



**University of
Nottingham**

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

**In Between and Across: Girls, Young
Women and Post-Feminism in Contemporary
Chinese Girlhood Films**

Liao Zhang

Department of Cultural, Media and Visual Studies
School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies
University of Nottingham

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Film and Television Studies

30 September 2023

Declaration

I, Liao Zhang, confirm that the information presented in this thesis is the result of my own work, except where due to reference is made. This thesis has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any other degree at another university.

Signature: Liao Zhang

Date: September 2023

For all the wonderful girls I have met. To my mom, my friends, my aunties, my sisters and my niece.

Acknowledgements

I feel very lucky that I chose to pursue Girlhood Studies at the beginning of my PhD, when I didn't know exactly what it meant to me. Over the years, I have walked slowly and clumsily on my academic path, and I'm still doing so. But one thing that made me feel very pleased and proud throughout this process was the overwhelming number of female scholars in this field. I have come across a lot of extraordinary women's wisdom through their books and papers, piece by piece. Girlhood Studies is a friendly, supportive community. On many occasions, my peers in this community have consistently provided me with protection and encouragement, which has given me continual confidence to complete my PhD.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors. Dr Franziska Meyer, your warmth has helped me get through many of my most difficult and darkest moments during my PhD journey. More importantly, without your inspiration and rigour, this thesis would have been considerably less critical than it is at present. Dr Mark Gallagher, who brought me to the University of Nottingham and fully supported and encouraged me to pursue this project and the hidden history of girls in Chinese film. Your meticulous work ethic and patient guidance helped me to develop good academic habits and writing style that will not only be the foundation for the completion of this PhD thesis, but also be advantageous in my future as a researcher. I am not the best student, but you are the best supervisor in my life. I would also like to thank Dr Hongwei Bao. Your suggestions assisted me in identifying and improving many flaws in the theoretical structure of my thesis.

Special appreciation to my academic predecessors, who greatly influenced me during my pursuit of a PhD. Thank you, Prof. Mary Kearney, for welcoming me into the SCMS Girls Studies community. You made the first international academic conference I ever attended an incredibly wonderful experience. Thank you, Dr Feng Lin, for inviting me to the conference you organized and providing me with your detailed comments on one of my chapters. Thank you, Dr Hiuman Chan, for giving me the opportunity to see the world outside of academia and the chance to work with many film industry professionals. Thank you, Prof. Shelley Cobb, for introducing me to the community of Women's Film and Television History Network when I was just starting my PhD; some of the data collection methods I used were inspired by her wonderful project 'Calling the

Shots’. Thank you, Prof. Helen Kennedy, for the time you have dedicated to reviewing this thesis and for your meaningful feedback. You and Shelley are the ones who made my viva a wonderful memory that I will never forget.

Also, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all my friends, Linda Pittwood, Qi Ai, Zhun Gu, Siqi Wang, Joaquín Montalva Armanet, Piotr Paszynski, Jiyoung Kim, Hening Zhang, Ning Zhang, Karolina Jesień, Lu Zhang, and every colleague from the Department of Cultural, Media and Visual Studies. Thank you for the enjoyable times we had together in Nottingham. I would especially like to thank my dearest friends, Dr Xiaoran Zhang and Dr Henshen Xie. The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without your assistance. Your unwavering companionship during our numerous late-night conversations motivated me to continue down this path. I’ve had many dark moments over the last three years of the pandemic. The reason I am still safe and sound is because of the hands you extended to me time and time again. Furthermore, I would like to extend my appreciation to Tom, for your unwavering support, your weekly Friday visit, and the endless proofreading of my work.

My deepest thanks go to my parents. You have been the best role models in my life, teaching me the value of living and thinking independently as well as maintaining a lifelong learning habit. From my arrival in the UK in 2014 to my earning my PhD, I have resided in this country for a period of ten years. Thank you for your selfless financial support over the past ten years. You gave me the freedom to explore the world. You are the pillar of my life. I love you.

Abstract

The year of 2013 witnessed the image of girls and young women becoming hyper-visible on the contemporary Chinese film screen. Among the top ten highest-grossing films of that year in mainland China, there were three that featured girls and young women as the main characters: *So Young* (致我们终将逝去的青春, dir. Wei Zhao, 2013), *Finding Mr. Right* (北京遇上西雅图, dir. Xiaolu Xue, 2013) and *Tiny Times* (小时代, dir. Jingming Guo, 2013). The commercial success of these films brought the story of girlhood to the spotlight of the Chinese film industry, as well as unveils a nearly decade-long obsession with portraying girls and young women in the contemporary Chinese films. Although these girls and young women focused films are gradually (if not already) becoming a lucrative film genre for producers and studios as well as a valuable field to explore, the level of attention paid to this subject by academics remains low. By situating these girl-centred films into the framework of Huallywood, I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* (少女青春片) in Chinese and Girlhood Films in English, to describe a group of Chinese mainstream films that not only prominently feature girls as central characters and concentrate on issues relevant to girls, but also strongly appeal to young female audiences. This thesis explores how girls and young women are depicted on the contemporary Chinese film screen between 2008 to 2018, the time during which the industrialization of Chinese cinema was growing to reach maturity. As the portrayal of girls and young women are celebrated as well as regulated, I argue for its ambivalent representations. My methodology is combined, with this thesis primarily utilizing textual analysis as its foundational method, along with the support of genre studies, narrative analysis, mise en scène analysis as well as cultural and historical examination. Through investigating four key themes: girls' historical cinematic representation, girlhood film as a genre, girl's subjectivity, and post-feminist female friendship, this thesis tries to answer the following questions: What does it mean to be a girl in contemporary Chinese girlhood films? How do these representations of girls negotiate with the various sociocultural phenomena that constitute contemporary Chinese girlhood? How does the portrayal of young Chinese women in films resonate or contrast with the concept of post-feminist sensibility? Meanwhile, as a result of the Chinese government's attempts to retreat from the practices of the women's liberation movement in the neoliberal era, women's issues have been left for the women's community and evolved into an individual matter. How has this

neoliberal individualistic logic manipulated the portrayal of girls and young women in the cinematic space, resulting in the emergence of a new type of relationship among girls? In doing so, I argue that girlhood films are a form of multidimensional agency, in which the portrayal of girlhood experiences maps and interacts with the vibrant sociocultural context and gender discourse of neoliberal China.

Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Abstract</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>List of Figures</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>Abbreviations</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Chapter 1 Introduction</u>	<u>14</u>
Girlhood Films in Context	14
Methodology	24
Thesis Structure	28
<u>Chapter 2 Conceptualising Girlhood Films in Contemporary Huallywood</u>	<u>31</u>
Defining the Girl and Girlhood.....	32
Girlhood Films: A Genre Made About/By/For Girls?	45
Problematizing the Apparent Conventions of Film Genre	54
Four Paradigms of Chinese Cinema Studies.....	59
Huallywood as the Research Framework	68
<u>Chapter 3 Where are the Girls before the 2000s?</u>	<u>76</u>
The Birth of Chinese Feminism	79
This New Girl Which is Not One	85
State Feminism in the Mao Era.....	96
Socialist Girls in the Mao Era.....	100
Women’s Studies in the Market Reform Era.....	105
<u>Chapter 4 Fashioning the Post-Feminist Subject in Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films</u>	<u>111</u>

The Discourse of Post-Feminism.....	113
Post-Feminist Masquerade and Underlying Retreatism in <i>Go Lala Go</i>	125
Self-Fashioning in the <i>Nei-Wai</i> Realm in <i>Suddenly Seventeen</i>	134
Intersubjectivity and the ‘Perfect’ in <i>Suddenly Seventeen</i>	143
 <u>Chapter 5 Centring Post-Feminist Girlfriendship in Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films</u>	 <u>149</u>
The Portrayal of Female Friendship: From Literature to the Screen.....	152
Contemporary Female Friendship Films and Post-Feminist Girlfriendship.....	162
Pre-existing and Commodified Friendship in <i>Girls</i>	165
Self-Branding and Post-Feminist Representability in <i>Girls</i>	167
Girlfriend Gaze and Supportive Mutual Regulation in <i>Girls</i>	170
Red Rose & White Rose, Well-Educated Working Girl & Phallic Girl in <i>Soul Mate</i>	178
Girls’ Friendship as Bodily Bonding in <i>Soul Mate</i>	185
Interference Factor, Self-Regulation and Judgemental Gazing in <i>Soul Mate</i>	189
 <u>Chapter 6 Conclusion</u>	 <u>194</u>
Researching Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films	194
Objectives and Contributions.....	196
Feel-Bad Girlhood: A Turn to Realism Since 2018	199
 <u>Bibliography</u>	 <u>202</u>

List of Figures

Figure 1: Girlhood Films Produced and Released in Public Cinemas in Mainland China, 2008-2022.....	45
Figure 2: Some of the Girlhood Films Made by the New Generation of Female Directors, 2008-2022	49
Figure 3: Gender Distribution of Directors in Making Chinese Girlhood Films 2008-2022	50
Figure 4: Gender Distribution of Summer Movie Season 2007-2012.....	51
Figure 5: Annual Production of Feature Films in China 1999-2013	59
Figure 6: Chinese Annual Box Office 1999-2013 (Billion/RMB)	59
Figure 7: Lin Ying climbs to the top of a chimney in Queen of Sports.....	89
Figure 8: Weiming and her lover at school in New Women	92
Figure 9: Weiming's father punishes her in New Women	92
Figure 10: Weiming on a date with Dr Wang in New Women	95
Figure 11: Aying teaching factory girls to sing a song in her free time in New Women	95
Figure 12: Two Main Routes for Socialist Films to Construct the Figure of the Liberated Woman	101
Figure 13: Wu Qionghua is arrested by Nan Batian's hatchet men in The Red Detachment of Women	103
Figure 14: Wu Qionghua is sold to Hong Changqing in The Red Detachment of Women.....	104
Figure 15: Wu Qionghua joins the women's army in The Red Detachment of Women	104
Figure 16: A Xiang working in the factory in Red Skirt Popular in the Street	109
Figure 17: A Xiang wearing a red dress in Red Skirt Popular in the Street	109
Figure 18: David and Lala in the meeting in Go Lala Go	128
Figure 19: David on a business trip in Thailand.....	128
Figure 20: When Lala first starts working at DB.....	129
Figure 21: When Lala becomes David's secretary	129
Figure 22: Lala sits in her new sports car, repeatedly calling David.....	132
Figure 23: Older Liangxia applying lipstick in Suddenly Seventeen	136

