

Critical Asian Cinemas

Critical Asian Cinemas features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. "Asia" refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

This timely series includes studies that critique the aesthetics and ontology of the cinema, but also the concept of Asia itself. They attempt to negotiate the place of Asian cinema in the world by tracing the distribution of films as cultural products but also as aesthetic objects that critically address the ostensible particularly of Asianness as a discursive formation.

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Women Filmmakers and the Visual Politics of Transnational China in the #MeToo Era

Gina Marchetti

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Patricia R. Zimmermann, an indomitable force for progressive social change through media activism and education. Patty genuinely embodied Che Guevara's famous phrase, "The true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love." May this book pay tribute to her revolutionary contributions to feminist cinema and radical media studies.



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A Note on Romanization

This book employs renderings of names, places, and things across the very diverse Chinese-speaking world. In general, *pinyin* is used for Mandarin names and terms associated with the People's Republic of China, Wade-Giles for Mandarin names connected to Taiwan, and the most commonly used version for names in Cantonese and other dialects. Normally, family names precede given names, but exceptions exist for people who prefer to use an order more in keeping with the English practice of given names first. When there seems to be some confusion, variations have been noted in the text or in the footnotes. My sincere apologies for any unintentional errors or renderings that deviate from common practice.



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1. Introduction: #MeToo and the Visual Politics of Transnational Chinese Cinema

Abstract: The #MeToo movement in Asia provides a window onto the visual politics of gender and sexuality in the transnational Chinese film industry. Women filmmakers do more than chronicle and critique the ways in which men look at women on screen. They also create ways of seeing in direct opposition to the male gaze. Taking up their cameras as activists, women filmmakers offer a gendered perspective on the political movements and events of the second decade of the twenty-first century. If #MeToo opens the door wider, these films by women may have a greater chance of being produced, distributed, programmed, reviewed, and even actually seen by viewers eager for relief from the constricting blindness of the male gaze.

Keywords: Sexual harassment; state surveillance; oppositional gaze; intersectional gaze; male gaze; feminist activism

In 2017, allegations against Harvey Weinstein opened up the depth and breadth of sexual harassment in Hollywood; Weinstein's associates in Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China (PRC) came under scrutiny as well. One of the first responses from mainland China came in the form of an opinion piece published in the English-language edition of the government-run newspaper *China Daily*. Sava Hassan, an expat Egyptian-Canadian residing in the PRC, wrote "Weinstein Case Demonstrates Cultural Differences" (2017), in which he argued that sexual harassment does not pose a problem in China because of the timidity of Chinese men and the prevailing conservative values of the society. Although claiming the article only reflected his observations as a teacher in China, Hassan's ignorance of the actual situation did not belie the fact that *China Daily* published a perspective that thoroughly

disregarded the facts (see Feng 2017). Internet response was immediate and *China Daily* expeditiously withdrew the piece; however, the Chinese press inadvertently added fuel to the growing transnational conflagration around the smoldering issue of sexual harassment and violence against women in China.¹

In fact, Weinstein's sexual misconduct points to a pervasive transnational culture of gender inequality that extends beyond Hollywood and connects industrial networks ranging from Europe through Northeast as well as South and Southeast Asia to other parts of the world (Roxborough 2017). The very different ways in which women (and a few men) have chosen to come forward about their experiences of sexual harassment expose only the tip of the iceberg of systemic problems that range from film censorship to unequal pay, sexual objectification of female bodies on screen, and a dearth of opportunities for women to serve as film directors, cinematographers, and in other creative roles.

Given the pervasiveness of the problem throughout the creative industries and beyond, #MeToo quickly took the Chinese Internet by storm in 2017 as “rice (*mi*/米) bunny (*tu*/兔)” in order to avoid mainland censors. Connected by digital networks, victims found strength in numbers, and their grievances spanned the transnational worlds of entertainment, the media, higher education, and beyond (Zhang Jing 2018). Connections from China through Hong Kong to Hollywood made Weinstein's story global, and the movement continues to roil Chinese popular culture years later. Taking a close look at the film culture surrounding the #MeToo phenomenon promises to provide critical insight into understanding gender bias, sexual harassment, and violence against women as it operates transnationally. The escalation of violence against Asian women in the wake of the emergence of the coronavirus in Wuhan leading to a global pandemic in 2020 has made a deeper understanding of Chinese women's depiction in global media even more urgent. The brutal murders in Atlanta's spas in 2021 provide a particularly bloody example of the devastation caused by the confluence of racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia exacerbated by deep-rooted, hysteria surrounding Chinese women and their sexuality in the American psyche.

On the other side of the world, in Xi Jinping's China, women navigate through the stigma of being “left over” (Hong Fincher 2014), pressure to have one, two, or three children, ongoing disputes regarding gender and property rights, as well as crackdowns on feminist activists working to enhance

1 Hassan's article is, however, still available online as of May 2022; see Hassan (2017).

awareness of sexual harassment, human trafficking, labor exploitation, and the rights of sexual and ethnic minority women. Using Xi's consolidation of power in 2012 in the PRC as a starting point, this book covers the momentous changes taking place in women's lives across the Chinese-speaking world and throughout the diaspora through the #MeToo movement to the beginning of the global coronavirus crisis in 2020.²

The impact of the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 crisis on women involved in Chinese screen culture highlights the urgency of this critical investigation into the gendered nature of the visual politics of transnational China. Women filmmakers push back against various ways in which the world gazes at Chinese women through the lenses of Hollywood Orientalism (Marchetti 1994), pictorial Ornamentalism (Cheng, A. 2019; Chow 1990), hypersexualization (Shimizu 2007), and exoticism (Khoo 2007). Moreover, women behind the camera confront the ways in which Chinese men look at women through Confucian, Republican, Maoist, Reform Era, and contemporary depictions of gender on Chinese screens (Cui 2003; Chen 2012; Ma 2015). Adding to scholarship that restores women directors to the annals of Chinese film history, this book examines how female filmmakers look at Chinese women inside and outside of the mainland.³

Women Filmmakers and the Visual Politics of Transnational China in the #MeToo Era refines the concept of the “male gaze” in order to respond to current political and cultural needs. As feminist research on global screen culture demonstrates, female filmmakers see the world differently, and the cinematic gaze fractures to include the look, the stare, the leer, the glare, the glimpse and the glance as well as intersectional, oppositional, alienated, queer, and other critical gazes. In this book, special emphasis falls on films dealing with female perspectives on reproduction, romance, family relations, gender roles, generational differences, body image, labor migration, career options, minority representation, media access, feminist activism and political rights. Throughout the study, #MeToo sets the stage for this investigation of female filmmakers as the digital age enables a reassessment of the roles women play as active producers of motion pictures as well as activists struggling against harassment, bias, and violence because of their gender.

2 Xi paid a visit to Los Angeles in 2012, too, and this marked a turning point in Sino-US film. For more on this issue, see Zhu (2022).

3 S. Louisa Wei (dir. *Golden Gate Girls*, 2013), Robin Lung (dir. *Finding Kukan*, 2016), Lingzhen Wang (2021b), and Yau Ching (2004), among other dedicated researchers.

#MeToo Across Borders

Karen Boyle points out in her 2019 book *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* that “#MeToo is *networked* feminism: a feminism made possible by the affordances of the social media platforms on which it circulates” (3).⁴ Speaking specifically of the #MeToo movement in Asia, law scholar Puja Kapai notes the importance of digital networking to address gaps in the legal system:

It is now possible to use anonymous reporting to seek out other victims to build a case against a serial sexual predator in a manner that was not conceivable before. This helps address multiple facets of the gender justice gaps, including victim-blaming and shaming, undermining the testimony of victims on grounds of credibility, and the silencing of victims for reasons of honour (2019: 51).

