

A Comparison of the Representation of Women in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: The Fifth Generation and the Sixth Generation

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ABSTRACT

Under the context of globalization, Chinese culture increasingly absorbs Western theories of humanism and feminism, while the representation of women in Chinese cinema develops throughout times. Comparing the Fifth Generation's filmmakers and the Sixth's Generation's filmmakers in China, the latter are prone to construct female characters in a more humanist approach. Not only depict transgressive women, the new generation also represent female viewpoints. Unlike the Fifth Generation's filmmakers who produced films through male perspectives, the new generation promote the audiences to assimilate the sensations of female characters. However, both generations can still hardly escape traditional frameworks of gender ideologies. Without formulating truly subversive gender politics, Chinese cinema in the 21st century is still far from achieving progressive gender representation.

Keywords: *Women's film, Feminism, Chinese cinema, Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation*

1. PREFACE

The representation of women in films transforms with social and historical changes in China. In different historical periods, female characters are constructed according to prevailing ideologies in the society. This essay will compare the works of the sixth generation with the fifth generation in terms of their representation of women. This essay will take *The Crossing* (Baixue, 2019) as an example of the sixth generation's film to analyze the similarities and the differences of the way women are constructed by the two generations. I will argue that both generations are politically progressive that they foreground female images and represent women as transgressive protagonists. In terms of difference, the fifth generation's films tend to construct women as empty signifiers. Under a superficial surface of gender liberation, the fifth generation conveys male subjectivity through female images. From a more humanist vision, the new generation explores authentic female experience without adhering to patriarchal perspectives. Nevertheless, the two generations also share a common characteristic that they cannot escape from traditional narrative frameworks. Both generations are prone to reinforce dominant ideologies without being able to present a completely subversive vision. Though the sixth generation demonstrates a more liberal vision than the previous generation, further developments in terms of gender issue are still required in Chinese cinema.

In terms of the films made before the fifth generation, Dai Jinhua argues that "between 1949 and 1979 all narratives about women asserted that women were tragically enslaved, mistreated, and victimized in the dark abyss of

Old China." [1] Being deprived of active power, the female characters were merely symbols of the passive victims in the society. Additionally, Dai points out that women were constructed as "the classical Earth Mother" full of traditional feminine virtues. [2] For instance, *The Goddess* (Wu Yonggang, 1934) represents female based on traditional ideological framework, which avoids representing transgressive femininity through formal strategies. Wang Yiman contends that Wu Yonggang implicitly suggests the prostitution of the mother figure (Ruan Lingyu) through oblique camera work, while using glamor shots to elevate her to saintly ethereality. [3] Refusing to represent abject female sexuality, *The Goddess* intentionally glamorizes motherhood, constructing an impossible figure that do not exist in the reality. Nevertheless, women are no longer the socially victimized, who become empowered rebels with individual agencies in the works of the fifth Generation. Rey Chow points out that a new female sexuality was reformulated and traditional roles became instable in the early twentieth century. [4] In terms of modern Chinese culture, Chow demonstrates a tendency towards primitivization of female. To illustrate, modern Chinese artists "used pornographic explorations of 'primitive' sexuality to articulate what they believed to be the basic humanity in us all." [5] For instance, *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987) represents a female protagonist with progressive sexuality. Irrespective of traditional moral code, Jiuer (Gong Li) embraces her desire and has sex with a man not her husband. Zhang Yingjin argues that the celebration of desire in *Red Sorghum* suggests a degradation in carnival, which "affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character", and serves to liberate Chinese people's mind. [6] Thus, a discovery of female desire occurred in Chinese cinema,

where women were portrayed as main protagonists who break away from the paternalistic family system that demands women to remain sexual chastity.

