

Symptoms of Alienation: the female body in recent Chinese film

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Imaginary Politics

Women's bodies may have offered unique possibilities for the expression of the canonical virtues, but they could not escape being *women's* bodies ... in the long run even the exaltation of women's virtue operated to keep women in their cultural place (Carlitz, 1994, p. 124).

The position of women in traditional Chinese society has become a conceptual paradigm for bad practice in relations between the sexes. Meanwhile for feminist theoreticians in the century of cinema it is commonplace to notice the gendering of bodies on screen. In this article I will divert from neither of these commonplaces but I will argue that taken together they reveal a developing aesthetic of transnational spectatorship that revels in sexism in Chinese cinema. I will make this argument through readings of films made outside the Chinese State Studio system, and which have been marketed internationally as counter-cinema. My argument draws on theoretical understandings which have been developed in feminist psychoanalytic work outside China. The application of such theory to recent Chinese cinema is appropriate given the aesthetic and gender-specific resonances between these films and the construction of gendered bodies in cinematic space of other cinema practice. I will also argue that there are self-conscious references to such theory in the films discussed, which confuse but do not mitigate the overall impression of female subordination within the text. These references locate the films within a contemporary global cinematic imaginary but they are subject to strong local inflection from their position within the Chinese cinema and its historical development.

A film's contemporaneity is marked at moments of recognition between spectator and text, when the symbolic structure of the film matches the spectators' conception of how life is—the criss-crossing imaginaries of the everyday. This moment of recognition may also be described as an articulation of cinematic space through the process of reception. I am particularly concerned here with international reception, how we see as well as what we see. This needs to be understood in tandem with the idea of transnational imaginaries. I mean by this discernible overlaps in the imaginary structures of experience across the cinema-going, video-watching global population. Such overlaps are made possible through symbolic continuities between one cultural construction and another. The one which I am focusing on here is the construction of the gendered body in the symbolic organization of sex on film.

I will concentrate on two films; one directed by Zhang Yuan, the other by Wang Xiaoshuai, *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, Zhang Yuan, 1993) and *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, Wang Xiaoshuai, 1993). Both films are valuable pieces of independent film-making. They eschew formulaic plots, and rely neither on revolutionary

heroism nor on Hollywood happy endings (nor even post-classic, neo-art Hollywood *unhappy* endings). They focus on the story rather than on the plot. That is, both films try to create a sense of the moment, constructing a realism of disorder. People play 'themselves' or approximations of themselves. This produces a performative mode that is already absent—actors provide an illusion of subjective wholeness for the spectators' comfort. Amateurs-as-themselves cannot do this. They know neither themselves nor the art of being themselves, and the result is oddly affecting. The spectators find that their job is not to identify with those on screen, but to contribute a sense of contemporary recognition to that presence, to legitimate the film as fiction and document. Thus the plots seem haphazard and are structured only by a vague chronology of the various characters' problems. These films are very different from the highly melodramatic and formally (if not experientially) closed narratives of revolution and liberation which characterize much Chinese cinema post-1949. However the production of meaning and its relation to the construction of gender is rather similar in both groups. In both there is a tendency for subversion of female subjectivity through a reduction to corporeal sexualized meaning. In these later films this is articulated into the political reading of the films, particularly *Beijing Bastards*. The imaginary space(s) created and occupied by disaffected young, male bohemians in Beijing in the 1990s are coterminous, in the sense expressed by Castoriadis' notion of the social imaginary, with the clashing contemporaneities of socialism and marketization.

Everything happens as if the terrain where the creativity of society is manifested in the most tangible manner, the terrain where it makes, makes be, and makes itself in making be, must be covered over by an imaginary creation ordered in such a way that the society can conceal from itself what it is (Castoriades, 1975, p. 293).

What is important in the dimension of the social-historical is not that human beings always eat and have children, but that they do so in an infinite variety of ways. It is precisely this infinite variety, this indeterminate range of possibilities which builds upon but always exceeds the material conditions of human life, which is the domain of the social imaginary (Thompson, 1984, pp. 22–23).

Deng Xiao-ping's¹ China has, since 1978, been on the road to the Four Modernizations. In pursuit of modernization the Party-state has re-organized the political high ground to accommodate the principles of hired labour, large- and small-scale capital accumulation, individualistic consumerism, and entrepreneurial and State economic enterprise. It has done so, however, without relinquishing its will to control the population. In these films, the tension between the freedom to fail, inherent in market politics, and the necessity to conform, central to the politics of the one-party state, is made visible through the everyday lives of these players on the margins of conformity.