The global #MeToo movement combines social media with an established form of second wave feminist organizing based on “consciousness raising” groups that facilitate the sharing of personal experiences of sexism and discrimination. This is similar, in some ways, to the Chinese “speaking bitterness” 訴苦 (*su ku*), which refers to the expression of grievances more generally, but has been used by women to voice their oppression. Rather than acquiescing to silencing and denial, netizens across the Chinese-speaking world took to the Internet using #MeToo to expose the extent of sexual harassment and violence against women in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere.

Even before the advent of #MeToo, social media saw the exponential growth of feminist discourse online. In *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*, Leta Hong Fincher notes:

Despite intrusive censorship, the rise of China’s new generation of feminist activists was inextricably linked to the explosion of Weibo in 2010 and WeChat in 2011. ... The internet provided space for them to explore ideas with more freedom than many of their workplaces and homes, and also allowed like-minded women throughout the country to find one another (2018: 35–36).

Social media enable accusations against powerful perpetrators to be supported by testimony from other women even though years and miles

4 *Italics in the original. For a critical look at #MeToo and the limitations of Internet feminisms, see Tolentino (2019).*



separate the victims. Thus, #MeToo dampens the type of discourse found in films such as Charlie Yeung's legal thriller *Christmas Rose* (2013), which casts doubt over the veracity of a handicapped woman's claims of sexual harassment. The online visibility of accusers in number tipped the balance against serial perpetrators.

Soon after the 2017 *China Daily* editorial denying sexual harassment in the PRC, Christoph Rehage, who had studied at the prestigious Beijing Film Academy (BFA), wrote the following on Twitter: "The Chinese movie industry is full of abuse. Many actresses, especially the younger ones, are being treated like prostitutes" (quoted in Hass 2017). In fact, a sexual assault at the BFA in May 2017 opened up an outpouring of other allegations involving sexual harassment at Beijing Aeronautics and Astronautics University (BUAA/Beihang), University of International Business and Economics, Renmin (People's) University, among other institutions of higher education (Lü 2020; Sharma 2018).

Female filmmaker Yang Mingming made two films (discussed in chapter 4) loosely based on her experiences as an aspiring filmmaker in Beijing, *Female Directors* (2012) and *Girls Always Happy* (2018). Her semi-autobiographical films, shown at festivals in Berlin, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, provide insight into the treatment of women within mainland Chinese film circles as well as the society at large. Love affairs with older and more powerful men (including university film professors) play a key role in both of Yang's films, and her narratives point to the fact that gender-based power dynamics impede women's film education even when sexual coercion drops out of the scenario. As Mary Celeste Kearney points out in a summary of her research on gender and film education for her guest post "How Film Schools Lead to Pipelines Full of Weinsteins" on the *Women and Hollywood* website, systemic sexism keeps women out of the director's chair even during their school years:

Examples of sexism on the part of male instructors include not believing women are knowledgeable or strong enough to use filmmaking equipment; dismissing female-authored or female-centered stories; and engaging in harassing comments or behavior. For instance, a student in my study reported: 'One friend told me she and her female partner had trouble convincing a professor to support the script they were writing. He kept telling them that he wasn't interested in their story and didn't think anyone else would want to see their film' (2017).

Although Kearney's research focuses on film education in America, Yang's films attest to similar problems in China.

To cite an example from Singapore, Sandi Tan's documentary *Shirkers* (2018) narrates her autobiographical account of being an aspiring female filmmaker thwarted by the behavior of a senior man in the field. In this case, Tan and two fellow female novice filmmakers, Jasmine Ng and Sophia Siddique, collaborate with Georges Cardona on a punk-inspired independent feature film also entitled *Shirkers* in Singapore in 1992. When the three women filmmakers leave their footage in Cardona's hands for postproduction, the film and Cardona disappear. Several years later, after Cardona's demise, Tan is reunited with her footage minus the audio track, and she begins a process of making her documentary about the production of the original feature, the mystery of its disappearance, and Cardona's betrayal of his three protégées.

Even though Tan recounts only one instance of feeling uncomfortable with Cardona's apparent attempts at sexual intimacy, his treatment of these Asian female film students attests to his lack of regard for their creative talents. Even without any expectations of sexual favors, men involved in the industry – including film educators seen in *Girls Always Happy* and *Shirkers* – disrupt women's careers through their frequent dismissal and lack of regard for novice female directors. While Sandi Tan, Jasmine Ng, Sophia Siddique, and Yang Mingming all survive their film educations, the trauma of the patriarchal pedagogical process lingers in their films.

The case of Gary G. Xu, author of *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (2007), illustrates the overlap between #MeToo and film higher education's transnational reach more directly. Forced to resign from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign as well as step down as curator of the Shenzhen Biennale in 2018, Xu had harassed several female students over two decades, but the weight of the allegations only came crashing down on him in the wake of #MeToo online protests about his behavior (Bursztynsky and Liu 2018; Wang 2018). Xu denied any wrongdoing and has taken legal action against the netizens who posted the accusations online (Movius 2018). In fact, in 2019, Chinese courts sided with Xu against another university professor who had used social media to expose Xu's behavior (Wee and Yuan 2019).

In addition to shaming and threats of legal action against accusers, other forces work to silence victims of sexual harassment and their advocates. As Feng Yuan (2021) notes, media discourse and online policing work together to censor frank discussions of sexual misconduct in the PRC:

Making things 'politically sensitive' is one way the censorship system exerts its influence. The mechanisms of this 'sensitisation' include forcing victims to delete their posts on social media and silencing their supporters.



A typical example is the ‘Hou Liangping incident’ at the Beijing Film Academy (a female student alleged she had been sexually abused by a professor at the academy), which disappeared from the internet so completely it was as though it had never happened. The mechanisms of sensitisation also work through the use of euphemisms when dealing with perpetrators – vague terms like ‘unethical conduct’, or phrases that can serve to defame the victims, like ‘inappropriate sexual relations’. Such terms obscure the basic problem of sexual harassment.

Frustrations with the inability of the justice system in mainland China to handle cases of violence against women and other forms of sexual harassment predate #MeToo. Because of the precedence of Party over the courts and lack of an established “rule of law,” the exercise of justice in these cases seems piecemeal. Broader reforms such as the 2015 Family Violence Law make efforts to address similar issues, but these measures do little to address the suppression of women’s voices of dissent such as the arrest of the Feminist Five – Li Maizi (also known as Li Tingting), Wei Tingting, Wu Rongrong, Wang Man and Zheng Churan – on Women’s Day, March 8, 2015, as a result of their political activities surrounding violence against women and sexual harassment (Morrish 2018).⁵

Nanfu Wang’s documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016), explored in chapter 3, follows feminist activist Ye Haiyan in her quest for justice for several victims of statutory rape on Hainan Island, while narrating the story of the surveillance and harassment of human rights campaigners in China.⁶ The fiction feature, *Angels Wear White* (2017), also analyzed in chapter 3, dramatizes a similar story of the plight of girls raped by well-connected officials in a seaside resort town. That film features a female lawyer, specializing in cases involving the sexual trafficking of under-aged girls, as a composite character resembling the lawyer assisting the activists in *Hooligan Sparrow*. Since Ye Haiyan’s public shaming of Hainan’s judicial system likely helped to put child traffickers behind bars, the timing of the 2015 law answering one of the demands of the Feminist Five for legal measures to curb violence against women may not be purely coincidental. Many other activist filmmakers in China, notably Ai Xiaoming, who appears briefly in *Hooligan Sparrow*,

5 Li Tingting links her anti-violence against women campaigns to the #MeToo moment. For a detailed account of the Feminist Five and contemporary feminist activism in the PRC, see Hong Fincher (2018).