Figure 24: Older Liangxia measures her weight every morning in Suddenly Seventeen	136
Figure 25: Younger Liangxia changes to her new look in Suddenly Seventeen ..	138
Figure 26: Younger Liangxia dancing in the club in Suddenly Seventeen	140
Figure 27: Older Liangxia making breakfast for Maoliang in Suddenly Seventeen	144
Figure 28: Maoliang getting ready for work in the morning in Suddenly Seventeen	144
Figure 29: Younger Liangxia keeps looking at Yanyan when they first meet in Suddenly Seventeen	145
Figure 30: Older Liangxia shoots a video for younger Liangxia to send her a message	146
Figure 31: Reverse view as older Liangxia shoots a video for younger Liangxia to send her a message.....	146
Figure 32: Xiwen loses all her energy and positivity, and has to be assisted by her girlfriends to take a bath in Girls	172
Figure 33: Xiwen is pushed by her girlfriends in a wheelchair when shopping to ease the pain of her breakup in Girls	173
Figure 34: To cheer Xiwen up, Xiaomei forces herself to swallow the beef she never eats in Girls	174
Figure 35: To cheer Xiwen up, Kimmy removes her makeup in public in Girls .	174
Figure 36: Kimmy fights with Xiaomei after she discovers she is leaving for Europe in Girls	177
Figure 37: 13-year-old Qi Yue in Soul Mate	179
Figure 38: 13-year-old Ansheng in Soul Mate	180
Figure 39: Ansheng hiding behind Qiyue's back in the bathroom in Soul Mate .	185
Figure 40: Ansheng turns around and finds Qiyue is already wearing a bra in Soul Mate	186
Figure 41: Ansheng in the bath ask Qiyue to show her breasts in Soul Mate	187
Figure 42: Qiyue ask Ansheng to show her breasts too in Soul Mate	187
Figure 43: Qiyue gets a call from Jiaming when she is travelling with Ansheng in Soul Mate	191

Figure 44: Ansheng gets a free bottle of wine from the male guests at the bar in Soul Mate	191
Figure 45: Gender Ratio of Male and Female Directors' Work in the Commercial Mainstream Film Market	201

Abbreviations

CEPA	Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement
CFA	China Film Administration
ECFA	Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement
IDG	International Data Group
MRFT	Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television
POV	Point of view
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publishing, Radio, Film and Television
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
WTO	World Trade Organization

Chapter 1

Introduction

Girlhood Films in Context

This study is about many of the girls I used to encounter in my girlhood through the screen. Before I decided to make the cinemas of girlhood the subject of my PhD research, I had already lived in a world surrounded by various images of girls. In the 2000s, when I was a little girl, China's entertainment industry embarked on its celebrated era through rapid commercialization and industrial transformation.¹ From the rise of female mass media celebrities in the Chinese language world, such as pop singers Jolin Tsai, Fish Leong, and Stefanie Sun, girl groups like *Qingchun Meishaonv* (青春美少女, Young Girls), Twins and S.H.E., as well as the popular girls-only talent shows *Super Girl* (超级女声, 2004-2006, 2016) and *Happy Girl* (快乐女声, 2009, 2011);² to the emergence of a group of female-orientated literature, such as Anni Baobei's *Goodbye Vivian* (告别薇安, 2000), Xueman Rao's *The Left Ear* (左耳, 2005), Xiaoxi Ming's *Summer's Desire* (泡沫之夏, 2006-2007), and Jingming Guo's *Tiny Times* series (小时代 1-4, 2007-2011); not to mention the proliferation of girl-centred TV programmes, such as *My Fair Princess* (还珠格格, 1998-2003), *All the Misfortunes Caused by the Angel* (都是天使惹的祸, 2001), *Pink Lady* (粉红女郎, 2002), *The House of Apple* (红苹果乐园, 2003), *The Dream of Star* (星梦缘, 2004), *Ugly Girl* (丑女无敌, 2008-2010), and *My Youthfulness* (我的青春谁做主, 2009), the popular culture I consumed in my girlhood was all focused on girls and young women.

In 2009, I left home to go to a different city to study film production at university. Because of the requirement of my major and the fact that I had been given financial autonomy for the first time after leaving my family, going to the cinema to watch a film

¹ Jingsi Christina Wu, *Entertainment and Politics in Contemporary China* (London, New York and Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-2.

² *Super Girl* was originally a television programme broadcast once a year from 2004 for four seasons. The show changed its name to *Happy Girl* in 2009 and was broadcast every two years for two seasons. Then in 2016, *Happy Girl* reverted to its original title of *Super Girls* for another season. For this season, the show was no longer broadcast on television, becoming a web-only programme through Mango TV.

gradually became a spontaneous consumption behaviour in my daily life.³ Continuous film viewings in my college years made me aware that such an obsession with young females also happens in a large group of Chinese films and seems to be growing into a trend in the Chinese film industry. This might have been an empiricist presumption back then. However, this conjecture was later evidenced by the way the cinema of girls and young women became more and more hyper-visible on the Chinese film screen in the 2010s, and often with strong box office performance as well as a high level of public discussion on social media. From the so-called ‘First Chinese Chick Flicks’ *Sophie’s Revenge* (非常完美, dir. Eva Jin, 2009)⁴ to *Love is Not Blind* (失恋三十三天, dir. Huatao Teng, 2011), which has been described as “the highest yield rate Chinese film of all time”,⁵ then to *Our Shining Days* (闪光少女, dir. Ran Wang, 2017), which came to be hailed as a successful transformative work in Chinese youth films,⁶ films about girls and young women have flooded the contemporary Chinese mainstream film market.

³ Prior to this, like many other Chinese children from my generation, many films we watched during our adolescence were children’s films with an educational purpose that were organised by the school for all students to watch together. Children are generally not regular visitors in commercial cinemas, at least before their college years (see the data I collected in Chapter 2 where I discusses the audiences’ age distribution of girlhood films). However, this might only be applicable to children born in the early 1990s. The Millennial generation has very different childhood experiences and entertainment patterns than the previous generation.

⁴ Le Luo 罗乐, “‘Nalai Zhiyi’ Zhishang: Zhongguo Xiaoniu Dianying De Suyuan – Bolai Yu Fuhao Kunjing ‘拿来主义’之殇: 中国小妞电影的溯源 — 舶来与符号困境 [The Tragedy of ‘Takenism’: Trace Chinese Chick Flicks and Semiotic Dilemma],” *Dianying Pingjie* 电影评介 [Movie Review], no.3 (2019): 73.

⁵ Xuguang Chen 陈旭光, “Nvxing Zizhi Shijiao, Xiaozhi Qingdiao, Wuzhi Zhuyi Yu Qingnian Dianying De ‘Zhuliuhua’ Zhenghou 女性自知视角、小资情调、物质主义与青年电影的“主流化”症候 [Women’s Self-Awareness, Petty Bourgeois Sensibility, Materialism and The Mainstreaming Syndrome of Youth Films],” *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.1 (2012): 33.

⁶ Huan Zhao Zheng 郑焕钊, “Congdianying Shanguang Shaonv Kan Singchunpian Zhuliuhua De Tuwei Yu Kunjing 从电影《闪光少女》看——青春片主流化的突围与困境 [From Our Shining Days to See The Breakout and Dilemma of Mainstreaming Youth Films],” *Wenyi Bao* 文艺报 [Culture & Art Daily], no.4 (2017): 1.

These films typically depict the life experiences of girls and young women in various situations, such as growing struggles at school or in the workplace and the challenges of starting out in adult society. Such films also frequently centre on topics that seem to be of particular interest to girls, such as makeovers, self-refinement, fashion, search for true love or fighting for their dreams. The themes of these films always promote a vision of a girl's ongoing maturation process prior to marriage, while female childhood and married female adulthood are usually not the primary focus. In addition, these female-orientated selling points in such girlhood films have appealed to a large young female audience. Girls like me and my peers are their ideal consumers. According to the data presented in Chapter 2, this type of film typically appeals to audiences that are over 70% females (this number even rises to 80% if the theme of the film is girls' friendships). Meanwhile, between 70% and 80% of these female audience members are young women under the age of 30. Therefore, in this study, I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* (少女青春片) in Chinese and 'girlhood films' in English, to describe a group of Chinese mainstream films⁷ that not only prominently feature girls as central characters and concentrate on issues relevant to girls, but also have a strong appeal to young female audiences.