This period has been described as post-socialist (Dirlik, 1989). If the idea of *post* indicates difference through continuation and effect rather than complete erasure of one time by another, it is a useful theoretical description of the period. The central figure of *Beijing Bastards*, Cui Jian, is one of East Asia's biggest stars, and a fine rock artiste. He is also a post-socialist hero. He sings of politics as though he were singing of love against the odds. Cui Jian's band ADO was formed in 1986 and achieved immediate success amongst urban youth in China. They were banned by 1988 but continued to 'Party'—party being the borrowed term for a secret rock concert/festival. As with British raves locations were kept secret from the police to prevent pre-emptive closure. The first

legal rock concert took place in China on 28 January 1990 in the Beijing Workers' Stadium (Liang and Stobbe, 1993). It was initiated by Cui Jian who offered to open a series of charity concerts to mark the occasion of the Asian Games and help to fund it. The authorities were persuaded to accept the proposal by the intervention of the deputy mayor of Beijing, who also attended the concert. According to one account of the concert and a subsequent national tour, rock music provoked a cathartic reaction in its audience:

As he [Cui Jian] was the able to discover by himself, the central problem in Chinese culture is the artificial complication of human relations. Instead of open and honest speaking, vague demands for morality and decency are seen as more important (Liang and Stobbe, 1993, p. 90).

Cui Jian's 'open and honest' singing was apparently also noted by the authorities as the tour was cancelled half way through and the band returned to playing underground venues, including the 'Diplomatic Restaurant' which features in *Beijing Bastards*. The quotation from the account of the Cui Jian tour is interesting for the ways in which it expresses the difference between social normalcy and the discourse of rock. Life without rock is 'artificial', it is policed by a 'morality' and a 'decency' which are to be seen rather than spoken. The implication that speaking is a closer indicator of intention than 'seen' behaviour is clear. The interstices of community, those that do not sit well with the demands of public order, are driven outside the discourse of morality and decency. The discourses that carry their voice are criminalized. The response from the criminals and their sympathizers is to see virtuous society as artificial and to encourage a rhetoric of authenticity for the outsider. Knowing that Cui Jian's secret performances are 'party(s)'—some of which are shown on film—leads a British audience to thoughts of rave and criminal justice. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 was the Tory Government's rabid response to free raves in the English countryside, travellers, and the rhythmic dancing of alienated youth.² It has left a cultural association that aligns some with dance as positive Anti-politics, and others with dance as the epicentre of national disorder. Dancing without a licence is now a criminal offence in the United Kingdom. As Jeremy Gilbert (1997) and Tara Brabazon (1997, pp. 104–108) have explained, the dancing body of the late 1980s in Britain has been seen as an aggressively apolitical and dangerously unbounded subject.

What is clear enough is that dancing, the crowd, and music with repetitive beats have been things which the dominant culture has tried to suppress and to regulate for at least the whole of modernity, and that the philosophers and would-be legislators have wanted to get rid of since Plato (Gilbert, 1997, p. 15).

What is also clear is that the dancing body, 'partying' in *Beijing Bastards*, and applauded in European and North American art houses, is not entirely apolitical; at least, not once the politics of gender are taken into consideration. A description of the film's origins suggests its status as an underground film. Their protagonists are singers, artists, roadies, undecided bohemians, although not quite the hooligans (*liumang*) of Wang Shuo's fictions, that John Minford has described elsewhere as those that cruise 'the inner city streets on [his] Flying Pigeon Bicycle, looking (somewhat lethargically) for the action, reflective sunglasses flashing a sinister warning' (Minford, 1985 quoted in Barmé, 1992, p. 28).³ Yet I offer this account of the film as a radical and politically innovative text not only to indicate how it has been understood by international audiences, but also to underline how the hegemony of a certain concept of statehood and modernity can be

replicated in gender relations even amongst the very groups that feel themselves excluded from the organizing principles of their political environment.

The Imaginary Spectacle

Beijing Bastards was introduced on its 1995 UK Channel Four screening as 'China's first rock and roll movie ... banned by the Chinese Authorities'.⁴ And so the British late night television audience settled down at midnight to an hour and a half of right-on radical rock and roll. They had been primed to enjoy familiar music (albeit—they suspected—less subtle than the mature Western varieties of rock), and an anti-Communist, sub-cultural feel-good factor, laced with the peculiarly English self-satisfaction of having sat through a foreign film on a Tuesday night. I want to argue that their expectancy was based on the assumption that Western rock and Western youth have been there before—and that the China factor simply reaffirmed the importance of the Western dominant and subversive relation. The audience expected to be impressed by Chinese temerity in an 'authentically' repressive climate—whilst patting themselves on the back that their youth—imagined, vicarious or actual—provided the template for this musical courage. The *actual* point of contact in the symbolic imaginaries articulated by film and in a Western audience's assumptions is rather less heroic. This—submerged but essential—additional feel-good factor in the film (not, unlike its 'banned' status, openly offered to the audience by the link man at Channel Four) was its comfortable dependency on a construction of alienated youth as male.