6 For a comprehensive discussion of the female gaze in documentary film practice, see French (2021). For more on contemporary documentary filmmaking in China, see Berry, Lu and Rofel (2010).



have been subject to harassment because they have been outspoken critics of the treatment of women in the PRC. Chapter 6 includes a discussion of Zeng Jinyan's *Outcry and Whisper*, which touches on Ai Xiaoming and the importance of her feminist circle in mainland China.

The active suppression of the mainland #MeToo movement, therefore, follows an earlier pattern of social, cultural, and government censure of feminists. As Zeng Jinyan (2021a) points out, #MeToo activists in the PRC face onerous obstacles as they struggle to be heard above the din of neoliberal and feudal depictions of female virtue:

The combination of market forces and the power of traditional culture has driven the spectacle of sexual violence and #MeToo cases in both mass and social media discourses, thus complicating, twisting, and censoring feminist efforts.

The case of journalist Xianzi (a.k.a. Zhou Xiaoxuan) serves as a prime example (see Feng and Wong 2021; Xianzi 2021a). Her 2018 accusation of sexual misconduct on the part of CCTV host Zhu Jun launched her as one of the most vocal #MeToo advocates in the PRC. Using his authority as a national media celebrity, Zhu did everything in his power to suppress Xianzi's online testimony, including filing a defamation lawsuit against her. However, this did not deter Xianzi from continuing with her own case against Zhu as well as speaking out on behalf of other victims while maintaining a vibrant, if precarious, online presence as a feminist activist (Guo and Zhang 2020; Xianzi 2021b).

As grievances span the worlds of entertainment, the specifics of Harvey Weinstein's story in transnational China stand out in several striking ways. Not unique to the American film industry, a business model that includes intimidation and sexual harassment pervades both Hong Kong and Hollywood. In Hong Kong, triad gangsters cast a sexist shadow over the quotidian operations of film production. In *Haunted: An Ethnography of the Hollywood and Hong Kong Media Industries*, anthropologist Sylvia J. Martin writes about this connection between triad influence and misogyny in the local industry as follows:

Several informants confided that their families disapproved of their on- and off-screen obligations, which included sexualized portrayals on camera and sexualized demands made of them off screen. An actress, at the beginning of her acting career, was expected to entertain dubious producers and their cronies at late-night parties and karaoke bars as a supplement to her paltry income. The prevalence of male gangsterism in

the industry has reinforced the patriarchal characteristics of capitalism – characteristics that ... likely contribute to why there are fewer female directors and few female cinematographers (2017: 145–146).

As Martin notes, sexual harassment becomes part of a misogynist production culture that keeps women from professional advancement and contributes to a cycle that also limits how and by whom women are portrayed on screen.

Interviewees in Barbara Wong's documentary, *Women's Private Parts* (2001), reaffirm Martin's observations.⁷ The film features candid conversations conducted by an all-female crew with women from various walks of life. Although ostensibly about women's sexuality in general, Wong includes herself and her cinematographer Ellen Pau, a noted Hong Kong lesbian videographer and founding member of the experimental media group Videotage, on screen with other female informants who work as media professionals in Asia. While Singaporean hardcore porn star Annabel Chong and acclaimed Hong Kong New Wave director Ann Hui deliver sanguine comments on their relationship with men in the film business, softcore porn celebrity Yum Yum Shaw tells a very different story.

Clearly bitter about her treatment within Hong Kong's film industry, Shaw claims she was duped into taking off her clothes on screen and, as a consequence, could not get work in mainstream movies, since, as she says, "They thought we were sluts." Given her notoriety, she could only go out in public without makeup, wearing a hat, and carrying an umbrella; however, she still had no peace and even her son suffered because of his mother's career. When victimized by a boy at school because his mother worked in erotic "Category III movies," Shaw told her son to confront the bully by asking what he expected his own mother to do about it. Either shame or sympathy ended the matter, but Shaw continues to see herself less as a "star" and more a survivor of Hong Kong's motion picture industry. In a gesture of bodily self-loathing, she cuts up her photographs to retain only her face, indicating the cloud of shame that still hangs over her.

In "Judging the Online Judges: The Two #MeToo Cases in Hong Kong," Chris Tsui (2020) comments on the Internet response to the first two prominent #MeToo celebrity testimonies to appear in Hong Kong. As a result of this research, Tsui argues that attitudes toward women in the entertainment industries tend to be more negative than in other walks of life. In the wake of the Weinstein allegations on social media, hurdling champion Vera Lui

7 Portions of these observations on *Women's Private Parts* originally appeared in Marchetti (2017a).



Lai-yiu and actress/model Louisa Mak both went public as survivors of sexual abuse. However, as Tsui notes, the public reaction to their testimony varied enormously:

I studied the first 500 comments on the #MeToo posts of Lui and Mak. Lui received over 450 positive comments, whereas only about 150 comments received by Mak were positive in nature, and the latter received even more comments that endorsed rape culture and inflicted secondary victimization on her (251).

Tsui's research confirms that public reaction to #MeToo reflected bias concerning a woman's profession, and many netizens quickly judged accusers' stories based on prejudiced perceptions of women in the entertainment industries.

Within the transnational *mélange* of cultures in the world of show business, Harvey Weinstein added his own belligerent sense of American male entitlement. In "Anthropology's Prophecy for #MeToo," Sylvia J. Martin asserts that "Weinstein's transpacific business operations exported a Hollywood expression of aggressive masculine authority to Hong Kong ..." (2021: 124). In fact, Weinstein had longstanding business dealings linking him to Hong Kong and mainland China. Quentin Tarantino, for example, distributed Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) through Rolling Thunder Pictures under Weinstein's Miramax, and these business interests brought Weinstein into contact with women from China and the Chinese diaspora (Bloomberg 2006).

Journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey report that one of Weinstein's victims, Rowena Chiu, said that her employer used the ploy that "he had never had sex with a Chinese girl before" to justify attempted rape during the Venice International Film Festival (2019: 64). After harassing Chiu in Venice and settling a sexual harassment grievance with her, Weinstein transferred Chiu to his Miramax offices in Hong Kong. Chiu, whose family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom before she was born, left the position after realizing Weinstein had little real interest in her professional development. Chiu later wrote:

As with many Asian women, ... I was visible as a sex object, invisible as a person. Harvey may not have created this imbalance, but he and many others have capitalized on it, knowingly or unknowingly, to abuse women of color (2019).

In transnational co-productions, Orientalist sexual predation regularly targets ethnic Asian actresses. In her 2007 book *The Hypersexuality of Race*:

Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene, Celine Parreñas Shimizu points out the racial dimension to these encounters. Although not speaking specifically of Weinstein, Shimizu notes, Euro-American men assume Asian women's compliance and sexual availability. At a 2018 protest in support of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood, actress Constance Wu, known for her starring roles in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Hustlers* (2019), spoke out:

I march today for Asian-American women who have been ignored, or judged or fetishized or expected to be a certain way to fulfill a certain idea of what a sweet girl should be (Madani 2018).

As Weinstein's remarks to Rowena Chiu indicate, these views of Asian women as sexual fetish objects pervade off-screen as well as onscreen attitudes and actions.

However, Harvey Weinstein's professional dealings with Asian actresses remain complicated. Weinstein worked with acclaimed female stars Joan Chen on the television series *Marco Polo* (2014–2016) and Michelle Yeoh on the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* (2016). Although Chen has not commented, Yeoh stated to the Associated Press:

I knew he was a bully and not always honorable. I wasn't exposed to this side of him, otherwise he would have experienced the full effect of years of martial arts training ... (Chen 2017).

According to the same article, Yeoh's relationship with the producer was complicated by the fact that he was also a major contributor to amfAR, an AIDS charity, for which Yeoh serves as an official ambassador. As in the United States, where celebrities such as Meryl Streep claimed not to be aware of Weinstein's predatory behavior, Yeoh also avoided a direct answer to the question of her knowledge of Weinstein's sexual misconduct.

