it means to be a woman" and thus expressing female subjectivity. With woman as the speaking subject and central image, women's filmmaking has challenged mainstream discourse but without yet defining "all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist."[25] When one reads Chinese women's films in terms of a conversation with feminist assumptions, one realizes the paradoxical contradictions. Also pertinent is the question of the comprehensibility of feminist readings of Chinese films. Why are Li Yu's films unable to turn marginality into counter-hegemonic discourse? Why is homosexuality located within rather than against heterosexual normality? To make matters even more confusing is the fact that Li Yu rejects feminism as a position or a discourse, as she states in an interview: "I am neither a feminist nor do I pursue gender equality in my films. Sexual difference is essentially contradictive and I have no intention of seeking resistance or changes in my works. Concern for women's issues or a female perspective is naturally embedded in myself, which doesn't require special gender consciousness."[26]



The director's stance and practice pose the question of whether in an ideological and commercially driven film industry it is possible to have a woman's cinema defined by feminism with "all identifications." We are challenged to rethink feminism under local/global conditions. "Feminism," as Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng explain, "is always already a global discourse, and the history of its local reception is a history of the politics of translation."[27] As theories in translation or translingual practices in the era of globalization, feminist theories and practices require that we consider global feminisms in light of local social-cultural conditions. In the process of negotiation and translation, women's filmmaking, hence female discourse and enunciation, will become increasingly interwoven with multiple canons: official, mainstream, masculine, commercial, and local/global.

## NOTES

1. On the concept of socialist cinema, see my chapter, "Constructing and Consuming the Revolutionary Narratives."
2. On women's cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, see my chapter, "Feminism with Chinese Characteristics?"
3. Before becoming a film director, Li Yu worked as a television anchorwoman for a local station and as a documentary film director for CCTV. *Fish and Elephant, Dam Street,* and *Lost in Beijing* are her three feature films to date. Young and talented, Li and her works have drawn notice from film festivals and film critics. *Lost in Beijing* incited controversy before it was sent to the Berlin Film Festival, and it was openly attacked by the Film Bureau after the festival.
4. *Fish and Elephant* is Li's first feature. In the film, two lesbians play themselves. In order to make this film, the first-time amateur director borrowed money, emptied her savings, and sold her house. The film did not reach a mass audience, but it received an award from the Venice Film Festival.
5. See Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," 30.
6. Director's comments from Q&A session after the screening of her film, *Fish and Elephant*. See Su Qiqi, "The True Story of Two Lesbians," http://www.hsw.cn/fun/2003-08/29/content_719924.htm.
7. Carol Guess, "Que(e)rying Lesbian Identity," 19.
8. Ibid., 19.
9. Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Theory," 964.
10. Shelly Kraicer, "Film Review," 3.
11. Queer cinema in China remains on the social-cultural margins. But film works on male gay identity and issues, both features and independent documentaries, are increasing. Zhang Yuan and Cui Zi'en are two representative figures. In comparison, films on the subject of lesbianism still have an open field.
12. On the notion of punishment as spectacle, see Michel Foucault, "The Spectacle of the Scaffold."
13. On feminism, Foucault, and the body, see Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity,* 81–116.
14. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 278.
15. Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World,* 168.
16. On urban space as gendered space, see Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, "Introduction."
17. Ibid., 3.
18. Ibid., 1.
19. bell hooks, *Yearning,* 206–207.
20. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One,* 31.
21. The lack of a counter-discourse or radical perspective despite the centrality of women's issues and female figures challenges us to rethink feminism(s) under different social-cultural conditions. In China, scholars, especially women, promote "softer" or "smiling" feminism(s) in confrontation with the "malestream" and mainstream.

22. On the notion of "female lack," see Rosalind Minsky, "Commentary on 'The Signification of the Phallus'"; and B. J. Wray, "Performing Clits and Other Lesbian Tricks," 188.
23. In his speech to the Beijing Women's Normal College in 1923, Lu Xun challenged the audience with the question, "what else could Nora be after she left her husband's house?"
24. The SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) required more than fifty cuts in the film and banned the film from screening for five months because of sexual scenes. There are two versions of the film, the original and the cut version fifteen minutes shorter.
25. Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 133.
26. See Li Yu, interview by Professor Cui Weiping, http://www.xschina.org/, April 18, 2007.
27. Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, "Introduction," 463.