Seeing the film in an English sitting room—or even in the Institute of Contemporary Art's newly refurbished cinema in London—gives the music, the grey streets, the scruffy dance cellars, the dour-faced policemen leading a drunk home through thin Beijing streets, the bicycles wheeling through traffic in persistent rain, the late night cafes where men drink until they fall over—all these things—a sense of exotic orientalism turned upside down. This is all so ordinary, it must be interesting, and it cannot help but seem authentic.⁵ And if cross-cultural reception of the film might be confused: a 'banned' film, the 'first rock 'n' roll movie' but which actually looks more like a skilful portrait of nothing more than the everyday; the film itself harbours contradiction. A story about young men and women trying to get by as musicians, as artists, or simply trying to be young and self-obsessed in a big city, the film offers an alternative version of life in the interstices of Party-State control systems in the People's Republic. At the same time the text relies on normative, gendered processes of identification and complicity between spectator and text to produce a romance of male alienation that squeezes female subjectivity—rendered almost entirely corporeal—into its margins.

The film opens with a sequence that cuts between a rock band's rehearsal and a confrontation between a young man and a young woman under an urban roadway. It is raining. The woman, Maomao, has told the man, Kazi, that she is pregnant. He wants her to 'get rid of it'. She is unhappy and frightened at the prospect. His response is an attempt to seduce her. This makes the situation impossible and she runs off into the rain. The scene between the two is in medium shot, with no particular emphasis on one character or the other. It is only after Maomao has left and there is an extended medium close-up on the surprised and pensively sullen Kazi, intercut with an equivalent shot of the rock singer, Cui Jian, that the film begins to demonstrate its interests. The invitation to identify with Kazi is compounded by the association of the young man's misery with the dominant soundtrack, Cui Jian's songs of politics and love, 'walking with your head against the wind'. Cui's sings, 'My eyes shine like a victim's [a rabbit caught in the head-

lamps?] ... but I can get along without you,' as Kazi runs his hand through his hair, and wipes the rain from his eyes, glistening in the lights of the road and the traffic.

There are other narrative strands in the film, but Kazi and Cui Jian hold the centre in a juxtaposition of existential angst and heroic articulation of the pain of living in a modern dictatorship (or the dictatorship of modernization?). Kazi's search for Maomao runs parallel to Cui Jian's search for rehearsal space and a performance venue. Both searches express frustration at a lack of control over their private and public lives. The film is indeed about the everyday, but in particular about how the daily experience of city life, modern capitalism—in this case 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Zhao Ziyang, 13th Party Congress, October 1987, quoted in White, 1994, p. 150), together with a creative will to push against the boundaries of self- and social-expression, turn the everyday into a struggle between helplessness and anger.

This dual-portrait of alienation, suffered by Kazi and sung by Cui Jian, is undoubtedly male. Or at least, the main male protagonists are prioritized in the camera-work and on the sound track. That is easily observed. Their symbolic construction within the text is more complicated however. Male alienation is characterized in the film as sexy, bohemian, a walk on the wild side of the contemporary scene. To sustain this interpretation of young masculinity it is important that the symptoms of real subjective distress are made invisible. In this analysis I suggest that the ideal image of the male subject is symptomatically anatomized in the female body. As Elizabeth Grosz argues in her work on the European imaginary anatomy, the human body has been reduced to a discursive shorthand of fit, white, male bodily presence.

Lacan develops his understanding of the *imaginary anatomy* largely in his account of the mirror stage ... this too is a psychical map of the body, a mirror of the subject's lived experiences, not as an anatomical and physiological object, but as a social and psychical entity (Grosz, 1995, p. 86).