Looking at Weinstein's productions in Asia, such as *Marco Polo*, the "need" to see female talent naked becomes clear, since women appear nude onscreen more often than their male counterparts even in martial arts roles.⁸ As Sylvia Martin cogently notes, referring to Weinstein and his close associate Bey Logan:

Weinstein and Logan – American and British, their white male gaze moving beyond the executive office and onto the set and editing room – impacted the former colony's entertainment community (2021: 138).

8 For the history of the naked and the nude in Western art, see Berger (1972).

Bey Logan, British-born and Hong Kong-based film director, writer, and martial arts adept, worked for Weinstein in various capacities beginning in 2005 (Fraser 2017b). As reported by news website *HK01* and the *South China Morning Post*, Logan introduced a female TVB presenter to Weinstein in 2009. Preferring to remain anonymous and declining to file charges, she still went public in the media with the story of how Logan set up a meeting for her to discuss a possible job with Weinstein. She describes meeting Weinstein at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel coffee shop, going up to his room, and being asked to take off her clothes, allow him to watch her shower, or, alternatively, watch him shower. She refused all requests and was summarily dismissed.⁹ When she subsequently complained to Logan, he remarked that her going up to the hotel room implied consent to Weinstein's sexual advances. Not surprisingly, the modus operandi for Weinstein's sexual victimization of women is identical to what his many other targets described – procurement by a third party, initial business meeting, request for sexual favors sometimes as quid pro quo for a job in the industry, and, in most cases, some sort of unwanted and unexpected sexual contact.

Even if “nothing happened” or if women still are able to work on Weinstein productions after their sexual encounter with the producer, the fact that other people (mainly men, but some women) devalue them as only able to “get a job” in the industry because of their aptitude for satisfying the sexual needs of a rapacious boss speaks volumes to the problems faced by women in the motion picture and related industries. Professional horizons narrow, and women become pawns in sexual maneuvers between heterosexual men who assert their power by hypersexualizing their bodies. The racial dimension to these encounters also comes into play in Weinstein's predation of Asian women.

Bey Logan's treatment of several women who complained about his behavior on set indicates that he shares this attitude with Weinstein. Sable Yu, for example, who worked with Logan on *Snowblade* in 2011 details how the director inappropriately touched her breast in front of the crew during filming (Zhao 2017). This public humiliation was compounded by private harassment that included groping and other unwanted sexual contact. Martial arts actress Ju Ju Chan also has spoken to the press about unwelcome sexual encounters with both Harvey Weinstein and Bey Logan. Chan, in fact, suspects that she had difficulty negotiating for a part in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* because she rebuffed Logan's advances.

9 This account coincides with Angela Meng's description of her encounter with Weinstein. See Meng (2020).



She describes Weinstein's proposition at the 2016 Beijing premiere of the film as follows:

[Harvey Weinstein] came over to me and asked me if I could meet him in his [hotel] room to spend some 'private time' together. I said no, why did we have to meet privately? My manager was there, too, and she could come up ... He was unhappy and I walked away (Chow 2017).

Ju Ju Chan notes that few victims of sexual harassment come forward out of fear of being blackballed in the industry, but the fact that Logan, for example, threatened Sable Yu with a lawsuit tells another side of the story.

In Weinstein's case, confidentiality clauses in several sexual harassment settlements in the United States made it difficult legally for women to warn others about the producer's violent record. In Asia, the threat of libel discourages many women from either bringing charges or speaking to the press (Wee and Yuan 2019). In many countries in Asia, public figures and private individuals enjoy the same protections under laws that place the burden of proof on the victim to provide incontrovertible evidence of sexual harassment or assault.

In the wake of accusations against Weinstein and Logan, actress Yammie Lam accused Eric Tsang of raping her during a shoot in Singapore (Ong 2018). Tsang has also been accused of drugging and sexually assaulting other women in the industry (Chow 2018). Actress Yu Sin Man blamed Tsang for allowing a rape scene in *Fatal Vacation* (1990) to "go too far" in a shoot he directed involving kidnapped tourists in the Philippines (*JayneStars.com* 2018). In January 2018, Tsang sued Grace Han, a modeling agent and blogger, for alluding to these earlier incidents on Weibo, a popular Chinese Internet platform (Siu 2018; Ap 2018).

The judicial process in other countries, such as the United States, also proves onerous for victims of sexual violence. In addition to outlining her own difficulties bringing her rapist to justice as a biracial Chinese American woman, Chanel Miller writes in *Know My Name* of the treatment of another victim of male violence in the California court system. Miller describes the judge's egregious handling of this Chinese immigrant's court testimony as follows:

The judge interrupted again, reminding her we needed to wrap things up. He was already organizing papers. She assured him she had only a few more lines. She stood, a few feet from her attacker, fighting for her life in a foreign language in a foreign country, but was indirectly told, your

problems are taking up too much time. The man, charged with battery causing serious bodily harm, had asked for a light punishment. She said, *When I get beaten, can I ask for a better offer?* (2020: 230)¹⁰

Racism and sexism compound the ordeal of women facing a system over which they have little control.

In addition to Weinstein, Tsang, and Logan in Hong Kong, sexual misconduct allegations have been leveled against Hollywood filmmaker Brett Ratner, known for his successful collaboration with Jackie Chan in the *Rush Hour* series (Kaufman and Miller 2017). Networking with other abusive men in the film business, Ratner took advantage of the Paris filming location to cast his friend Roman Polanski in a cameo in *Rush Hour 3*. Polanski, of course, cannot travel to the United States because he jumped bail after being convicted of statutory rape in 1978. Jackie Chan, too, has faced media pressure for his treatment of the women in his life, particularly his illegitimate daughter with Elaine Ng, Etta Ng, and her Canadian wife Andi Autumn (Birchall 2018).¹¹ According to Ng, Chan refused to help her at a low point in her life when she found herself homeless and completely destitute.

Other cases underscore the ways in which women working in the transnational Chinese film industry become vulnerable to attack. Hong Kong film director Sharon Lam, for example, was the victim of an attempted rape by a Hainan Airlines trainee pilot in Haikou, but was discouraged from filing charges against the perpetrator who climbed into her room via a balcony in order to assault her (Chan 2018). In another case, Hong Kong-Canadian film producer Raymond Law pled guilty to drugging and sexually assaulting women in his Vancouver home. Ironically, Law co-wrote and produced the exploitation film, *Ecstasy* (2011), about young women falling victim to sexual violence under the influence of the drug. In a bizarre statement on mitigating circumstances for his crimes, Law blamed his mother for disciplining him too harshly for his failure to achieve in Hong Kong's competitive school system as well as his father's abandonment of his family after their move to Canada in order to live with his mistress in mainland China (Young 2018).

Arguably, #MeToo would not exist without the cyber-support network it has provided to victims, and the anonymity available to those who prefer not to enter into the criminal justice system with their complaints. However,

¹⁰ Italics in the original.

¹¹ Although tabloid fodder, the gossip surrounding celebrities speaks to broader problems in the treatment of women.



the accused have also taken to the Internet to push back against allegations. For example, Bey Logan went online to offer an apology for his behavior:

Over the years of my adult life, I have made advances to women. Sometimes they were rebuffed and sometimes they were reciprocated. I have had a too-carefree attitude towards physical encounters with women. I have made inappropriate comments lightheartedly or after a few drinks. I now see I was wrong and I have made mistakes for which I can't forgive myself, and must live with them. I regret that any action I might have taken could have caused distress to anyone (Fraser 2017a).