2. SIMILARITIES: TRANSGRESSIVE WOMEN IN BOTH GENERATIONS

Sharing similar characteristic with the fifth generation, the filmmakers of the Sixth Generation depict women as transgressive and sexually liberated. Li Zhichun contends that “urban cinema does not depict their sexual activities with a strong subjective prejudice or patriarchal judgment. Instead, these films more objectively record women’s real-life sexual experiences.”[7] For example, *Baixue* resists idealization and represents unconventional female characters in *The Crossing* (Baixue, 2019). Unlike *The Goddess*, *The Crossing* reveals mother’s unmotherly aspect without portraying her as a devoting saint. Instead of being a bond within the family, the mother character is represented as a sexually liberated figure. As an opposition of the earth mother, Lan (Ni Hongjie) enjoys her personal life of drinking, smoking and hanging out with men. When Lan brings man home, she tries to let Peipei leave in order to stay privately with him. Instead of sacrificing herself for the child, Lan foregrounds her individual desire. Neither be forced into prostitution nor feel ashamed, she willingly chooses her life and treats her body for her own sake. Breaking away from traditional moral restriction, *The Crossing* represents Lan as a desiring subject. Rather than an imagined ideal, the female character is portrayed as an authentic human being who possesses questionable qualities.

Moreover, female characters are allowed to actively challenge the laws made by the patriarch. In *The Crossing*, Peipei (Huang Yao) frequently appears in public space as an autonomous subject. Miriam Hanseb argues that the emphasis on women’s mobility in the modern urban space suggests to their empowerment and acquisition of autonomy.[8] Instead of being confined within the domestic sphere, Peipei is represented as a “female flaneur”, who derives agency from navigating the modern urban space. Moreover, Victor Fan points out that Peipei’s act of crossing “enables her to defy the border itself in the one hand, yet subjects herself to the competing powers on the other.”[9] As a deviant force against the border’s division, Peipei illegally transports products between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The female’s biopolitical body crosses the geopolitical border, which rebelliously challenges the imaginary border that divides the nation apart. Additionally, *The Crossing* represents a subversive female gangster as a relegate mother of Peipei. Instead of being caring and gentle, Hua (Jiang Meiyi) is powerful and intimidating. Leading a group of men and being respected by them, the female leader takes the role of the father in traditional culture. Hence, both the daughter and the mother are represented as unconventional female who take the roles that traditionally occupied by men. Not only break the moral code, the women also challenge the law

established by the patriarch. Rather than passive victims of the society, the female characters demonstrate their active power through disobediently defying the conventions restricting them.

3. DIFFERENCE: FEMALE’S PERSPECTIVE IN THE SIXTH GENERATION’S FILMS

However, the Sixth Generation’s films are different from the works of the previous Generation that they deviate from patriarchal perspectives. To illustrate, the majority of the fifth generation’s filmmakers appropriated female image to convey male subjectivity. Dai argues that “a story about a woman’s desires and cravings was only a masquerade for man’s real predicament.”[10]. For instance, *Judo* (Zhang Yimou, 1990) represents a woman who shifts from being possessed from one man to another. Wang Yeuji argues that “the female body is a site upon which the ambivalence of male fear and desire mediated”. [11] Through representing woman, the film expresses both the male fear of castration and the male desire to gain power through the representation of woman. Functioning to reconcile men with the new order, the female character is an empty signifier allied with man’s imagination and estranged from women’s actual lives. Differently, the works of the Sixth Generation no longer adhere to male perspective. Li points out that “unlike Fifth Generation directors, who usually used metaphor to indicate what they wanted to express, Sixth Generation directors adopted a direct approach to display reality.”[12] Instead of being constructed as male-doubles, women start to play themselves and represent their inner complexities in the films of the 21st century.

In terms of *The Crossing*, Bai represents unique female experiences and depicts Peipei as an emotional subject whom the spectators can identify with. In the film’s narrative, the Lok Ma Chau-Haunggang border tears Peipei’s life apart, leaving her a rootless child finding neither side her home. The cinematography of the film makes the audiences assimilate Peipei’s sense of insecurity and identify with her. In the boat party sequence, the camera emphasizes Peipei’s facial expressions when she stands alone in a corner nervously looking up-and-down. The shaky camera movements create a sense of instability, presenting a chaotic atmosphere that surrounds Peipei. By amplifying the noisy background sounds, Bai enables the audiences to feel the senses of uneasiness and estrangement with Peipei. Being swallowed in the crowd of Hong-Kongers with Peipei, the audiences identify with her through assimilating her sensations. When Peipei jumps into water, the audiences become suddenly isolated from the noise of the crowd and surrounded by the sound of water. The sound effect makes the audiences experience the world simultaneously with Peipei, promoting the audiences to perceive the world through her sensations. Hence, the film’s cinematography explores female’s real experience and subjectivity, representing her as an

emotionally complex individual rather than an empty signifier.