These girlhood films have consistently demonstrated their strong ability to generate substantial box office earnings. For instance, *Finding Mr. Right* (北京遇上西雅图, dir. Xiaolu Xue, 2013) was made with a budget of just 28 million RMB but managed to gross 520 million RMB, yielding a remarkable return of 18.57 times its initial investment. Similarly, *Love is Not Blind*, with an investment of only 15 million RMB, exceeded

⁷ What I mean by mainstream films (主流电影) are those features that have passed the censorship of Chinese government agencies, been granted a Film Public Screening Permit (电影公映许可证), and therefore can be widely released in commercial cinemas in Mainland China. This film licensing system has been in place since 1996, and the agency responsible for censoring and licensing films was initially called the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (广播电影电视部, MRFT). This institution was restructured in 1998 to become the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (国家广播电影电视总局, SARFT). Then, through a massive government institutional reform in 2013, SARFT was reorganised into the State Administration of Press, Publishing, Radio, Film and Television (国家新闻出版广电总局电影局, SAPPRFT). In 2018, SAPPRFT underwent a new reorganisation and is now called the China Film Administration (国家电影局, CFA).

expectations by generating over 340 million RMB in box office revenue.⁸ This commercial success, in turn, has quickly made girlhood films a highly popular and profitable genre of production, which led to the proliferation of girlhood films in the contemporary Chinese film market. This is not to say, however, that the depiction of girls and young women only emerged onto Chinese mainstream film screens at the beginning of 21st century, but rather that girlhood films, for the first time, have become a significant force as well as a distinctive film genre with huge box office appeal following the industrialization of the Chinese film market. In other words, the popularity of Chinese girlhood films also demonstrates the importance of young female audiences in the domestic film market during the era of “she economy” (她经济).⁹ Therefore, this study defines girlhood films as a film genre made *about* and *for* girls, though such films are not necessarily made *by* girls. Although how actual young female filmmakers produce films in the current Chinese film industry is also an important topic and a relevant area to investigate, this is beyond the scope of this project.

Although such girlhood-focused and female audience-oriented films are gradually (if not already) becoming a lucrative film genre for production as well as a valuable field to explore, the level of attention paid to this subject by academics remains low. In China, these films are often loosely put into various categories by different scholars or film critics,

⁸ “Dianyingjie ‘Yinsheng Yangshuai’? Qibu Xiaoniu Dianying Bannian Juanzou Shieryi Piaofang 电影界“阴盛阳衰”? 7部“小妞电影”半年卷走12亿票房” [The Rise of the Feminine and the Decline of the Masculine in the Film Industry? Seven Chinese Chick Flicks Swept Away 1.2 billion RMB in Box Office in Six Months], Guanchazhe 观察者 [Guancha Syndicate], last modified 23rd September 2013, https://www.guancha.cn/culture/2013_09_23_174088.shtml?web. (accessed 16th September 2021).

⁹ ‘She economy’ is one of the 171 new Chinese words announced in August 2007 by the Chinese Ministry of Education. She economy, also known as women's economy, was coined by economist Qingqi Shi and refers to the increasingly significant role women play in China's social and economic development as a result of their rising social status and progressively stronger independent consuming power. This has led to the emergence of a female-specific economic phenomenon and market, as well as the formation of a significant new growth point in the market, which has a significant impact on the economy as a whole. See Fan Yang, “Post-feminism and Chick Flicks in China: Subjects, Discursive Origin and New Gender Norms,” *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no.3 (2023): 1062.

including *Qingchun Dianying* (青春电影), *Qingnian Dianying* (青年电影),¹⁰ *Aiqing Dianying* (爱情电影, Romance Film), or *Xiaoniu Dianying* (小妞电影 or Chinese Chick Flicks). In the 1980s, some films that centred on the experiences of girls' coming of age were even considered by some scholars as Children's Films, such as, *Qingchun Wansui* (青春万岁, dir. Shuqin Huang, 1983) and *The Missing Girl-student* (失踪的女中学生, dir. Shujun Shi, 1986).¹¹ In the past two decades, for many scholars who have systematically examined Chinese youth films, such as Xuelin Zhou's *Young Rebels in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*,¹² Changsong Wang and Yiming Chen's *Genre Analysis: Chinese Youth on Screen*,¹³ Jing Zhou's *A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s*,¹⁴ and Linyu Yang's *A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films (1978-2018)*,¹⁵ from their case study selections, their monographs mainly concentrate on the unpacking of boys' images and boyhood experiences, or consider youth as a whole to discuss the

¹⁰ Both *Qingnian Dianying* and *Qingchun Dianying* are the Chinese equivalent of Youth Film, rather than Teen Film. Their difference in the Chinese context is that *Qingnian Dianying* refers to the identity of their filmmakers as youths, whereas *Qingchun Dianying* refers to the subject of the films depicting the lives of young people. *Qingchun Dianying* mainly depict young adults (青年, aged 15-30) rather than teenagers (青少年, aged 10-15). Films about teenagers are usually included in the category of Children's Film in China.

¹¹ Jianzhong Wang 王建中, "Guanyu Ertong Dianying De Jidian Sikao: Lishi, Xianzhuang He Wenti Suozai 关于儿童电影的几点思考: 历史、现状和问题所在 [Some Reflections on Children's Films: History, Present and Problems]," *Liaoning Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao* 辽宁教育学院学报 [Journal of Liaoning Educational Institute], no.3 (1992): 115.

¹² Xuelin Zhou, *Young Rebels in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).

¹³ Changsong Wang 王昌松 and Yiming Chen 陈一鸣, *Huayu Qingchun Dianying Leixingxue Yanjiu* 华语青春电影类型学研究 [Genre Analysis: Chinese Youth on Screen] (Guangzhou: Jinan Daxue Chubanshe, 2020).

¹⁴ Jing Zhou 周婧, *Ershi Shiji Jiushi Niandai Hou Huayu Qingchun Dianying Yanjiu* 二十世纪九十年代后华语青春电影研究 [A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s] (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 2018).

¹⁵ Linyu Yang 杨林玉, *Dangdai Huayu Qingchun Dianying Yanjiu 1978-2018* 当代华语青春电影研究 1978-2018 [A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films 1978-2018] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2021).

relationship between cinematic representations with certain socio-political events in different historical periods. Studies that specifically consider the adolescence of girls and female youth as a gendered life experience are only mentioned sporadically in these books.

On a larger scale, scholarship that employs feminist film theories to investigate the girl-centred films that have proliferated in the 2010s Chinese film market are also inadequate. From a timeliness standpoint, in Xuelin Zhou's monograph *Youth Culture in Chinese Language Film*,¹⁶ he was unable to further explore the portrayal of girls in Chinese films from 2007 onwards. On the other hand, for another film genre that specifically focuses on the representation of female youth – *Xiaoni* *Dianying* – studies are often confined to considering this type of film as imported Hollywood Chick Flicks, examining their transnational circulation, adaptation and innovation in China.¹⁷ However, the idea that *Xiaoni Dianying* are merely cultural imports from Hollywood fails historical scrutiny, since this viewpoint not only neglects to explore the local trajectory of girl-centred films in Chinese film history, but also obscures the periodic explosion of girls' cinematic depiction in the 20th century, such as the hyper-visible images of *Modeng Nvlang* (摩登女郎, Modern Girl) in the 1920s and 1930s as well as *Tie Guniang* (铁姑娘, Iron Girl) during the Mao era. Moreover, the question of how the connotations and cultural specificity behind these two cross-linguistic terms – *Xiaoni* (小妞, which derives from a northern Chinese dialect) and Chick – affects the portrayal of distinct youthful femininity on screen has also not been addressed. Hence, this research provides the first comprehensive study on Chinese films featuring girls and young women. It proposes the recognition of girlhood films as a distinct film category, with the objective of exploring not only its diverse dynamics during the era of globalization but also to trace its unique historical evolution within the local context.

It is also worth noting that contemporary girlhood films emerged at a time when the gender discourse in China took a neoliberal post-(state)feminist turn. With the development of women's studies movement since the 1980s, female intellectuals such as Xiaojiang Li started to reflect on the rigid gender concepts of state feminism in the Mao era. De-gendering and (re)masculinizing the feminine to make women become qualified

¹⁶ Xuelin Zhou, *Youth Culture in Chinese Language Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 115.

¹⁷ Luo, "'Nalai Zhiyi' Zhishang," 73.

socialist builders only resulted in gender sameness rather than equality.¹⁸ Hence, with the call for emancipation of the mind and the emergence of multicultural trends during the 1980s, the (re)focus on gender difference, the rediscovery of femininity and (re)sexualization of women, sparked “a youth-led sexual revolution” in China.¹⁹ Around the same time, following Xiaoping Deng’s 1992 Southern Tours speech, which marked the commencement of a robust market-oriented economy in China, the so-called “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” began to take shape.²⁰ The government started to reduce regulations on many facets of people’s lives, transitioning from the collective economy in the socialist period to a newly formed “individualized personal responsibility system.”²¹ Under this neoliberal market system, the concept of individualism started to gain prominence in China. China’s women’s policies during this period also shifted with an individualistic ethos, moving from the promotion of women’s full and sustained employment during the Mao era to emphasizing women’s self-development and self-reliance in the reform period.²² Moreover, while reclaiming their femininity, women started to distance themselves from collective gender identity – socialist *Funv* (妇女, women)²³ – and turn to focus on their individual identity, personal desires and autonomy.

¹⁸ Dongchao Min, “*Duihua* (Dialogue) In-Between: A Process of Translating the Term ‘Feminism’ in China,” *Interventions* 9, no.2 (2008): 180.

¹⁹ Elaine Jeffreys and Haiqing Yu, *Sex in China* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2015), 47. This sexual revolution primarily denotes the transformation that has taken place in the perception of sexuality among Chinese youth over the past three decades following the end of the Mao era. It has evolved from a resurgence of romantic love into a focus on sexual satisfaction and women’s desires, eventually leading to the emergence of a broader spectrum of sexual relationships.

²⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²² Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-perception in Twentieth Century China* (London and New Jersey: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), 150.