For the most part, these online apologies fail to do justice to the harm done by a violently sexist culture that belittles the professional contributions of women on a massive scale and denies them access to employment behind the camera. From the insensitivity of the criminal justice system in the United States, the culture of shame in Hong Kong, and state action against accusers in the PRC, victims of sexual harassment and male violence against women face an uphill battle. While the #MeToo movement offers a certain degree of hope, the challenges remain daunting. Unfortunately, as the case of silencing of tennis star Peng Shuai in 2021 indicates, the power of the Chinese state to intervene in order to maintain male privilege obviates many gains made by women pushing back against male violence through #MeToo (Thorbecke 2021).

Regarding the Gaze

In the online talk based on her 2017 article “The Visual Language of Oppression: Harvey Wasn’t Working in a Vacuum,” filmmaker and educator Nina Menkes links onscreen portrayals of women to male control of the industry and a male-dominated production culture. She lauds #MeToo for connecting the various ways women suffer on both sides of the camera from these sexist assumptions and a culture of male violence. In the wake of #MeToo, Rebecca Harrison (2018) calls for a dramatic reconfiguration of film pedagogy in order to initiate change in the industry and throughout the broader viewing culture:

I want all women students, all women cinema goers, all women, everywhere, to have this experience and to know the possibility of their lives being centred. I want them all to have a cinema that they feel is for them.

This means taking control of the camera “gaze” and repurposing it for the benefit of women. In an article on violence against women in the cinema, Clover Hope (2018) summaries this perspective as follows:

While the theory and execution of the male gaze on screen has been thoroughly studied, conversations around #MeToo have us re-examining the trend with fresh eyes and scrutiny of its roots, from Alfred Hitchcock’s women protagonists in peril to Tarantino’s vengeful femme fatales and, more recently, excessive depictions of rape on television ... The lack of sweeping change in Hollywood begs the question of whether (or rather, how) we’ll see progression in ways that take us beyond dreams and theory.

Hope goes on to quote film distributor Debra Zimmerman of Women Make Movies:

The problem is that what’s on the screen is indicative of what’s happening in the minds of the people making the films ... We are inundated with images of women as victims, images of murdered women’s bodies. They are rarely the narrative force; they’re rather the narrative background, or they’re being acted upon rather than acting.

In mainstream Hollywood cinema, minority women fade even deeper into the narrative background as abused and marginalized figures within the American imagination.

#MeToo, of course, predates the accusations against Harvey Weinstein and Alyssa Milano’s use of the hashtag to rally women online. The movement got its start in 2006 through the efforts of African American activist Tarana Burke. She sought to break the silence on sexual violence against minority and poor women by encouraging solidarity through MeToo.¹² In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks (1992) discusses the strategies used by African American women to look back at Hollywood’s Euro-American, male-defined “gaze.”¹³ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (1997) calls for “decolonizing the gaze” in order to locate diasporic women’s subjectivity on screen. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam globalize the male gaze

12 For more on race, class, and #MeToo, see *Where Freedom Starts: Sex, Power, Violence, #MeToo: A Verso Report* (2018).

13 See also Gaines (1986).



by linking it to imperial ambitions: “Exoticizing and eroticizing the Third World allowed the imperial imaginary to play out its own fantasies of sexual domination” (1994: 158).¹⁴ In *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, E. Ann Kaplan speaks of the need for understanding the “ways in which the ‘male’ gaze and the ‘imperial’ gaze cannot be separated” (1997: xi).

Laura Mulvey’s desiring male gaze includes both voyeuristic/sadistic and scopophilic/fetishistic aspects, and Gaylyn Studlar (1984) further theorizes the masochistic gaze as an offshoot of men’s fetishistic desires. However, what links most theories of the male gaze based on psychoanalysis or other models of visual pleasure rests on the passivity of the object of specular scrutiny. Mulvey (1975) articulates this as follows:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (7).

Claire Johnston (1973), among other feminist film scholars, called for a women’s “counter cinema” to push back against the hegemony of this powerful male gaze and the passivity of its female object.

In *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Nicholas Mirzoeff goes a step further to argue that all visuality that runs counter to images of white Western male heroes must be “feminine”: “It is given that they [heroes] are men, or masculine, gendering all countervisuality as feminine” (2011: 131). In *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, Rey Chow notes that the Emperor Puyi occupies a “feminized space” in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1990: 18). Looking back at what Laura Mulvey hypothesized as the “male gaze” in 1975 takes many forms as those excluded from power due to race, class, sexual orientation, gender, physical (dis)ability, ethnicity, or other visible markers of difference within a hierarchy reinforced and reified by commercial media culture.¹⁵ It can be argued that the “male gaze” still dominates screens that marginalize other desiring gazes theorized along various axes of erotic identification including gay, lesbian, trans, and queer.¹⁶ Women also “read

¹⁴ See also Rony (1996).

¹⁵ Mulvey, among many others, have reassessed this essay over the decades. See, for example, the special issue of *Signs*, “Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film Feminisms,” published in 2004.

¹⁶ For more on the lesbian axis see Holmlund (1991) and Mayne (2000); trans axis see Halberstam (2001); and queer axis see Straayer (1996).

against the grain” and repurpose mainstream media through fan fiction, BL narratives, and various forms of bricolage and détournement to look back at male-defined screens.¹⁷

However, formulating a “female gaze” has been riddled with difficulties that cover women’s authorship, performance, and spectatorship. As Laura Mulvey (1975) notes in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the cinematic gaze consists of three overlapping perspectives, which include the view from behind the camera (authorship), the characters’ eyelines on screen (performance), and the position of the spectator watching the film (spectatorship). All three play a part in this book’s exploration of gender and visual politics in transnational China; however, the ways in which women filmmakers construct a specific viewing position for their characters and audiences frames the discussion of the female gaze.

On the occasion of a tribute to female cinematographers at New York’s Lincoln Center in 2018 entitled “The Female Gaze,” Tori Telfer (2018) summarizes the contradictory views of the women showcased as follows:

What is the female gaze, then? It’s emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than to objectify. (Or not.) It’s respectful, it’s technical, it hasn’t had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it’s feminine and unashamed, it’s part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back.

In a speech on the female gaze at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, Joey Soloway (previously Jill Soloway) stated the obvious:

You know what’s crazy is that it’s been FORTY YEARS since Mulvey named the Male Gaze and no one has claimed being the namer of the Female Gaze yet! I really want that. I want it to be like MULVEY: MALE GAZE, SOLOWAY: FEMALE GAZE!¹⁸

Although many feminists did theorize a “female gaze” earlier, Soloway does contribute a unique perspective with a lucid description of the intersectional possibilities of the female gaze as a pathway to “feeling” empathy through

17 For further discussion of these issues, see Lavin, Maud, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao, eds. (2017).

18 A transcript of the speech is available on Topple: <https://www.toppleproductions.com/the-female-gaze>.



seeing as well as an avenue for social justice through the depiction of diverse viewpoints.¹⁹

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of “intersectionality” in 1987 as a means of positing the ways in which sexism and racism “intersect” to magnify the negative effects of bias. Shanghai feminist activist Lilian Shen points out in an interview with Erica Martin (2018) about her work with the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Women Up and Queer Talks that “cross concept” – *jiaocha xing linian* (交叉性理念) – may be the closest translation for “intersectionality” in Chinese:

‘There isn’t technically a term for intersectionality in Chinese ... When we had this as a topic for Queer Talks, we translated it as *jiaocha xing linian* (交叉性理念). The concept of intersectionality isn’t necessarily widespread in China, but the idea that these issues are connected if you go down to the root of the problem – I think people understand that.’ Intersectionality highlights the fact that sexual harassment affects women across the socioeconomic spectrum (Martin 2018).