Additionally, Bai reveals the mundane life-process of female and makes the audiences assimilate her unactualized sensations. Fey Mou demonstrates a notion of suspension-imagination that a subjective state can be made palpably through the concrete image of the objective, which hangs in the air as a suspension-imagination. Drawing attention to the flavorless life-situation, the audiences can perceive an unsubstantiated state that can hardly be produced by the dramatists.[13] Applying Fey's theory in *The Crossing*, Bai utilizes a stationary long shot to emphasize Peipei's lonely image when her father leaves her alone in restaurant. Without dramatic narrative change, the long take keeps framing Peipei remaining static and staring at her father through the restaurant's window. In the mundane silence, Peipei's unspoken disappointment and frustration hangs in the air as imaginations. Through the concrete image of Peipei's silent stare, her subjective sensations become crystalized in the audiences' minds. Thus, Bai unfolds the reality of the female's life and conveys her inner emotion in a subtle and highly comprehensive approach.

Moreover, *The Crossing* eschews from hierarchal looking relationship and equally represents the desire of both genders through emphasizing physical interactions. In the Fifth Generation's films, the male gaze of desire constructed women as erotic objects although women were positioned in the foreground. Laura Mulvey argues that looking relationship suggests power relationship because women are deprived of individual agencies when they are passively gazed.[14] Being subjected under male gaze, the women were constructed as erotic objects to be looked in the Fifth Generation's films. In order to enter international cinematic market, the female characters' bodies were not only displayed for male gaze, but also exhibited as exotic orient to the Euro-American gaze. Rejecting the hierarchal power relationship suggested by the gaze, Bai prioritizes the mutual sensation of touch and represents the desire of both genders in *The Crossing*. For instance, the sequence of Peipei and Hao (Sun Yang) tying phones on each other highlights the bodily sensations of them both. According to Fey's notion of suspension-imagination, the characters intimately touch and hug each other in the name of tying phones, whose acts of desire make palpable their inner sensations of sexual desire. In the sequence, the sweaty bodies and the intimate physical interactions are emphasized over verbal dialogues. Without montage editing, Bai utilizes a long take to represent them touching and being touched by each other in a narrow space under erotic red light. Depending on the cinematographic techniques, an air of hormonal desire becomes created, while the characters' desire toward each other is crystalized in the air as an imagination. Thus, instead of having one character subjugated under another's exploitative gaze, Bai represents the mutual desire of both genders through creating an air of sexual desire surrounding them both.

In terms of spectatorship, the spectators are also promoted to identify with both genders in the touching sequence.

Mulvey argues that men possess women through actively gazing her, while the spectators can simultaneously possess the female through identifying with the powerful male gaze.¹ From a humanist perspective, the filmmakers of the new generation represent a more equal gender relationship in their films, who refuse to promote the spectators to identify solely with male vision. In *The Crossing*, Bai represents the reciprocal actions of touch to avoid gender-biased identification. To explain, Vivian Sobchack demonstrates a carnal viewing experience that the spectators' bodies enact a reversibility in perception and subvert the notion of onscreen and offscreen as mutually exclusive sites.[15] Sobchack wrote that "I has a carnal interest and investment in being both 'here' and 'there', in being able both to sense and to be sensible, to be both the subject and the object of tactile desire."² In other words, the spectators acquire a sensation of both touching and being touched when viewing a scene of touch, who simultaneously feel their own bodies and the characters' bodies. Thus, the spectators neither particularly identify with Peipei nor Hao, who assimilate the sensations of them both. Instead of being satisfied through possessing the female character, the spectators experience a pleasurable bodily response in reaction to the erotic touching image on the screen. By way of evading looking relationship and stressing tactile sensations, Bai negotiates an equal gender relationship and prevents the audiences from solely identifying with male character.