Grosz describes the Lacanian position as the way in which the psyche conceives of the body—and depends on that conception for its own coherence. It is observable therefore that a disturbed psyche acts out trauma through parallel, symbolic disturbances wreaked upon the body. This relationship, as described by Grosz, is immensely suggestive of the relationship between film and spectator, where the text presents bodies on film that are an ideal point of identification for a pleasure seeking audience. That much is familiar ground to feminist film scholarship. The question that arises in the context of *Beijing Bastards* and *The Days* is whether or not the anatomy of the male—and by analogy in this argument, the female—in Chinese cultural structures is equivalent to the psychic organization of body space that Grosz refers to in a Western context. On the level of the medical science of anatomy in the two cultures the answer is clearly no. Chinese anatomy is a holistic discourse, with an emphasis on pattern, energy, and connectivity between all the systems of the body, mental as well as physiological. As Judith Farquhar has argued, although also noting the hybridity of Chinese and Western medicine in recent years, 'For patients too, the multiple body involves a certain subjectivity ... Medical care for many Chinese patients is continuous with their own individual and family strategies for maintaining health' (Farquhar, 1994, p. 94). This is in contrast to Western anatomy that has concentrated on dissection in the philosophical context of the Cartesian split between the ego and the corporeal self. However this medical paradigm is not necessarily repeated in the symbolic world of gender. As Harriet Evans has argued, the concept of gender in Chinese *political* discourse is a noxious tincture of

subordination and sexual disappearance disguised as collectivist and latterly marketized equality.

If under collectivist ideology, as Li Xiaojiang argues, the rhetoric of male–female equality prevented women from asserting themselves, then under the reprivatization of love and sexuality the continuing attachment to socio-biological constructions effectively legitimises women’s lack of autonomy (Evans, 1997, p. 220).

In this argument I am therefore stressing the political as much as medical injections into the filmic text understood as symbolic universe—the space of articulation of the subject. The medicalized body in these films is in any case quite specifically under the knife of Western medicine as two women succumb to hospitalized abortion procedures. It seems that the Chinese medical body, and the anatomical differences that are posed there, may be either discrete from or (as I suggest below) implicated in the practice of gender construction in Chinese socio-cultural performance. A useful discussion which establishes this dichotomy as a historical conundrum is to be found in Charlotte Furth’s work on sexuality and reproduction in Chinese medicine in the sixteenth century. Furth notes that whilst Chinese medicine did not lump sexuality and reproduction unproblematically together, thus essentializing the female body, it did associate sexuality and longevity. There is therefore a discursive separation of the male and female anatomy, in so far as the female is the source of a dangerous pleasure, whilst the male is a body that must enjoy the erotic whilst protecting itself from female corporeal rapacity:

... orthodox Chinese medical discourse did not understand such pleasures as constituting an independent domain of ‘sexuality’, but rather positioned the erotic at the fulcrum of body experiences implicating human longevity and even spiritual regeneration on one side and generativity and reproduction on the other ... (Furth, 1994, p. 145).

My argument here is that the separation of spiritual need and bodily suffering is recapitulated in Chinese film as an unconscious symbolic tic, and also as a strategy to invigorate male status. In the films I am discussing the imaginary ideal is the mirror image of masculinity—the face that the male subject presents to camera. I want to argue further that in the case of *Beijing Bastards* and *The Days*, this pattern repeats itself with a twist that is most clearly understood in the schema of the imaginary anatomy.

In *Beijing Bastards* we get a casual glimpse of the painter, Liu Xiaodong. He is identifiable by the large figurative painting on which he works whilst a young hopeful hangs around hoping to get accepted into the studio’s set. Liu comes across as having ‘made it’ as a Beijing bohemian. He and his very large canvas inhabit the studio space and the artistic space of the scene, whilst the female hopeful hovers at the door asking for advice. We are also aware from the credits that he is responsible for the art direction of the film. In *The [Winter] Days (Dongchun de rizi)* (1994, Wang Xiaoshuai) Liu Xiaodong and his partner, Yu Hong, also a painter, are the main protagonists. Here, however, they are seen working together in a cramped flat above an art school, although Yu’s creative output is only implied. Liu dominates the narrative and his art informs the visual narration of the film, although his persona is less confident than in the brief scene in *Beijing Bastards*, and he no longer appears as a central figure of a glamorous set. He is struggling to sell his pictures to overseas buyers, in particular an American who showed interest but fails to come up with an actual purchase. Liu’s winter days are desperate forays into the commercial art world whilst his relationship with his partner collapses until it is she—rather than one of his canvasses—who goes to New York.

Liu Xiaodong was born in Liaoning in 1963. He graduated in 1988 from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts and stayed on as a lecturer. Yu Hong was born in 1966 in Beijing. She also graduated in 1988 from the Central Academy, and has since worked there as a lecturer. She has exhibited in Monte Carlo, Macao, Pasadena, CA, Berlin, and Venice, as well as appearing in the major Mainland avant-garde shows in the past eight years. An autobiographical pointer to where the 'buyer' might have seen Liu's work would be that both Liu and Yu exhibited as 'realists' in the 1991 *New Generation* exhibition in the History Museum in Beijing (*China Avant-Garde*, 1993). Despite the fact that Yu Hong's oeuvre and career are arguably at least as interesting as Liu's, the work is not filmed (Huot, 1994, p. 57). This is a first indicator that the narrative will prioritize Liu as artist, and Yu as female counterpart. The second is a motif of sight, and mirroring, in the film that seems to make conscious reference to psychoanalytic theory, whilst working the narration through the paradigmatic gender structure that such theory describes.