The intersection of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and age play important roles in understanding the operation of male control and violence in China. Soloway’s emphasis on the intersectional nature of the gaze draws on Crenshaw’s theory and parallels Lingzhen Wang’s use of the term in her work on Chinese women filmmakers. Linking intersectionality to third-world feminist theory, Wang notes the importance of adding a transnational perspective to Crenshaw’s concept:

If intersectionality theory has helped transform feminist discourse from a universal, single-axis framework to a dynamic, interconnected multiaxis movement within the United States, third-world feminism has emphasized cultural specificity and historical differences in feminist research in a global context and repositioned the center of feminist discourse beyond the Western-oriented paradigm (2011: 12).

The subtitle of Lingzhen Wang’s anthology, *Chinese Women’s Cinema: Transnational Contexts*, notes the crucial role cross-border networks play

19 For an emphasis on film authorship and the female gaze, see Malone (2018). For spectatorship and the female gaze, consult *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* edited by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, which includes a reprint of Stacey (1987). For more emphasis on performance, see Malone (2017).



in the careers of women filmmakers. The “transnational” can transcend the boundaries of the “nation” in many respects, and feminism provides a key ideological avenue for transnational conversations to travel across borders. For example, Wang draws on Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s call for a transnational feminism in order to “scatter” the hegemony exerted by Euro-American feminism in theory and politics. Grewal and Kaplan articulate the promise of this feminist hybridity as follows:

For postmodern articulations of difference and global connections can be used to reify dominant social relations, or they can be used to oppose the hegemony of Western imperial culture. That is, articulations of hybridity can be read to argue that Western culture is not pure, is not the origin or the destination of everything (1994: 7).

In *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Caren Kaplan expands on Adrienne Rich’s (1983) “politics of location” for transnational feminism “to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term ‘gender’”:

Only when we utilize the notion of location to destabilize unexamined or stereotypical images that are vestiges of colonial discourse and other manifestations of modernity’s structural inequalities can we recognize and work on the complex relationships among women in different parts of the world (1996: 187).

Along similar lines, editors at *Public Culture* advance a cosmopolitan feminism that merges feminism’s political plurality with cosmopolitanism’s view to a world beyond the nation, and Chandra Mohanty (2003) in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* speaks eloquently of the need for a decolonized feminism as the basis for genuine transnational solidarity.²⁰ Mayfair Yang (1998) directly addresses the need for a similar approach to women’s culture across the Chinese-speaking world in *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*. In order to comprehend the visual politics of contemporary cinema fully, an intersectional, transnational feminist perspective must be employed.²¹

20 See the final installment of *Public Culture*’s Millennial Quartet, *Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Carol Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), 8–9.

21 For more on transnational screen feminism, see *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* edited by Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre, and Áine O’Healy (2007).

However, the question of the nature of this intersectional and transnational gaze remains. Soloway considers the female gaze in the negative as a “non-gaze,” and this resonates with Luce Irigaray’s remarks in *The Sex Which Is Not One*:

Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation (1985 [1977]: 25–26).²²

Being an object of erotic contemplation vies with the possibility of agency in the expression of desire as well as in the control of an active gaze. In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Laura U. Marks (2000) provides a different perspective by adapting a broader vision of the operation of gender and the gaze across cultures. She advances a theory of intercultural “haptic visuality” that resonates with Soloway’s emphasis on the feeling body in relation to the female gaze:

In intercultural cinema, haptic images are often used in explicit critique of visual mastery, in the search for ways to bring the image closer to the body and the other senses (151–152).

In the case of transnational Chinese cinema, the movement of the body across borders complicates this visuality. The gaze fractures further at the intersection of spheres of political influence radiating from various cultural centers in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and throughout the Chinese diaspora. In his essay, “These Nations Which Are Not One: History, Identity, and Postcoloniality in Recent Hong Kong and Taiwan Cinema,” Chris Berry observes a creative visual multiplicity within the cinema cultures of Hong Kong and Taiwan:

It is a discordant and dynamic conjuncture, constituted when different cultures (themselves maybe less unified than we think) with different histories and different trajectories meet, intersect, overlay, fragment and produce hybrid forms within a certain geographic space (1992–1993: 38).²³

22 For a thoughtful formulation of Irigaray in the service of feminist film theory, see Ince (2017a).

23 See also Berry (2010).



In “What Is Transnational Chinese Cinema Today? Or, Welcome to the Sinosphere,” Berry (2021) reaffirms the need to understand Chinese film transnationally as multiple and hybrid in form. In fact, he argues for a need to move beyond Chinese-language cinema to include Chinese-accented films in non-Sinitic languages within the broader Sinosphere.

In *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Shu-Mei Shih (2007) sees the visual, with particular emphasis on the cinema, as central to subjectivity and identity in an age of global capitalism, and she provides an expressly feminist interpretation of the ways in which language and gender intersect across the fractured Chinese-speaking world. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997) links feminism to transnational Chinese film studies cogently as he expresses his desire “to inscribe the emergence of a transnational Chinese film culture, and to engender, to give rebirth to Chinese film discourse through regendering it” (26).²⁴ This feminist regendering of Chinese culture, in fact, extends beyond the medium of the motion picture. Channeling Irigaray in *The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism*, Ya-chen Chen (2011) warns against “one-ness” in any approach to Chinese feminism:

Chinese feminism is not just the ‘one’ that is synonymous with Communist feminism. It is not only the ‘one’ that any single kind of PRC feminism or Asian American feminism can represent, replace, or generalize, either (213).

The “sex which is not one” meets the “nations which are not one” in a complex visual politics of embodiment in films by female filmmakers about contemporary Chinese women.

The journey for women filmmakers as they envision novel relationships between the screen and the body in contemporary Chinese culture can be rocky. Hui Faye Xiao (2021) sees women filmmakers facing the “double censorship” of the market and the state as the growth of mainland Chinese consumer clout casts its shadow over film production:

... film production now encounters double censorship: the profit-oriented commercial censor and the governmental censorship on politically sensitive issues. Seeking to carve out a discursive space against the double

24 For more on the global dimension of contemporary Chinese cinema, see Zhang (2010). See also Fleming and Indelicato (2019); Kokas (2017); Bloom (2016); Wang (2013); Chan (2009); Lo (2005); Yau (2001); and Laukkanen (2016). For more on gender and transnational Chinese film, see Bergen-Aurand, Brian, Mary Mazzilli, and Waisiam Hee, eds. (2014).

ensorship, women filmmakers ... insist on producing women's films that centralize the female gaze, create alternative cinematic languages, gendered narratives, affective expressions and sociopolitical visions (173).

Quoting Teng Congcong's *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), Xiao asks in the title of her article: "Why Am I Still Imprisoned in Your Eyes?" #MeToo in transnational China opens up this question to further interrogation. Women filmmakers critique images of male violence linked to exotic Oriental femininity on commercial screens. They also push back against the surveillance of women's bodies by a judgmental patriarchy and a punitive state in the business of controlling unruly Chinese women. While many female filmmakers discussed in this book do not identify as "feminists," their films do employ visual tactics for subverting certain aspects of male visual power.

In order to comprehend the ways in which visual politics operate across women's films about transnational China, the intersection of ideology, film authorship, and female subjectivity must be acknowledged. The late Esther M.K. Cheung and Jamie T.C. Ku, for example, argue for the centrality of ideological criticism to feminist film analysis of Hong Kong cinema:

This kind of ideological film criticism has enabled us to develop self-reflexive cross-cultural feminist readings of Hong Kong films so as to articulate the relation between gender difference and cultural difference. The biggest advantage of this critical approach is how it has opened up 'theory' – western theory *per se* – to social, cultural, and political developments in non-western contexts. This endeavor requires the reconsideration of theory and its relevance in response to new historical challenges. ... The term 'coalition strategy' has been used by some feminists to refer to the need to articulate the relation between different kinds of ideology, for example, gender difference and racial or class difference (2004: 419–420).