²³ The term *Funv* was introduced by Chinese Communist Party theorist Jingyu Xiang, who, from a Marxist viewpoint, suggested substituting the term *Nvxing* with *Funv*. While the two terms both refer to women, *Funv* underscores the collective identity of women as a whole.

Meanwhile, also thanks to China's market economy reform, the rapid economic growth in the 1990s enabled China to quickly grow into a consumer society. This period witnessed the emergence of the urban middle class as a prominent demographic, assuming a central role in driving consumption trends. The rising incomes of this urban middle class could not only meet their basic daily needs but also transformed consumption into a significant symbol of class identity and personal expression. Under the influence of consumerism, the reclaiming of femininity of women on screen was achieved by showing how they reconstruct their body through the consumption of fashion items such as clothes and beauty products.²⁴ Then, since China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, gender discourses in China have also been complicated in the course of its globalization. Some rhetoric from Western post-(liberal)feminist culture is invoked by popular culture and mass media, such as individual choice and empowerment.²⁵ The act of women's continuous self-management and self-discipline of their own bodies as well as psychological status has been reinterpreted as empowering and liberating, highlighting women's autonomy, freedom, choice, and subjectivity. This creates the illusion that women's happiness and equality are solely dependent on their own struggle and self-improvement, thereby diverting attention away from the sexism caused by state patriarchy and structural inequality.

The evolution of this complex gender discourse in China during the early 21st century follows a similar logic to how post-(liberal)feminism operates in Western societies: shifting blame away from patriarchal capitalist institutions and holding women responsible for their disadvantaged status, thereby normalizing or even promoting the constant scrutiny of women themselves.²⁶ Women (mostly urban young women) are mobilized to actively transform themselves into an entrepreneurial autonomous subject, to take on a leading role in embodying the new values and subjectivities associated with neoliberalism, in order to provide insights into the most effective strategies for coping

²⁴ Cara Wallis, "Chinese Women in the Official Chinese Press: Discursive Constructions of Gender in Service to the State," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3, no.1 (2006): 98.

²⁵ Sue Thornham and Pengpeng Feng, "'Just a Slogan': Individualism, Post-feminism, and Female Subjectivity in Consumerist China," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no.2 (2010): 209.

²⁶ Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism: A Post-feminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no.6 (2017): 609.

with such significant social changes.²⁷ Consequently, girls and young women have consistently been involved in continuous self-making and self-improvement efforts, framed around the concepts of empowerment and choice, which has led them to become more deeply entrenched in the pursuit of complete perfection.²⁸ To put it more explicitly, both the Western post-(liberal)feminism and the Chinese post-(state)feminism represent how women's gender practices (both in reality and on screen) have been influenced during the process of social neoliberalisation. This common feature allows the theory of post-feminism, to a certain extent, to be applicable to the Chinese context. As Joel Gwynne states, "post-feminism as a cultural sensibility may operate in any society across the global, [...] it more commonly operates in economically prosperous neoliberal nations, regardless of their geographical location."²⁹ Nevertheless, the comprehension of the post-feminism concept in the Chinese context still requires a reinterpretation.³⁰ The hyper-visible post-feminist girls in the contemporary Chinese cinematic space are not solely a result of what Michelle Lazar suggests as global circulation by international media corporations.³¹ Instead, they are intertwined with the rise of neoliberal individualistic discourse, the legacy of socialist state feminism and the re-emergence of conservative Confucian patriarchal values, culminating in a distinctly nationally specific form of expression. The depiction of girls on the contemporary screen precisely reflects and maps this (re)-formulation of post-feminist culture in neoliberal China.

Therefore, this project mainly focuses on Chinese girlhood films produced from the beginning of the 21st century to the present day. It considers two key research questions:

- How have girls been represented on the contemporary Chinese film screen?

²⁷ Yunjuan Luo and Xiaoming Hao, "Media Portrayal of Women and Social Change," *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no.3 (2007): 281-298.

²⁸ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism," 609.

²⁹ Joel Gwynne, "Japan, Post-feminism and the Consumption of Sexual(ised) Schools in Male-Authored Contemporary Manga," *Feminist Theory* 13, no.3(2013): 326-327.

³⁰ See more discussion about post-feminism in China in Chapter 4.

³¹ Michelle M. Lazar, "Discover the Power of Femininity! Analyzing Global 'Power Femininity' in Local Advertising," *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no.4 (2006): 506.

- How do these representations of girls negotiate with various sociocultural phenomena that constitute contemporary Chinese girlhood?

Although studies focusing on the portrayal of women in Chinese films have increased since the 1980s,³² my research attempts to add to these existing studies a specific category of girlhood, to investigate the specific socio-cultural connotations attached to this word, to distinguish it from the portrayal of female childhood and stabilized married womanhood. I approach girlhood films as a specific categorisation in the Chinese film industry, and to avoid the umbrella term of generalized categorising that sees all girl-centred films as *Qingchun Dianying* (Youth Film), *Aiqing Dianying* (Romance Film) or *Xiaoniú Dianying* (Chinese Chick Flicks). By doing so, this project specifically focuses on how girls and young women are portrayed, celebrated as well as regulated in contemporary Chinese girlhood films. Invoking Lingzhen Wang's approach, I argue the girlhood films are a form of "multidimensional agency,"³³ in which the portrayal of girlhood experiences maps and interacts with the vibrant sociocultural context and gender discourse of neoliberal China. As argued earlier, the concept of post-feminism is crucial to understanding the construction of girlhood on the contemporary Chinese cinema screen. Hence, this research attempts to answer the following questions through case studies presented in different chapters: Why has the image of girls and young women become increasingly prominent in Chinese cinema since the late 2000s? How does the portrayal of young Chinese women in films resonate or contrast with the concept

³² Chris Berry, "China's New Women's Cinema," *Camera Obscura* 6, no.3 (1988): 8-19; Jinhua Dai 戴锦华, "Bukejian de Nvxing: Dangdai Zhongguo Dianying Zhongde Nvxing yu Nvxing de Dianying 不可见的女性—当代中国电影中的女性与女性的电影 [Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women's Film]," *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.6 (1994): 255-280; Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Yanru Chen, "From Ideal Women to Women's Ideal: Evolution of the Female Image in Chinese Feature Films, 1949-2000," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no.3 (2008): 97-129; Lingzhen Wang (ed.), *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³³ Lingzhen Wang, *Revisiting Women's Cinema: Feminism, Socialism, and Mainstream Culture in Modern China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 5.

of post-feminist sensibility? Meanwhile, as a result of the Chinese government's attempts to retreat from the practices of the women's liberation movement in the neoliberal era, women's issues have been left to the women's community and have evolved into an individual matter. How has this neoliberal individualistic logic manipulated the portrayal of girls and young women in the cinematic space, resulting in the emergence of a new type of relationship between girls? Moreover, this study also draws attention to the historical precedents of these contemporary girlhood films. By tracing the historical trajectory of girls' cinematic representations in modern China, the socialist period as well as the reform era, I investigate how images of girls have been in dialogue with Chinese social changes and feminist practices throughout the 20th century.

Methodology

This thesis primarily utilizes textual analysis as its foundational method, along with the support of genre studies, narrative analysis, *mise en scène* analysis as well as cultural and historical examination. Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 serve as the thesis's introduction and conclusion. There are four main analysis chapters, from Chapter 2 to Chapter 5, and the approach I take in different chapters varies.

Chapter 2 investigates whether these girl-centred contemporary Chinese films can be identified as a unique film genre. I draw on the work of Harry M. Benshoff, who defines "genre as a type of fictional film produced within an industrial context."³⁴ In other words, it becomes crucial to situate girlhood films within the industry-oriented framework of Huallywood to examine its potential as a film genre. Hence, I set my research scope between 2008 to 2018, a time when the industrialization of Chinese cinema began to reach maturity. Meanwhile, with Benshoff's definition, documentary and experimental films are removed from consideration, while mainstream fictional cinema takes precedence. This thesis explores contemporary Chinese girlhood films by extensively collecting and analysing film data. While this thesis has already considered that the meaning of girl and girlhood are a kind of cultural construction,³⁵ there is still a

³⁴ Harry M. Benshoff, *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to methods, Theories, and Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 85.

³⁵ See more discussion about the definition of girl and girlhood in Chapter 2.

need to establish specific parameters for film data collection. To address this issue, I introduce the Chinese concept of *Qingnian* (青年, Youth) denoting the period between the age of 15 or 16 and approximately 30.³⁶ On this basis, I curated a film database by selecting films featuring girls and young women within this age range, released in Mainland China between 2008 and 2022, and predominantly produced in China (co-productions are also included). It is important to highlight that while my primary case studies in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 predominantly examine films in the 2010s, when I gathered data for these films, I intentionally looked back by a few years. This approach enabled me to analyse the shifts in production trends across a broader timeframe, minimizing the possibility of any empirical errors. Simultaneously, it provided an opportunity to chart potential directions for future research.

My data is sourced from the annual publication *The Research Report on China's Film Industry* by China Film Press since 2009.³⁷ This series was initiated in 2007 and is published yearly; each book encompasses all Mainland China film releases from the preceding year. In this book's film catalogue, contemporary Chinese films are categorized into 20 genres, including comedy, romance, thriller, animation, action, war films, children's films, youth films and more. Notably, films featuring young girls are typically classified under the category of youth films or romance films. I reviewed the titles of Chinese market films listed yearly in this book series and scrutinized the accompanying synopses for each film to determine whether they were girl-centred films. Ultimately, I amassed a total of 320 mainstream feature films spanning from 2008 to 2022. In my database, each film's information was catalogued across 16 categories, encompassing film title, year, theme, production region, release date, director and their gender, screenwriter and their gender, main actors, whether it is an adaptation from a novel, original novel title, gender of the original novel's writer, box office and rating score. The aim of recording the gender of the filmmakers is, apart from exploring girlhood cinema as a film category that is made about and for girls, I also seek to gain insights into the dynamic of the generation of female filmmakers, even though director's gender identity is not the primary defining criterion of this genre. This is because, despite the proliferation of

³⁶ "Youth," in *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshua Guan, 2016), 1060.