The opening sequence of the film shows Liu alone in his studio/apartment, still working on a large portrait of a woman. The woman is Yu. She is portrayed standing at the Great Wall, facing the viewer but with her eyes hidden behind binoculars as she scans the landscape beyond the border. In the final scene, Yu has departed for the United States. Liu has a breakdown as he tries to survive alone. He does endless press-ups, dresses himself in a Mao suit, and finally rampages through the school breaking mirrors. In the last moments of the film he puts on his spectacles and peers in the—as yet unbroken—mirror. Where has he gone? We, the spectators, see his reflection, his imaginary self. But what does Liu himself see? Behind him there is still the unfinished portrait of Yu, eyes blinded by the binoculars. This canvas frames him and imprisons him. It is a reminder of his imaginary anatomy, the body of Yu. This sequence is peculiarly reminiscent of the Lacanian notion of the mirror stage and the splitting of the adult subject. The loss of the *complementary* anatomy, which is perhaps an inflection of Grosz's language through Chinese medical discourse, is visualized through psychic blinding in front of the mirror. The film admits to the permanent infantilism of the single male. When Yu terminated their relationship, and left for the United States, Liu lost his access to his subjective coherence, to the present, the past and the future. A male voice-over informs us that at the psychiatric hospital a doctor had opined that there was nothing to worry about, Liu was suffering from personality, and half the population had the same problem.

I prefer to diagnose his condition as disembodiment. He looks into the mirror for the imaginary anatomy that will reassure him of his symbolic articulation. He sees nothing. He clothes himself in a mnemonic of the past, the Mao suit, but even with his specs on and peering hard, he seems confused. The fixed image of Yu on the canvas behind him is now out of shot, the absence a reminder that his access to the contemporary, to sanity, has emigrated.

I am arguing therefore that male anxiety is displaced from the male onto the female. It is articulated in the text as a loss of control over 'his' female body. Obviously, my argument is significant in terms of the loss of agency for female characters, who are allowed neither corporeal autonomy nor the illusion of an ideal projection of their experience. It also presents a depressing account of young Chinese, urban masculinity. The depths of alienation, wherein the male subject cannot account for his own anatomy either in imaginary or in symbolic terms, is extraordinary. Although the strategy of displacement which operates within the symbolic world of the text is an exercise in male power over female corporeality, it is also an admission of incoherence. In these films,

without the female body as a symbolic mode of articulation, the male cannot speak. The unrepresentable core—the place of anxiety—is present in this symbolic world of the text, but it is distanced from the ideal image of the male and transposed to the vehicle of anxiety, the female.⁶ The male characters play out the ideal version of their unease, whilst the female characters bear its narrative brunt. In this way male anxiety, which is arguably one of the causes of male alienation, is implicit within the text of the film but is visible only through the suffering of women.

A Mutual Constitution—the Body which Suffers

The neglect of female subjectivity—or rather, female psychic coherence—is particularly noticeable when the female *body* is so important to the plots. In both *Beijing Bastards* and *The Days* there is a sequence concerning an abortion. In neither film is this operation presented as an experience belonging to the woman in question. The ‘abortion sequence’ serves as a metaphor for other deaths, as a catalyst for narrative development, and, crucially, as a narrational device for disguising the empty anarchy of male subjectivity. The association between *his* imaginary anatomy and *her* image, a conundrum of dependency and denial, reveals a fast bond between the two bodies. In *The Days* the major narrative leap comes when Liu and Yu return home to his parents. This is occasioned by her abortion, and their futile attempt to have a holiday to refresh their relationship. The main problem with the question of the abortion is the way in which it is used for the progression of *his* story and not as a factor in the development of *hers*.

At the beginning of *Beijing Bastards* Kazi has a good head of hair, by the end it has been shaved off. The last image of the film is a still of the shaven Kazi walking along a crowded street, after two conflicting fantasies, one in which Maomao has a termination, and one in which he has heard his baby cry. His shaven head has meanwhile been explained by another character as just something he does from time to time, or it could indicate that he has spent time in prison, but in the context of his narrative, he seems to be trying to look like a baby. Maomao’s disappearance and apparent preoccupation with the foetus undermines Kazi’s image of himself as central player in his own narrative. He admits to camera that he would rather his girlfriend were dead than that she should disappear without needing to tell him her movements. The cinematic effect of his fantasies of control over Maomao’s body is a confusion of the fate of the foetus, the distressed narrative of its mother, and his own aimless confrontation with life.