An intersectional understanding of the gaze, then, paves the way for a coalition strategy to support women filmmakers in transnational China. In her book on renowned director Tang Shu-Suen, Yau Ching notes the importance of ideological critique to uncovering the political dynamics of women filmmakers' perspectives:

While I strategically use auteurism as a tool to illuminate a female author's reconstruction of her professional and artistic languages to expand and express her subject positions and critical thinking in various contexts,

ideological analysis is for me crucial in evaluating an author's subject positions and agency. I use notions of authorship as points of departure, because as a range of theoretical possibilities they leave a lot of room for politicisation (2004: 21).

However, the relationship between feminism and female film authorship can be complicated. As the arthouse and festival circuits reify cinematic artistry under the brand name of the privileged male auteur, women struggle for recognition in a system that devalues their contributions. In this male-defined and dominated world, feminist advocacy can be a hindrance.

Director Ann Hui, for example, has avoided associating herself with feminism throughout most of her career:

The reason that I so often tell women's stories in my movies is because I find it very easy to put myself in their shoes. For me, my identity as a woman does not mean feminism, but a way of thinking and a perspective of looking at the world. I cannot avoid that (Li 2010).

However, a telling scene from Hui's semi-autobiographical *Song of the Exile* (1990) speaks to the ways in which the intersection of race and gender limit transnational Chinese women filmmakers.²⁵ Nearing graduation from film school in London in 1973, Hueyin (Maggie Cheung) does not secure an interview for a coveted position at the BBC. While graciously helping her white classmate to get ready for her own interview, Hueyin makes the decision to return to Hong Kong, leaving London behind permanently. Although race appears to be more of a factor than gender in this instance, the obstacles faced by Asian women in male-defined media production spaces worldwide remain as seen in Harvey Weinstein's treatment of Asian women in his professional circles. Ann Hui, like the fictional Hueyin, returned to Hong Kong after completing her studies at the London Film School and never turned back.

Hui's achievements were, in due course, recognized outside of Asia with a Life Achievement Award at the 2020 Venice International Film Festival that solidifies her standing as a global auteur. Her attitude toward being a female filmmaker also evolved: "Eventually I stopped minding being called a female director. I thought, whatever" (Chu 2010). In an interview

25 For more on *Song of the Exile*, see Chow (2007); Yue (2010); Ho (1999); Erens (2000); Chua (1998); and Williams (1998).



dealing with the Eileen Chang adaptation, *Love After Love* (2020), Hui goes even further to say:

I don't self-consciously, declaratively shoot films to be feminist ... But it will come out that way anyway. If you're honest about what you're looking at and you're a woman that shoots a movie it's already feminist. It's a woman's point of view (Kerr 2021).

In fact, the female filmmakers' successes often rest on more than the perspective of a single star auteur, since women's networks play a critical role in offsetting the negative effects of male bias in the industry.²⁶ As Patricia White demonstrates in her book, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, the rise of festivals devoted to women filmmakers, women's participation in the expansion of film education, as well as the links they have forged with women associated with local, national, and international film movements have facilitated the growth of women's filmmaking globally.²⁷

In films as diverse as *Shirkers* and *Song of the Exile*, across non-fiction and fiction, women filmmakers reflect on their own agency – or lack thereof – in the male-dominated and racist world of contemporary film culture. Many of these films pay tribute to female bonding around the production process. In fact, several of the films in this book offer self-reflexive commentaries on women as active producers of images. Some, including *Hooligan Sparrow* (chapter 3) and *Outcry and Whisper* (chapter 6), provide first-person commentary on gender politics in contemporary China with the filmmakers onscreen to narrate events. *Small Talk* (chapter 5), too, features a first-person account of women's private lives in Taiwan. Liu To's *A Tiny Handheld Camera* (chapter 7) immerses viewers in the experience of being a female documentarist confronted by the Hong Kong police during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The filmmaker's presence shapes Fu Yue's *Our Youth in Taiwan* (chapter 8) on Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Anson Mak's *Fear(less) and Dear* (chapter 7) on Hong Kong's 2019 protests as well. Other films offer fictional views of female filmmakers as seen in Yang Mingming's *Female Directors* and *Girls Always Happy* (chapter 4).

Female protagonists appear as writers and journalists in Lisa Zi Xiang's *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (chapter 5), Liu Shu's *Lotus* (chapter 6), and Lulu

26 For more on Ann Hui's networks, see Marchetti (2022b).

27 For an overview of scholarship on transnational women's cinema, see Ince (2017b) and also McHugh (2009).



Wang's *The Farewell* (chapter 10). Many of these films feature first-person accounts, and scholars, such as Kiki Tianqi Yu (2019), herself a filmmaker, note the importance of digital video technology in the hands of women in the expansion of first-person documentary practice in mainland China. In virtually all the films mentioned in this book, women filmmakers and their protagonists serve as witnesses to how the world views women in transnational China. The emergence of this female gaze, in all its complexity and multiplicity, testifies to the persistence of women's vision on Chinese and world screens even as #MeToo exposes the odds against their success.

Structure of the Book

As this introductory chapter shows, the politics of looking boasts decades of theorization of oppositional, feminist, queer, and other ways of seeing beyond white, male, heterosexual, cisgender eyes, and the #MeToo moment calls out a critical return to the intersectional politics of looking in transnational film productions.²⁸ The #MeToo movement in Asia provides a window onto issues surrounding women in the Chinese-language film industry, Orientalism in transnational cinema, and the politics of looking in contemporary global cinema. Women's films highlight the biases at the heart of the way women look on screen. Their films critique the way the camera gaze gives men tacit permission to leer with impunity, while shaming women for their desirability.

Female filmmakers note the extension of the male gaze in support of state surveillance and the restraint this places on feminist activism. Other female directors turn their attention to the dismissive glance given to women deemed too lowly, physically unattractive, poor, foreign, or marginalized because of age, race, ethnicity, class, (dis)ability, or other male-defined and culturally determined markers of unattractiveness. Often dependent on the men who shun them, these women only hope for a glimpse of the neglectful fathers, husbands, boyfriends, teachers, bosses, or other men who wield so much power over their lives.

Women filmmakers do more than chronicle and critique the ways in which men look at women on screen. They also create ways of seeing in direct opposition to the male gaze. These include queer ways of showing

28 For an eloquent defense of transnational film scholarship, see Dina Iordanova (2016). For an overview of the development of the concept, see Higbee and Lim (2010). For an update, see Lim (2019).



the body, feminist explorations of motherhood, and socialist and post-socialist interrogations of female labor inside and outside of the domestic sphere. Taking up their cameras as activists, women filmmakers offer a gendered perspective on the political movements and events of the second decade of the twenty-first century. If #MeToo opens the door wider, these feminist films may have a greater chance of being realized, distributed, programmed, reviewed, and even actually seen by viewers eager for relief from the constricting blindness of the male gaze.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the look, the looked over, and the overlooked in Aubrey Lam's *The Truth About Beauty* (2014) and two short films, Ann Hui's *My Way* (2012) and Siufung Law's *Unfinished* (2013). Lam's film comments on what Naomi Wolf (1990) sees as a key aspect of the post-feminist backlash against women in the internalization of a beauty ideal. However, in this case, that ideal intersects with Orientalist and neoliberal capitalist expectations for women in mainland China. In increasingly expensive and frustrating attempts to create beauty through surgery, the protagonist's new looks elicit more disapproving stares than opportunities for financial or romantic advancement. The transwoman at the center of Ann Hui's *My Way* offers a different perspective on the creation of the feminine look, and Law's *Unfinished* underscores the importance of what J. Halberstam (1998) has termed "female masculinity" in the gender-queer continuum that refuses to be contained by suffocating sexual binaries. Drawing on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2009) concept of the "generative potential" of staring, this chapter considers the contradictory dynamics at play in the construction of the cinematic look on contemporary Chinese screens.