³⁷ Each book in this series provides information concerning the Chinese film industry from the preceding year. To gather data from 2008, I consulted the book released in 2009 and subsequent editions.

images of girls in the contemporary Chinese film market, most of these films are still directed by men. According to our statistics, only about 25% of girlhood films produced between 2008 and 2018 were directed by women.

All this movie data was primarily sourced from Douban.com, IMDb and web searches. Furthermore, to examine the demographic composition of the viewership of these girl-centred films, I also gathered additional information about the audience. This included data on the viewers' gender distribution, age groups (categorized into four brackets: under 20, 20-30, 30-40, and over 40), and educational attainment (distinguishing between those below and above undergraduate level). I primarily sourced this audience data from the *Maoyan* (猫眼) and *Dengta* (灯塔) film databases. It is important to note that this audience data pertains to individuals who expressed an intention to watch the film through the ticketing apps of *Maoyan* and *Dengta* rather than those who actually attended screenings. I proceeded to watch these films, supplemented by reading their plot descriptions, to identify recurring themes. Access to these films was primarily through Mainland China streaming platforms such as Tencent (腾讯), Aiqiyi (爱奇艺), Youku (优酷), Letv (乐视) and Bilibili (哔哩哔哩). By examining the protagonists, themes, gender and age distribution of the audience in these films, I define girlhood films as a film genre made about and for girls, but not necessarily by girls.

Chapter 3 examines the historical transformation of the representation of girls in cinema throughout the 20th century. To begin with, I examine the evolution of the Chinese feminism/women's liberation movement, specifically the trajectory from May Fourth feminism in modern China to state feminism in the Mao era, and the women's studies movement during the market reform era. This exploration is based on a thorough analysis and interpretation of historical sources and relevant scholarship. Within this context, I explore how shifting gender discourses in Chinese history have been in dialogue with the portrayal of girls and young women on the film screen. This chapter serves as a concise case study, focusing on the depiction of girls and young women in films during three distinct historical periods: the 1920s and 1930s, 1949-1966, and the 1980s to 1990s. I have selected two to three films from each of these eras for brief analysis. It is important to note that due to significant losses of film materials, some Chinese films from the early 1920s are no longer accessible. In such cases, I utilize the reading narrative method. Descriptions and details about these early 1920s films are sourced partially from synopses available on the film website Douban.com (豆瓣) and partly from information found in

press, advertisements, film reviews, and interviews published in film magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, such as *Guowen Weekly* (国闻周刊) and *Film Monthly* (电影月报), among others. The data of these magazines comes primarily from the Late Qing and Republican of China Periodical Full-text Database (晚清与民国期刊全文数据库) and the Hantang Modern China Newspaper Database (瀚堂近代报刊数据库).

Following this, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 delve into the circulation of post-feminist sensibility in contemporary Chinese cinema by analysing how girls and young women are portrayed within the cinematic space. Through in-depth textual analysis of selected films, my focus is directed towards how these girls embody their post-feminist subjectivities in the films, and how new forms of homosocial relationships are generated among them – post-feminist “girlfriendship.”³⁸ To closely analyse films, two primary methods are employed: narrative analysis and *mise en scène* analysis, inspired by Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, who introduced the “social interaction approach”³⁹ into the study of narrative analysis. This approach refers to “a view of narrative as talk-in-interaction and as social practice, teasing out the analysis of interaction as a fundamental aspect of any study of narrative, and the investigation of the intimate links of narrative-interactional processes with larger social processes.”⁴⁰ With this approach, I not only examine the story and film plot, but also focus on how girls’ identity is co-constructed through their interactions in the film. Furthermore, as highlighted by Fina and Georgakopoulou, narratives are integrated within local contexts and are not isolated or separable entities.⁴¹ This interactive approach underscores the importance of linking the film narrative to the sociocultural environment in which it is situated. This perspective proves invaluable for effectively incorporating contemporary Chinese social context and gender discourse into the interpretation of the film’s narrative.

³⁸ Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2. Girlfriendship is a term from Winch to describe a strategic female friendship among girls, through which they help each other to achieve post-feminist normativity by mutual surveillance and regulation. See more discussion in this regard in Chapter 5.

³⁹ Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, “Analysing Narrative as Practice,” *Qualitative Research* 8, no.3 (2008): 379.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 382.

Consequently, this approach enabled me to apply post-feminist theory in the discussions about how these films portrays girls.

In addition to analysing the narrative aspects, I also utilized *mise en scène* analysis to explore the visual elements crucial to constructing the film's storyline. This includes examining factors such as the film's setting and characters' physical attributes (body, costumes, makeup, hairstyles). On the one hand, the locations in which the girls appear in the film (indoors, outdoors, cafes, offices, nightclubs, shopping malls) are important in shaping their identities. Variations in these settings subtly suggest the diverse personalities, abilities, and socio-economic standings of the girls. On the other hand, elements like clothing, makeup, and hair can also indicate a character's class, identity, and mental state, serving as an extension of their personal expression. In terms of a woman's body, in the post-feminist media culture, it represents "women's source of power,"⁴² "her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment."⁴³ Another crucial aspect to consider within visual components is the position and movement of the camera. The way a camera moves can guide a viewer's focus to particular characters, items, or scenes, shedding light on the intricate relationships between characters. Furthermore, employing techniques like transitioning between different point-of-view shots or seamlessly blending the point-of-view shots with close-ups can help understand how the position of the narrator switches throughout a film. This also serves as a way to illustrate different narrators' subjectivities and desires. This study also delves into auditory aspects, emphasizing the importance of voiceovers and monologues. In the film, the girls not only convey their emotions through narration but also use it as a tool to further develop their personal identities through self-reflexivity.

Thesis Structure

Given that Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 serve as the thesis's introduction and conclusion, this thesis consists of four main research chapters.

In Chapter 2, through the collection and analysis of data, I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* (少女青春片) in Chinese and girlhood films in English to describe a group

⁴² Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism," 616.

⁴³ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 21.

of Chinese mainstream films that not only prominently feature girls as central characters and concentrate on issues relevant to girls, but also strongly appeal to young female audiences. I argue that girlhood film is a film genre made about and for girls, but not necessarily by girls. Simultaneously, I also address the need to discuss girlhood films within the larger framework of Huallywood in this globalization era.

In Chapter 3, I reorganise the images of girls on the Chinese cinema screen in these three phases since the turn of the 20th century, in accordance with the historical timeline. The first two parts of the chapter examine the birth of Chinese feminism from the late Qing Dynasty (1840-1912) to the May Fourth period (1915-1926) and the newly emerged portrayal of girls and young women on screen during the 1920s and 1930s. The third and fourth sections examine the portrayal of girls in cinema after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), when state feminism and its ideology were strictly regulated. The final two sections focus on the specifics of the new path of the women's liberation movement initiated by female intellectuals in China during the market reform period as well as how it has influenced the girls and young women's depiction on China's film screen. Specifically, through searching the archives, I also aim to bring out the images of girls that have been forgotten by other scholarly works. By doing so, I argue that the transformations of girls' images in films have been in consistent dialogue with the development of Chinese feminism.

In Chapter 4, I turn the attention to individual girls on the screen. I have chosen young women in the urban setting as the research sample for discussion. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's concept of post-feminism, through the examination on *Go Lala Go* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016), I argue that these two examples show a transformation from post-feminist masquerade to the regime of complete perfection, which reveals a more comprehensive and intensified discipline on girls and young women on the contemporary Chinese film screen, albeit in a way that celebrates the girls' achievement by constant self-monitoring and self-improvement as well as their desire to be perfect.

In Chapter 5, based on a textual analysis of *Girls* (闺蜜, dir. Chun-Chun Wong, 2014) and *Soul Mate* (七月与安生, dir. Derek Tsang, 2016), I investigate the depiction of paradoxical female friendship in contemporary Chinese girlhood films. I draw on Winch's work on "girlfriendship" which refers to a strategic neoliberal relationship between girlfriends in post-feminist media culture, to analyse the portrayal of

girlfriendship under both pre-existing and retrospective frameworks. I analyse how girlhood friendships are commodified in a neoliberal context, which in turn transforms friendship into an exchange of capital. I also examine the depiction of girls' friendship which embodies the localised ethos and updates the concept of post-feminist representability in the Chinese context accordingly. In addition, I employ Karen Hollinger's framework for analysing female friendship in Hollywood films and apply it to identify eight different representations of female friendship in Chinese films throughout the 20th century.