4. DEFICIENCY: THE TRADITIONAL IDEOLOGY IN BOTH GENERATIONS

However, both the works of the fifth and the sixth generation cannot completely subvert traditional framework and formulate a truly oppositional discourse. Admittedly, certain female filmmakers did attempt to break from male perspective and make women's films in the 1990s. Dai contends that female filmmakers of the Fifth Generation began to select materials concerning women and represent an experience unique to women.[16] Nevertheless, the women's films of the fifth generation "only reflects indirectly the prevalent phenomenon of the lowering of women's social and cultural status."³ The films end with a conventional cultural order although they begin with an oppositional female image, which are still saturated by the normalization of male-dominated culture[17] Similarly, the female image in the Sixth Generation's films remain adhering to certain traditional frameworks. Dai comments that the female filmmakers of the Fifth Generation do not experiment with radical, therefore marginal cinema, nor did they attempt to create works that can be categorized as 'anti-cinema'.⁴[18] The filmmakers of the new generation still can hardly establish an anti-cinema that represents an awakening female

consciousness. Though the female figures express themselves in certain extent, the sentiment and style of the Sixth Generation's films are yet sufficiently self-conscious. In *The Crossing*, Hua is raided by the police and completely disempowered in the end although she appeared as a powerful female leader before. The police symbolize masculine power, while the law suggests absolute justice. The female law-breaker's transgressive behavior is violently terminated, implicating that anyone disobey the law established by the patriarch has to be punished. Hence, the female character is still under the control of male power and remains being subordinated in the film. Meanwhile, Peipei's border-crossing is terminated by the juridical authority of the law, who eventually fails to challenge the territorial confines set up by the border. Despite of the film's emphasis on Peipei's rebellious effort, she eventually has to be subjugated under the law. Though Peipei's individual sexual desire is recognized, she ceases to develop her relationship with Hao in the end. As a female with transgressive desire, Peipei is punished by losing both her female friend (Joe) and her potential male partner. In the film's narrative, righteous men (police) save teenage girl (Peipei) from evil woman (Hua) in order to prevent her from perpetuating disobedient behaviors. Despite of its representation of transgressive women, none of the female character is really allowed to subvert the law made by men. The failure of Peipei's law-breaking adventure is a lesson that teaches her to be obedient and enduring.

Additionally, the transgressive mother figure is punished and corrected. When Lan fights with a man on the street, she hysterically drags him and desperately begs him to return her money. The shocking visualization of violence represents the audiences the undesiring consequence of being sexually unconservative. The unmotherly mother is not only punished by being distanced by her child, but also by having her personal property confiscated by the patriarch. In the film's end, the mother is represented returning to her traditional role, who cooks for her child and stops hanging out with men. The final return of both Peipei and her mother to the family is represented as a satisfying conclusion, and therefore the film ends in a conventional way that keeps women in their places. In the final sequence, Peipei and her mother overlooks Hong Kong from mountain hill, who seemingly have accepted the fact of their current situation. Rather than keep being rebellious, the women are forced to accept their fate in the end. Eventually, Peipei fails going travel with Joe and Lan still cannot take her to Spain, while Hua becomes confined in the prison. Without actual character development, everything remains unevolved and even has regressed in the end. Hence, the film is only contemporary in the surface, which reinforces traditional ideology and remains non-progressive in its essence.

5. CONCLUSION

Both the works of the fifth and the sixth generations foregrounds female characters and represent transgressive

women. Differently, the new generation depart from a more humanist perspective, which explore authentic female experience without adhering to patriarchal vision. The two generations are also similar that they both reinforce traditional ideologies, whereas the sixth generation does it in a relatively implicit way. Nevertheless, it is reductive to ghettoize the works of the sixth generation that there are much more conventional films than *The Crossing* made in the 21st century. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that certain highly subversive and avant-garde films are successfully produced by the sixth generation's filmmakers. This essay only analyzed the overall landscape of the sixth generations' Chinese cinema by taking *The Crossing* as an example. In the 21st century, Chinese people no longer expect to see national expressions and mass narrative in films so much as in the revolutionary or post-revolutionary years in the past. As the society becomes increasingly welling off, Chinese people begin to pay more attention to the real experiences of the socially marginalized. Meanwhile, the Chinese are increasingly influenced by the civil right movements in the west, gradually assimilating the western ideas of individualism and humanism. Not only women's status become significantly lifted, gender issues such as LGBTQ rights also start to be taken as discourse in contemporary China. Under the social context of the 21st century, the films of the new generation generally demonstrate a more liberal and modern vision toward women. Though the new generation still can hardly escape traditional frameworks of the patriarchal society, there is a potential for a more ideologically advanced cinema to be developed in China.

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