The leer, of course, complements the look by emphasizing the male origin of the gaze rather than its female object. Women filmmakers highlight the pervasiveness of this male licentiousness in films dealing with male violence against girls. Alluding to the case of the Hainan child rape victims although setting her fiction feature in Xiamen, Vivian Qu's *Angels Wear White* (2017) points to many of the larger issues involving sexual violence against women in China. Chapter 3 analyzes Qu's film as well as Nanfu Wang's *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016) in relation to the joint concepts of the "leer" and its obverse moralizing "glare" within the context of the panoptic power of the state.

The patriarchal glare speaks to the judgmental view leering men turn on women whose unruly sexuality or unfeminine demeanor provoke their ire. This disapproving glare plays a key role in how women judge themselves through the eyes of the men who have power over them. Much like the mechanism of the Panopticon Michel Foucault (1977) describes in *Discipline and Punish*, the internalization of this censorious glare serves to control

women's behavior without any external enforcement of sex-gender rules. Even as women filmmakers turn the camera back on this glare by taking their erotic destinies into their own hands, they are dogged by the disapproval of the larger society that seeps into their most intimate fantasies.

Chapter 4 searches for the dialectical opposite of the "male gaze" in what Lili Loofbourow (2018) calls "male glance" rather than the "female gaze." Dismissed by the male glance, women become obsessed with a glimpse of the men on whom they depend for their survival in a male-defined and dominated world. Yang Mingming's *Female Directors* (2012) and *Girls Always Happy* (2018) serve as examples of the interplay between the male glance and the female glimpse. Yang stars in and directs both films. By providing a glimpse behind the camera, she shines a light on the constraints faced by young women who try to become visible in a world in which women only seem to be seen as objects rather than agents of the gaze.

Further, Yang concretizes the ways in which a male-defined worldview affects women across generations against the backdrop of Beijing's hutongs, which provide a physical reminder of women's lives under feudal patriarchy that kept them behind closed doors and high walls. In *Girls Always Happy*, Yang plays an aspiring screenwriter, living with her mother, both hustling to survive in a city dominated by men. Yang's tale of eventual triumph, however, does not belie the fact that women in a rapidly changing society in which everything is monetized increasingly find their future subject to male whims.

Chapter 5 takes up the intense mother-daughter dynamic at the heart of *Girls Always Happy* but shifts its focus from heterosexual to queer politics of the gaze. Specifically, this chapter concentrates on films that explore lesbian sexuality and motherhood from the heterosexual daughters' perspectives. In Huang Hui-chen's documentary *Small Talk* (2016) and Lisa Zi Xiang's fiction feature *A Dog Barking at the Moon* (2019), mothers and daughters look at each other across the gay-straight divide as they hash out their differences around the family dinner table. Set in Beijing, the semi-autobiographical *A Dog Barking at the Moon* critiques the unhappy marriage of an "out" gay man to a closeted lesbian from the perspective of their pregnant daughter who acts as an intermediary between the feuding spouses. Taiwanese filmmaker Huang Hui-chen's autobiographical family portrait strips back layers of the director's fraught relationship with her lesbian mother A-Nu to uncover the sexual abuse she endured from her father as a child. The filmmakers use their cameras to examine how mothers and daughters look at each other in attempts to find common ground in a world of compulsory heterosexuality in which women's desires are marginalized throughout what Adrienne Rich (1980) has called the "lesbian continuum."

Chapter 6 examines the alienation at the root of a female gaze which, to paraphrase Luce Irigaray (1985 [1977]), is “not one.” For women, the divided nature of the gaze – as women see themselves as others see them – gives rise to an alienated vision of self. Beginning with a close look at the way in which Liu Shu’s *Lotus* (2012) depicts its divided protagonist at the intersection between the economic and sex-gender system in neoliberal China, chapter 6 moves on to take up the question of alienation in Zeng Jinyan’s non-fiction *Outcry and Whisper* (2020), made in collaboration with co-directors Huang Wenhai and Trish McAdam. The alienated woman mirrors a deeply divided society, and both films dramatize the profound contradictions that pull at women across social, regional, and class divides.

The continuing importance of feminism as a foundation for film activism motivates the filmmakers involved in *Outcry and Whisper*, which brings together mainland Chinese labor and feminist activism with Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement agitating for democratic reform. Building on the portrayal of female activism in *Hooligan Sparrow* and *Outcry and Whisper*, chapters 7 and 8 take up the ways in which women filmmakers view female activism in the male-defined political arena in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Just as Internet connectivity gave #MeToo a transnational platform for activism, women filmmakers involved in other types of cross-border political organizing also turn to the digital.²⁹ The spontaneity of Liu To’s *A Tiny Handheld Camera* (2014) from the Umbrella Movement and Kanas Liu’s short films springing out of the 2019 Hong Kong protests attest to the importance of women as witnesses as well as participants in political movements. Other films, including Sue Williams’ *Denise Ho: Becoming the Song* (2020), Anson Mak’s *Fear(less) and Dear* (2020), Fu Yue’s *Our Youth in Taiwan* (2018), and Tan Pin Pin’s *To Singapore, with Love* (2013), offer portraits of female activists facing off against the authorities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore.

Chapter 9 digs into the visual archive to critique the connection between women’s bodies and disease in the colonial port cities of the Pearl River Delta including Canton (Guangzhou), Hong Kong, and Macau. While Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) reminded global film audiences of the region’s relationship to pandemics in the wake of SARS (2002–2003), other filmmakers take different approaches to waves of diseases. Bo Wang and Pan Lu’s *Many Undulating Things* (2019), for example, exhibits a particular attitude toward gender in what Priscilla Wald (2008) calls “outbreak narratives” by drawing on the historical archive of visual representations of disease. Looking at a section of this essay film and a companion installation video,

29 See Maule (2017). For more on digital China, see Voci (2010) and Zhang and Zito (2015).

Miasma, Plants, Export Paintings (2017), this chapter highlights the need for what Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) has called the “third eye” in order to uncover the continuing power viral visions exert over Chinese women’s bodies at times of increased violence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The book concludes in chapter 10 with a consideration of the ways in which the world sees Chinese women filmmakers working outside of China. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, several female directors shot to prominence with acclaimed features. After winning the prestigious Golden Lion for best film at the 77th Venice Film Festival in 2020, Chloe Zhao’s *Nomadland*, a film set among RV drifters in the American West, went on to accrue other notable awards at the Golden Globes, the Toronto International Film Festival, and Oscars for Best Director and Best Film at the Academy Awards. However, Zhao is only one among several Chinese women who have managed to move into feature filmmaking in the notoriously closed, male-dominated, and white-defined world of American cinema. Cathy Yan, Lulu Wang, and others have made notable contributions to contemporary American screen culture.

The final chapter focuses on Lulu Wang’s semi-autobiographical *The Farewell* (2019), which tells the tale of a complicated transnational ruse to disguise a family gathering designed to bid farewell to a terminally ill matriarch in Changchun as a wedding celebration for her grandson. By analyzing the ways in which women in *The Farewell* look at themselves and each other, a visual politics of gender and generation emerges that highlights how ethnic Chinese women see themselves and are seen on transnational screens in the wake of the increasing importance of the mainland Chinese market to the world’s film producers. Throughout transnational China and the Chinese diaspora, women filmmakers push back against the male gaze in their critique of the overlapping and interrelated aspects of the look, the stare, the leer, the glare, the glance, and the glimpse as they make their mark on global screens.

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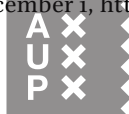
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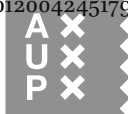


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