Chapter 2

Conceptualising Girlhood Films in Contemporary Huallywood

2013 was a year in which the image of girls and young women became highly visible on contemporary Chinese film screens. Among the top ten Chinese films of the year at the box office, three were films featuring girls and young women: *So Young* (Wei Zhao, 2013), *Finding Mr. Right* (Xiaolu Xue, 2013), and *Tiny Times* (Jingming Guo, 2013). Among these high profits films, *So Young* with its 700 million RMB box office, brought the story of girlhood to the spotlight of the Chinese film industry, and simultaneously announced the dawn of a boom for Chinese girls-dominated films. However, with the image of girls and young women becoming more and more ubiquitous after the turn of the century, such films depicting girlhood experiences began to be discussed under different terminologies as a film genre/category in literature on film studies, in film reviews as well as in marketing materials. Generally, these girl-centred films are loosely contained under the broad concept of the Chinese *Qingchunpian* (青春片) or *Xiaoniu Dianying* (小妞电影 or Chinese Chick Flicks). However, the sweeping classification of *Qingchunpian*, for one thing, obscures the dynamics of the genre's development in Chinese film history and its entanglement as well as overlaps with children's film, youth subculture, and Chinese chick flicks; for another, it ignores the unique characteristics of girlhood and boyhood experiences from a gender perspective. More importantly, the lumping of girl-centred films into the category of *Qingchunpian* ignores the shift in audience gender distribution of this genre across time. It also overshadows the emergence of female audiences as an undisputable force in the Chinese film market in the 21st century. In terms of the use of *Xiaoniu Dianying*, which considers the phenomenon as merely a cultural import from Hollywood does not stand up to historical scrutiny. This view not only neglects to explore the local trajectory of girl-centred films in Chinese film history, it also obscures the periodic explosion of girls' cinematic depictions in the 20th century, such as the hyper-visible images of *Modeng Nvlang* (摩登女郎, Modern Girl) in the 1920s and 1930s as well as *Tie Guniang* (铁姑娘, Iron Girl) during the Mao era. Moreover, the question of how the connotations and cultural specificity behind these two cross-linguistic terms – *Xiaoniu* (小妞, derived from a northern Chinese dialect) and Chick – affects the portrayal of distinct youthful femininity on screen remains unaddressed.

Hence, in this chapter, I use the rise of the girl-centred trend on the contemporary Chinese film screen as the entry point to propose the concept of girlhood films. I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* (少女青春片) in Chinese and ‘girlhood films’ in English to describe a group of Chinese mainstream films that not only prominently feature girls as central characters and concentrate on issues relevant to girls, but also strongly appeal to young female audiences. This kind of nomenclature, on the one hand, approaches the study of such girl-centred films as a subgenre of the existing genre of *Qingchunpian* in the contemporary Chinese film market, with a focus on girlhood experiences; meanwhile, it criticises how, since the term *Qingchunpian* has been widely discussed in Chinese academia since the 1990s, studies of Chinese *Qingchunpian* have always been associated with/dominated by boyhood experiences. On the other hand, I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* to distinguish girl-centred films from *Xiaoni Diaying* or Chinese chick flicks, in order to criticise these two terms’ limitations when conducting research on girl-centred films in historical and local contexts. Most importantly, I argue that girlhood film is a genre made about girls and for girls but not necessarily by girls. In this way, it emphasises the significance of the gender composition of the film audience in the study of girl-centred films within the framework of industrialised Huallywood. On this basis, in this chapter I ask, what does it mean to be a girl in the 21st century China? How have representations of girls redefined and expanded the original concept of girls? Moreover, how can we evaluate the concept of girlhood film in the globalized and industrialized Huallywood context?

Defining the Girl and Girlhood

To research girlhood films as a newly invented term and film category, the first and most important issue to address is what it means to be a girl: What constitutes contemporary girlhood? Why has the concept of girl and girlhood garnered significant attention in social discourse, academic research and popular media from the late 21st century onwards? In this section, I analyse the concept of ‘girl’ on three different levels before presenting my own approach to girlhood in this study.

Firstly, in a general sense, a girl embodies a stage of age. As different scholars situate it within various social contexts and historical periods, the age stage embodied by the term girl undergoes compression or expansion. Sarah Projansky argues in her study of

American popular culture that the definition of a girl is “someone under the age of eighteen.”⁴⁴ She emphasises that using 18 as the boundary between girl and woman is not only because it is a legal age category, but also because 18 often signifies a stage of major life change, namely leaving the parents and school education.⁴⁵ Hence, in her study, she only discusses films that portray actual girls (teens, tweens and children) and refuses to include adult women who are referred to as girls. Her reasoning for this age-based criterion goes beyond the legal aspect of reaching adulthood; it is based on the observation that girls in this age bracket frequently struggle with common life experiences such as transitioning from school or leaving their parental homes.

The term ‘girl’ has also been employed in some research to describe tweens. The term ‘tween’ originated during the post-World War II era in the United States when the media industry recognized that pre-teenage girls represented a potentially lucrative demographic.⁴⁶ Originally, the term was coined to refer to a marketing strategy and product category within the American children's clothing industry. Over time, it evolved to describe a specific stage in a person's life, which falls between childhood and adolescence. Nowadays, tween denotes individuals whose ages typically span from around seven or eight to about 13 or 14 years old.⁴⁷ The term tween has evolved over time along with shifts in writing styles – Cook and Kaiser have delineated this evolution: ‘subteen/preteen’ denotes the term's usage in the 1940s-1970s trade context; while ‘tween’ with a lowercase ‘t’ encompasses the general age group or market; ‘Tween’ with a capital ‘T’ signifies the newly established persona and market that emerged in the 1990s.⁴⁸

Australian sociologist Anita Harris argues for the fluidity of the definition of girl rather than a fixed period of life, and the definition of girl is influenced by specific

⁴⁴ Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Daniel Thomas Cook and Susan B. Kaiser, “Betwixt and Be Tween: Age Ambiguity and the Sexualization of the Female Consuming Subject,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 2 (2004): 204.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cook and Kaiser, “Betwixt and Be Tween,” 205.

historical and social contexts.⁴⁹ In her study of girls in the contemporary Anglophone context, it seems that “female children are becoming aware of a feminine identity at a younger age (hence the tweenie phenomenon), and women into their thirties and forties cheerfully describe themselves and their peers as girls.”⁵⁰ Thus, Harris broadens the boundaries of the use of the term girl at both ends, while including young womanhood (mid-to-late 20s) in this category. This is because factors such as the “extension of education” and the “trend towards later-life motherhood” in contemporary anglophone society all have an effect on the completion of girlhood.⁵¹ Furthermore, Harris’s latter example, in which middle-aged women continue to refer to themselves as girls, demonstrates that girlhood does not end simply because the girl grows older. Rather, girlhood can also be a state of mind that rejects, resists, or ignores weighty adult categories and embraces both femininity and youthfulness.

Mary Celeste Kearney’s research on girls’ media production in the US aligns with Harris’s approach. She employs the term girl to describe these individuals aged 12 to 21.⁵² This age scope is informed by two main factors. First, some feminist research has shown that “around the age of twelve, and often earlier, girls are encouraged by a variety of individuals and social institutions to privilege the traditional practices of femininity over all other activities available to them.”⁵³ Second, young women in their early 20s are mostly in a partially dependent status, either residing with their parents or relying on them financially.⁵⁴ In this context, girlhood can be defined as the life stage that begins when a child gains awareness of her femininity (or has it imposed upon her). At the other end, girlhood may conclude when female subjects join adult groups or institutions (the workforce or marriage) and become fully independent.

Secondly, looking beyond its use as an age-based category, the term girl can also be perceived as a sociocultural construction associated with distinct implications across

⁴⁹ Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 191.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

various historical periods. Sociologists of youth Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris contend that, “girlhood is something that is both individual and collectively accomplished through participating in the social, material and discursive practices defining young femininity.”⁵⁵ More importantly, the concept of girl has consistently been intertwined, and therefore restated, with the progression of the feminist movement.⁵⁶

Kearney challenges the idea that the early Western feminist movement fully distanced itself from the concerns of young females, despite a longstanding history of feminists experiencing uneasy identification or even disidentification with girls. She contends that the pioneers of early feminism advocated for education system reform and other social support, encompassing girls within the term women, and spoke up on their behalf.⁵⁷ As a result of the processes of modernization (as in industrialization and urbanization) and the reform of the educational system in the late 19th century, the lives of girl underwent significant transformations. An increasing number of young women departed from their homes to pursue employment and education, experiences that granted them heightened autonomy from their parents and increased opportunities for engagement with both men and the broader public domain.⁵⁸ On this basis, discussions of the modern girl began to emerge in public discourse during this period and gradually evolved into a global phenomenon in the 1920s and 1930s. According to Weinbaum and colleagues the modern “girl denoted young women with the wherewithal and desire to define themselves in excess of conventional female roles and as transgressive of national,

⁵⁵ Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

⁵⁶ The feminist movement I am alluding to here pertains primarily to the Western three-wave feminist movement, or more precisely, the anglophone countries-centred feminist movement.

⁵⁷ Mary Celeste Kearney, “Coalescing: The Development of Girls’ Studies,” *NWSA Journal* 21, no.9 (2005): 6.

⁵⁸ Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Hawes, Joseph M., “The Strange History of Female Adolescence in the United States,” *Journal of Psychohistory* 13, no.1(1985): 51-63.

imperial, and racial boundaries.”⁵⁹ The image of the modern girl was often depicted as a youthful embodiment of femininity, characterized by her bold and unconventional intimacy with a particular consumerist look, a lifestyle that courageously accepts male company, and a mindset that relishes stepping out to work and revelling in leisure.⁶⁰ But this hedonistic image of the modern girl also provoked strong criticism from society. For example, in Carol Dyhouse’s research on British young women in the 1920s, the image of the modern girl was “marked by great uncertainty,” and thus, numerous politicians voiced concerns about whether women under the age of 30 possessed the necessary sensibility to be granted full citizenship rights.⁶¹

Then, with the development of the first wave feminist movement in the early 20th century, feminists increasingly directed their attention towards the fight for civil rights, particularly women's suffrage. This led to the perception that politics was “a realm off-limits to youth.”⁶² Young individuals were perceived as lacking the maturity, rationality, and experience necessary to manage the obligations of adulthood and citizenship, and this viewpoint was widely accepted at that time.⁶³ Consequently, first-wave feminists primarily depicted adult women as the only females worthy of civil rights, thus sidelining girls in feminist agendas.⁶⁴ This adult-centred viewpoint was further strengthened during the second wave feminist movement. One illustration can be found in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, where she rephrases women’s dilemmas as having been trapped at home and thus becoming dependent, childlike, and giving up their adult capabilities,⁶⁵ thus they must grow up to gain emancipation. Similarly, in 1973, American linguist Robin

⁵⁹ Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization*, eds. Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

⁶⁰ Brigitte Soland, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14-16.