The abortion sequence begins with a close-up of doctor’s hands pulling on white gloves, of surgical instruments, and finally a shot of Maomao—her legs up and splayed and the back of her head towards the camera. The subjective emphasis, however, stays on Kazi. He is shown pacing down a corridor, a full body shot. He reaches an open window and gazes, troubled, out over the city. At the window Kazi’s perspective is shared by the spectator in a lingering point of view shot. Again intercut with Cui Jian’s rehearsal and performance, Kazi’s thoughts are intimated by Cui Jian’s lyrics—‘The pain of this city goes on, but gives me hope for a better tomorrow’. Both men are shown in medium close-up, eyes to camera.

Maomao is also shot once in medium close-up. She is lying on the hospital bed. Cui Jian’s voice continues on the soundtrack. Her eyes are averted from the camera and she bites her lip in anticipation of the operation. The next shot—and final appearance—of Maomao’s face is in the corridor where Kazi ‘finds’ her, and hears a baby cry. Their conversation is brief and, as with the opening scene of the film, the framing gives no real clues to their relationship. The only disruption is at the sound of the child. Maomao

keeps her eyes on Kazi as he looks sharply around. The scene is inconclusive. It is impossible to say whether the meeting is another fantasy or not. What is clear is that the film-maker constructs the scene around Kazi's reaction to the possibility of the child's birth, rather than to the state of either Maomao or the baby itself. In the final still, Kazi's hairless incorporation of this possibility reiterates the profound disregard for anything but the female reproductive capacity in this narrative strand.

In these radical films of the 1990s the female body, exemplified in its (thwarted) reproductive mode, is used more or less graphically in the narration to direct the development of a male centred narrative. This is obviously prioritized over the woman's own story in both cases. In *Beijing Bastards*, the woman is hardly seen except in the fantasy scenarios of the young man. She is not heard except in two brief conversations with him at either end of the film. By choosing to abandon him as her central point of identification she is 'disappeared' from the screen. He meanwhile speaks directly to camera as well as being involved in other narrative strands, implying a multiplicity of points of identification. He also of course holds narrational control over her reappearance on screen, which implies a control over her body. In *The Days*, the suffering of the woman is narrated as catalyst and a proairetic device for a descent into madness of the man. Even her image is also in his control. He does not finish painting her, but he blinds her image before abandoning the work. These very facts however are indicators of his own dependency on her imaginary anatomy for his own subjective completion. In different ways both Yu and Liu remain unfinished.

The male ego does not speak through its own sex in these films. It needs a mirror image that seems discrete—female—in order to articulate its bewilderment with contemporary experience, without betraying its panic. The performance of masculinity on screen is belied by a narrative and a narration which produce the male as feminine. In these narratives of young male angst female characters appear as ghosts of a man's relationship with his own past, present and future. The woman signals, and to an extent articulates, male alienation at the price of her own narrative coherence. Or, she suffers physically so that he has a narrational hook through which to pursue and disguise his own unhappiness.

So far in this analysis I have dwelt on Liu, Kazi, and Cui Jian—with references to Yu Hong and Maomao. I want to elaborate this argument by picking up on an economic and political reading of construction of gender in 1990s China. Hill Gates' description of the 'mutual constitution' of the sexes in China (and arguably everywhere else) forms part of her work on economic interdependency in town and village enterprises (Gates, 1996, pp. 127–130). That does not mean that there is a conscious and positive equivalence between the sexes in China. On the contrary, research suggests that the representation of women in China, as in many societies, continues to subordinate their cultural presence to the interests and priorities of masculinity (Evans, 1997, pp. 187–188). My argument does not deny this. What interests me is *how* that subordination has been figured for, despite the pattern of subordination evident in these filmic texts, the constitution of the female subject is fundamental to that of the male. The woman's physicality supports his subjective inadequacy in the post-Maoist era of the market and modernization. In the films which I describe, the focus on the body of the woman not only obscures an engagement with any other dimension of her subjectivity but is substituted for it. When this focus is juxtaposed with the central narrative focus on the spiritual and intellectual traumas of the alienated contemporary male, the 'mutual constitution' appears as a representational strategy of his survival. This mutuality is unhappy and destructive.