⁶¹ Carol Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 70-71.

⁶² Kearney, “Coalescing”, 8.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kearney, “Coalescing”, 8.

⁶⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), 296.

Lakoff proposed that, when the term girl is employed in common language to refer to a grown woman, it carries associations of immaturity, frivolousness, innocence, and a lack of responsibility.⁶⁶ Kearney also identified such a situation in her research about the development of girls' studies, suggesting that feminists in the 1960s and 1970s frequently used the term young women to refer to girls, in order to avoid the negative connotations that came with the term girl.⁶⁷ Moreover, the portrayal of girls in America popular culture in the 1970s also "seemed to be suffering from an image problem," as they were often seen as cloying, lacking strength, and prone to giggling.⁶⁸ The term girl, in such a social context, acquired a political connotation, being seen as a part of patriarchal discourse that undermined the legitimacy of women. Presenting women in a girling manner was a means of suppressing them, which implies that women were perceived as both physically and intellectually feeble and deemed incapable of shouldering responsibilities or making significant decisions.

This negative interpretation of the word girl changed with the girl power discourse that emerged as a part of the third wave of feminism through the popularity of Riot Grrrl bands in the 1990s. Riot Grrrl bands are recognized for making the term 'girl power' widely known, first appearing as 'Grrrl power' on the cover of a Bikini Kill fanzine in the early 1990s.⁶⁹ These Riot Grrrls strategically employed the word Grrrl instead of Girl to "deny identification with the 'adult' [...] patriarchal worlds of status, hierarchies, and standards."⁷⁰ This rebellious spirit against the adult world found widespread acceptance, signifying a pivotal shift from the formerly "adult-centred perspective that persists in the feminist movement"⁷¹ to a girl-centred one. Meanwhile, according to Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, these Riot Grrrl bands, through their lyrics, reclaimed derogatory terms that

⁶⁶ Robin Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," *Language in Society* 2, no.1 (1973): 61.

⁶⁷ Kearney, "Coalescing", 10.

⁶⁸ Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (London: Penguin, 1999), 184.

⁶⁹ Dawn H. Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz, *'Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood* (New York, Washington DC, Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt and Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 7-8.

⁷⁰ Wendy S. Hesford, *Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of pedagogy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 45.

⁷¹ Kearney, "Coalescing," 6.

were initially directed at women, such as ‘slut’, ‘cunt’ and ‘dyke’.⁷² Subsequently, in 2001, the Oxford English Dictionary introduced an entry for ‘girl power’, defining it as “a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness and individualism.”⁷³

The celebration of girl power in popular culture has also led to changes in the portrayal of girls on the film screen. In her study of US girl-centred films in the 1990s, Mary Kearney notes that films of this period began to “incorporate contemporary feminist themes, especially the need for girls to develop confidence, assertiveness, and self-respect.”⁷⁴ By invoking the girl power discourse, the previous image crisis of girls, which characterized them through “passivity, voicelessness, vulnerability and sweet naturedness,” was subverted.⁷⁵ Instead, girl culture was redefined as “a positive force embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude and a Do It Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural production.”⁷⁶ Girls are now receiving recognition and celebration for their bold and assertive potentials. It is also worth noting that due to shifting political connotations, the terms girl and young woman have started to be used interchangeably more frequently in scholarly discussions.

Following the turn of the millennium, as the entry of a phase that can be characterized as “a post-girl power period,”⁷⁷ scholars began to reflect on this portrayal of girls’ self-confidence to re-examine the relationship between girlhood, power, and gender. Anita Harris indicates that “the discourse of girl power’s punk philosophy of DIY (do it yourself) and individual responsibility for social change lent itself easily to its transformation into a discourse of choice and focus on the self.”⁷⁸ This kind of focus on

⁷² Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, ‘Girl Power’: *Girls Reinventing Girlhood*, 7-8.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mary Celeste Kearney, “Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinema,” in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 125.

⁷⁵ Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, *Young Femininity*, 19-20.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Marnina Gonick et al., “Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What Comes After Girl Power?,” *Girlhood Studies* 2, no.2 (2009): 3.

⁷⁸ Harris, *Future Girl*, 16.

self is not just appreciation, but also tinged with regulation. In a similar vein, Gonick and colleagues argued that “while girl power emerged within the economic, socio-political context of the 1990s where girls could be active, in the 2000s they are now expected/demanded to be fully self-actualized neo-liberal subjects.”⁷⁹ Gonick, in another book co-authored with Aapola and Harris, provides a contextual analysis of this change. Grounded in the context of late modern Western societies (Australasia, Europe, and North America), they contend that globalization has had profound repercussions on various aspects of society, particularly the labour market. The relocation of manufacturing to the Global South has resulted in a scarcity of employment opportunities and increased competition in Western societies.⁸⁰ Additionally, disparities in educational resources have further exacerbated the divide between the rich and the poor due to the income inequality in the job market.⁸¹ Nonetheless, within neoliberal societies dominated by individualism, the insecurity arising from significant societal transformations must also be addressed at the individual level.⁸² Consequently, the importance of individual agency has been greatly promoted in the social discourse, encouraging people to enhance their personal competitiveness through continuous reskilling and re-education.

Nonetheless, this proactive reshaping of individuals appears to exhibit a gendered bias. As Angela McRobbie states, young women nowadays have replaced male youth as the symbol of social change.⁸³ For this reason, McRobbie further indicates, on one hand, that the development of feminism, reforms in the education system, and shifts in family dynamics have notably enhanced the lives of girls and young women.⁸⁴ On the other hand, this elevated status has plunged girls and young women into an unprecedented upheaval of their identities. Their identities are no longer confined to the conventional recognition of girlhood or womanhood.⁸⁵ While the lives of girls and young women are increasingly

⁷⁹ Gonick et al., “Rethinking Agency and Resistance,” 2.

⁸⁰ Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, *Young Femininity*, 4.

⁸¹ Angela McRobbie 安吉拉 麦克罗比, *Nvxing Zhuyi Yu Qingnian Wenhua 女性主义与青年文化 [Feminism and Youth Culture]* (Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2000), 196.

⁸² Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, *Young Femininity*, 4.

⁸³ McRobbie, *Nvxing Zhuyi Yu Qingnian Wenhua*, 198.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

marked by change and uncertainty, the lives of men and boys seem to remain more anchored in tradition [...] as newly empowered individuals, girls are urgently called upon to invigorate political power.⁸⁶ McRobbie's analysis reveals that, in contemporary times, girl becomes a new feminine identity, that shows a certain level of distancing from the conventional gender roles for women, such as daughter, wife and potential mother, and it is seen as the achievement of feminism. Moreover, within an era marked by constant change and development, the girl identity also serves as a site for simultaneously reconciling anxiety and progress.

Girls are now seen as the ideal neoliberal subjects, compelled to continuously self-make and self-improve to thrive within the shifting socio-economic and political landscape. The representations of girls in this period refer to a distinct femininity that is associated with powerful subjectivity as well as a self-discipline ethos. Such an ambivalent combination echoes the nature of post-feminism in the entanglement of both “feminist and anti-feminist ideas.”⁸⁷ Or, as Projansky directly points out, girlness “epitomizes post-feminism.”⁸⁸ Once again, the media and screens of the new century have widely disseminated this reinterpreted image of the post-feminist girl, which has emerged as a global cultural sensibility in various parts of the world. This image carries various refreshed updated meanings and expressions of girls, such as “femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment”⁸⁹ – I explore these concepts within the context of Chinese cinema in Chapter 4.

The third definition of the term girl has a close relationship with one's marital status. In her influential work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir aptly expressed the idea that “women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being.”⁹⁰ This remark

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 161.

⁸⁸ Sarah Projansky, “Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 45.

⁸⁹ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

⁹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 145.

highlights how the institution of marriage uniquely genders and subordinates women. This is particularly evident in China, which is deeply rooted in Confucian patriarchal values. In the Chinese Confucian tradition of educating women, there is a famous phrase, “when *Fu* [夫, persons, sages, women of rank] are in the *Jia* [家, procreative sublineage unit] they are *Nv* [女, young girls, daughters]; when they marry they are *Fu* [妇, wives, married] and when they bear children they are *Mu* [母, mothers].”⁹¹ In other words, women are categorised into three gender roles through their marital and reproductive status, *Nv* (女), *Fu* (妇), and *Mu* (母). Moreover, Barlow notes that, “the word *Nv* and its compounds, such as *Nvzi* (女子), *Nv’er* (女儿, girl child), and *Nvren* (女人, female person), meant unmarried girls, and *Fu* and its compounds (妇人, *Furen*, etc.) meant married women.”⁹² In Barlow’s enumeration, she leaves out two other words that are still widely used in the contemporary world, *Shaonv* (少女, young women) or *Nvhai* (女孩, female child), both refer to unmarried women. Specifically, for my naming of the girlhood films, I use the word *Shaonv* to refer to the word, girl. The reason why I choose this word is because, on the one hand, this word *Shaonv* can refer to both teenage girl as well as adult young women in Chinese. On the other hand, it is because the term *Shaonv* has become a cultural phenomenon in contemporary popular culture, and there are numerous affective concepts associated with the term, such as *Shaonvxin* (少女心, girly attitude) or *Shaonvgan* (少女感, girliness).