Revolutionary Heroism and Contemporary Unease

A third line of inquiry is historical and genre-specific. Returning briefly to the history of films made in China before the death of Mao, I suggest that the independent film-makers of the 1990s are working within the same representational constraints as their predecessors. This is to think of the contemporary as a *symptom* of the present—which betrays both traces of the past and expectations of the future—produces recognition of unexpected forms of publicity, civility, and the symbolic narration of these formations. Post-socialist heroisms rise out of the politics of translation rather than transformation.

In revolutionary genres the woman is represented as an accessory to male success—which is itself a metaphor for the Party and the Revolution (Yau, 1990). *He* leads the struggle and *she* is his acolyte. She is also the point of identification through which the spectator may observe *his* achievements. In *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960), despite the apparently female-centred narrative, the film is constructed around the agency of the male hero. He sets her free in the first place, and in the rest of the film his presence is her guarantee against a return to slavery. His supremacy, clearly narrativized in the plot, is inserted into the text by a number of shots in which she literally *gazes up* at him. His death in the final battle of the film signifies the end of her dependence on him (and precludes any sexual relationship which would fatally impair her relationship to the paternity of the Party itself). His surrogacy over, the hero must not survive to create a more equal relationship with his successful pupil.

Another, earlier, Liberation classic, *The White-haired Girl* (1950) follows a similar pattern. The heroine, Xier, is due to marry a young man, Dachun, from her village. Before the wedding can take place, he is forced off the land and she is tricked into slavery and subsequently raped by the evil landlord.

The very different representations in the film of Xier's and Dachun's flight from pre-Liberation slavery is highly suggestive of the patterns of 'symbolic anatomy' and 'mutual constitution' which I am exploring in this discussion. Whereas her escape might be seen as a visual articulation of the horrors of pre-Liberation China, his escape is already evocative of the bright promises of a new future. The two escape sequences are therefore mutual in that both are necessary to carry—visually—the entire rhetoric of the revolution. Xier's escape from the landlord is framed in darkness; the only lights on screen are lanterns carried by her pursuers. She sings her own song of defiance, 'I will not die, I will live, I will take revenge'. The darkness of the sequence is mitigated a little by the intercut shots of the night sky and a crescent moon. This links her journey up the mountain to the earlier sequence of Dachun's escape when the sky is similarly intercut—but the space of which is eventually occupied by the fluttering flag of the hammer and sickle. Dachun ascends a mountain in full light—accompanied by a choir of non-diegetic female voices singing a marching song of the Revolution. He is greeted at the summit by brothers in arms, members of the revolutionary forces. The three male bodies move together, there is a dissolve to the red flag (a non-diegetic image as neither of the soldiers is carrying it in the establishing shot), and another dissolve to a medium close-up of one of the soldiers' faces. In a way very similar to the opening of *Beijing Bastards*, the link between a central male character, a legitimate hero, and the overarching narrative of the film is made quite explicit. Once more male agency is linked to that of the Party project, with all the power and optimism which that entails within the text.⁷

So there are continuities between revolutionary genres and the independent post-revolutionary—or 'sixth generation'—films. The major discontinuity is that the earlier films are tied to an optimistic and closed view of the future whereas the recent films express

fear of the present and consequently disavow the future. The central theme of revolutionary films is optimism embodied in representatives of the Party. The constitution of the male subject through the suffering and/or dependency of the female serves the interests of a gendered constitution of revolutionary success. In *Beijing Bastards* and *The Days* the main theme is alienation or, less dramatically, uneasy survival in the face of continuous disappointment. The representation of the woman is the means by which male inadequacy (Kazi's peripheral relationship to the Beijing bohemian scene, Liu's struggles on public telephones to reach the international art market) is represented as interesting rather than catastrophic. However even in this central thematic divergence the strategy seems similar. The constitution of the male subject—and particularly the *narration* of that subjectivity—is not simply dependent on the female. It is—at least bodily—female itself.

Vicarious Morality

The circulation of the ideas, images, and of the social and political imaginaries, with which and within which these films resonate, is limited. Both *Beijing Bastards* and *The Days* deal with the bohemian élite of Beijing. The films were made by directors, Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai, who have emerged, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as major independent film-makers in China. Their work is not widely distributed and does not benefit from state studio subsidy. They are perhaps as well known on the Western art-house cinema circuit as they are to the movie-going audiences in the People's Republic. Nevertheless, the gender implications of the films' narration suggests that their relationship to mainstream, or politically acceptable, films in China and elsewhere is closer than the Channel Four link man would have us believe.

In counterpoint to my discussion of the transnational association between rock and radical chic I would just add a referent internal to Chinese cultural memory. In this paper I have made claims on the imaginary. I am arguing throughout this article that the contemporary imaginary is tied to the moment of experience, and that that moment may be reconstructed in a transnational publicness which deepens regressive structures in the text. This moment of reception occurs in a space which I describe as the contemporary. The following account of T'ien Ju-k'ang's work on female suicide in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) should make it clear, however, that cultural resonance may be present in the contemporary, which is not constrained by the demands of chronology. T'ien's conclusions are startlingly apposite to the present discussion and at least support my claim that historical contingencies are better understood within a complex association of continuities and revisions than as contributing to distinct cultural breaks.

... female suicide is shown to be evidently related to male anxiety through a psychological mechanism of vicarious morality (T'ien Ju-k'ang, 1988, p. viii).

The author argues that the explanation for a sharp rise in female suicides following the death of their spouse or fiancé was not—as was traditionally assumed—due to an excess of Confucian female virtue, but rather was attributable to the needs of men at periods of instability to have access to virtue, without actually behaving virtuously themselves. Women's suicides were allowed to happen because it made the male survivors feel better. Furthermore, this access had to be guaranteed by an inscription of imaginary male power onto the female body. A woman could reclaim her own virtue but not if her body had died in its construction. T'ien notes that many suicides were by starvation, which he understands as a cry for help, 'a fantasy of rescue' (T'ien Ju-k'ang, 1988, p. 66). The

death is slow, painful, and *stoppable* if anyone would care to offer the woman a virtuous alternative (he suggests that care for in-laws and ancestor worship would both have fallen within the scope of virtue). The fact that this call was not answered seems to indicate that virtue was not enough. Male anxiety could be placated only by absolute control over a body, that was not their own, but which became their own through its suffering and subordination.

It occurs to me that the choice of starvation might also be understood in the light of Western experiences of anorexia, which Grosz reminds us is the modern corporeal disturbance of the incoherent female subject. In this phenomenon the woman starves herself in order to assert a fantasy of *control* over her own body. In the Western case it is an image of womanhood as a sexualized child's body masquerading as youthful beauty which is at stake, in the case of the late Ming widow it is virtue. In both cases the stake is determined by male-orientated social and sexual interest.

This analogy does not lend itself neatly to T'ien's theory of starvation as a cry for help. It does however suggest that the fantasy of control in the female is overridden by the actual effects of the controlling images of female sociability—vulnerable childish 'beauty'/vulnerable devoted 'virtue'—images which may be characterized as a feature of the dominant male imaginary in both societies. The common thread—vulnerability—is accounted for in T'ien's perceptive link to male anxiety, and the need for the female—the imaginary woman—to be controlled, and even destroyed, to assuage and obscure that anxiety.

In the films that I have described there is a problem in the respective representation of male and female subjectivity. In these films about rock the woman does not dance, she suffers. The man suffers too but he does not know it, he is too busy dancing. The spectators can both dance and know, and in fact are required to do both by the text, which needs their recognition to bestow its status as contemporary and radical. Yet this knowledge is submerged by the dancing and the spectator comes out as complicit. The subjectivity of the female is reduced to a physicality based on her reproductive capacity and the reduction is compounded by a strategy of representation by absorption. The female subject emerges in moments of the text only to disappear into the narration of the male subject's story. It is doubly disappointing that this strategy of presenting a split subject disguised by a gendered discourse of identity seems to translate so easily from one spectatorial group to another. *Beijing Bastards*, the radical film 'banned' by the Chinese Authorities, is shown on Channel Four. *The Days*, 'No.100 of the best films ever', is shown on BBC 2. These are deserved epithets or accolades, and timely screenings, but they also point to transnational continuities of the violent constructions of gender in our cultural imaginaries.

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Notes

[1] Jiang Zemin's China?

[2] The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 criminalizes gatherings in the open air of two or more people preparing for a rave, and ten or more people waiting for a rave to start. The clauses stipulate land 'in the open air' but this includes 'a place partly open to the air' (The CJPO Act, clause 63: 1; 2; 10 c).

[3] See in the same article Barmé's note that, for Wang Shuo, the Cui Jian clique are 'all mouth—not proper

hooligans at all'. See also Andrew Higgin's report in *International Guardian*, 6.10.97, that the Flying Pigeon Factory has become one of the State Industry casualties of modernization.

[4] Screening at midnight, 26.06.95.

[5] For a discussion of the problem of authenticity see Stephanie Donald (1995, p. 329) and *passim*.

[6] Thanks to Harriet Evans whose work on *jiefang* and gender suggested this line of argument.

[7] See also Donald (1997, pp. 108–109).

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