The previously mentioned phrase presents a dichotomy between *Nv* and *Fu* that represents the contrast between young girls and married wives, with marriage serving as a defining factor that distinguishes between the two. This method of defining female identity in terms of marriage is still prevalent in contemporary Chinese society. This is because the Chinese family model imposes distinct expectations and responsibilities on men and women, as the process of marriage does not entail transforming a girl into a woman, but rather involves transforming her into a wife and future mother, where she actively assumes the responsibilities of being a “good wife and wise mother (贤妻良母,

⁹¹ Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 41.

⁹² Ibid., 40.

Xianqi Liangmu).⁹³ Thus, womanhood for Chinese women represents weighty domestic chores and serious and demanding maternal duties. The young Chinese women of the new century have developed resistance to the traditional gender expectations of women, as reflected in the declining marriage rate, which dropped from 8.2% in 1990 to 6.1% in 2002, the lowest point in the last two decades.⁹⁴ Soon after, as a kind of response, a new discourse emerged in late 2000s China, that of *Shengnv* (剩女, leftover women). According to Hannah Feldshuh, *Shengnv* is a word that “was officially formalized by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 2007,” and is used to describe “highly successful unmarried women over the age of 27 with advanced degrees.”⁹⁵ Feldshuh’s research found that during the same period, Chinese television screens featured a number of negative portrayals of *Shengnv*, treating their inability to enter into intimate relationships with men as the butt of jokes or establishing them as “woebegone women forced to make choices between the stigma of being an educated, unmarried woman and the desire to have a family.”⁹⁶ There is no such negative portrayal of older men both on screen and in reality, they are positively and kindly referred to as *Zuanshi Wanglaowu* (钻石王老五, diamond bachelor).⁹⁷

The strategic negativization of the term *Shengnv* represents a deliberate linguistic stance, as it highlights the inability of unmarried women to meet the responsibilities dictated by Confucian patriarchal values. Hence, *Shengnv* is a tool for language discipline, and a means of threatening women that “motivates conformity to marriage norms.”⁹⁸ Besides, this also signifies that marriage serves to limit women’s subjectivity. Marriage

⁹³ Fengxian Wang, “The ‘Good Wife and Wise Mother’ as a Social Discourse of Gender,” *Chinese Studies in History* 45, no.4 (2012): 58.

⁹⁴ Jiehua Lu and Xiaofei Wang, “Ershi Shiji Jiushi Niandai Yilai Woguo Hunyin Zhuangkuang Bianhua Fenxi 20 世纪 90 年代以来我国婚姻状况变化分析 [Change of the Marital Status in Mainland China since 1990s],” *Beijing Shehui Kexue* 北京社会科学 [*Beijing Social Science*], no.3 (2013): 63.

⁹⁵ Hannah Feldshuh, “Gender, Media, and Myth-making: Constructing China’s Leftover Women,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (2018): 39.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Lik Sam Chan, *The Politics of Dating Apps Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021), 30.

⁹⁸ Feldshuh, “Gender, Media, and Myth-making,” 40.

operates as a rite, where a woman shifts from her premarital gender identity (unmarried girl) to prescribed gender roles (as wife or mother), these gender roles are determined by the male member's identities in the family. This transition compromises the woman's agency and autonomy. Hence, from this vantage point, the concept of singleness is crucial in defining what it means to be a girl. Singlehood provides a space and a legitimacy for girls to discover themselves, to experience a more pleasurable aspect of youth, to embrace their unruliness, and to mature in their own way. It is important to note, however, that a young woman's singleness is still considered temporary and in need of correction, as evidenced by the use of the term *Shengnv*. The widespread acceptance of this notion subtly suggests that, ultimately, young women are still expected to enter into heterosexual relationships. Comparable themes can be observed in girlhood films from the 2010s, where young women are portrayed as making earnest efforts to alter themselves (through weight loss or other makeover techniques) in pursuit of a romantic relationship, and such endeavours are frequently glorified within the cinematic narratives.

After a thorough exploration of the development of the term girl, encompassing its roles as a life stage, a cultural construct within the context of Western feminism, and a representation of female singledom, I shall now refocus my attention on my own definition of this research project. I will delineate the concept of girl across three distinct dimensions. Firstly, I define girl as a kind of youthful femininity with generational characteristics. The construction of the girl is shaped by evolving discourses concerning girls in various time periods. As Griffin puts, "there is nothing 'essential' about girlhood; it is always produced and negotiated (by us all, but especially by girls) in particular historical and political moments."⁹⁹ Within the framework of post-feminism, this epochal characterization portrays the contemporary girl as an independent, autonomous subject who actively pursues self-making and self-improving. Hence, I will systemically examine the evolving depictions of girls and the distinct femininity they represent in various historical periods within the realm of Chinese film history in Chapter 2. Moreover, I will also investigate the influence of contemporary neoliberal post-feminist sensibilities on the emergence of novel expressions of femininity in Chapter 3.

⁹⁹ Christine Griffin, "Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary girlhood," in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 29.

Secondly, I consider girl as a kind of in-betweenness. Girl represents a unique female identity that occupies a space between traditional gender roles for women, which is between the role of being a daughter and the role of being a mother/wife. The former often makes it difficult for girls to escape the grip of the patriarchal family, while the latter implies responsibilities and duties that need to be assumed by the adult woman who re-enters the patriarchal family. Therefore, girlhood exists as an intermediate phase between full dependence in childhood and the stability of married womanhood. This in-betweenness gives girlhood itself a turbulent quality. So, she is always in-between something, in need of crossing something before she can get somewhere. This embodies a transition, a process of crossing. This leads to the construction of girlhood itself as a project that needs to be constantly improved and refined.

Thirdly, I define girlhood as a woman's singlehood. The in-betweenness nature of being a girl brings a kind of pleasure, as the status of being a girl seems to place her in a vacuum of responsibility (apart from the responsibility of remaking herself). As Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones indicate, "to be seen as 'girly' has become a desirable position for many female-identified subjects, including chronologically adult women, for whom the subject position girl may well contain connotations of escape, evasion, and transcendence of the norms governing adult femininity."¹⁰⁰ Girls as an identity between being a mother and a female child is the stage of singledom where girls have a great deal of autonomy. In this stage, the girl can have multiple identities outside of the traditional gender roles, such as a girl student, a working girl or, etc. She is the subject who has desires but is not constrained by others, and she is not encouraged to sacrifice but has the opportunity to discover the true self.

After elaborating on my definition of girlhood, I linked the above discussion with a term from cultural studies to approach girlhood as the "feminine adolescence."¹⁰¹ Driscoll made a clear separation between the term feminine adolescence and other age-related classification (female adolescence). She views childhood and adulthood as relatively

¹⁰⁰ Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones, "Introduction," in *International Cinema and the Girl: Local Issues, Transnational Context*, eds. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6.

stable phases and, therefore, defines feminine adolescence as something “not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self (though that has meant very different things in different sociohistorical contexts) rather than any definition of that self.”¹⁰² In this way, our definition for girlhood is no longer limited to specific numbers, but embodies a gendered process of growing up. Thus, girlhood films can be a space where we can negotiate all things related to girls, such as first love, friendship, dreams, careers, and so on.

Girlhood Films: A Genre Made About/By/For Girls?

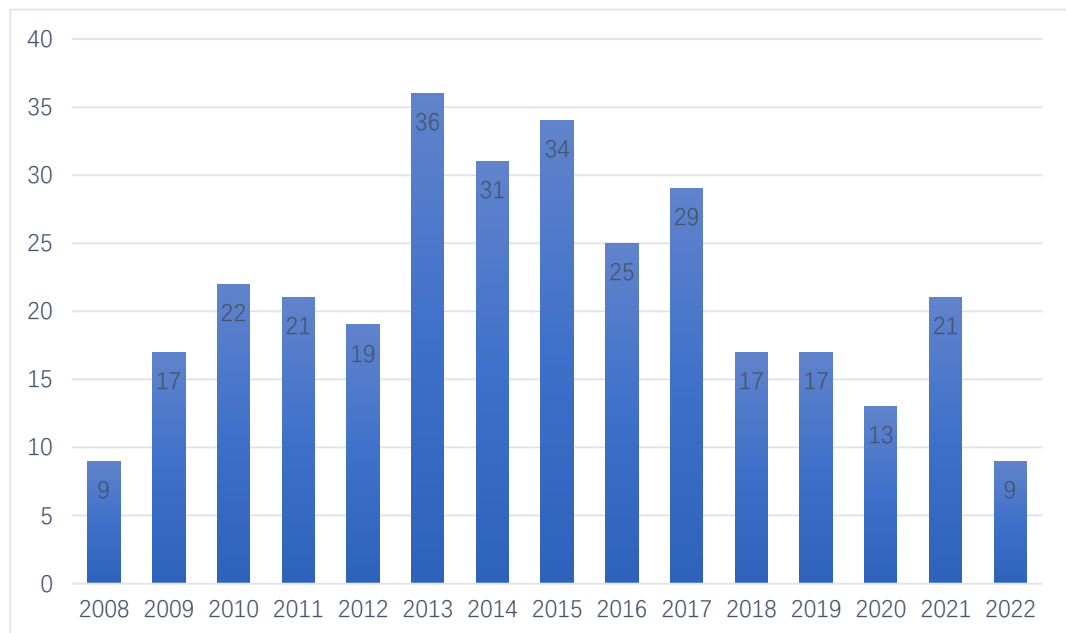


Figure 1: Girlhood Films Produced and Released in Public Cinemas in Mainland China, 2008-2022

When attempting to define girlhood films as a genre, I implement Sue Harper’s methodology, which involves examining her concept of the British women’s picture from three perspectives: “films made *by* women, *for* women *or* about women.”¹⁰³ In this

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Sue Harper, “The British Women’s Picture: Methodology, Agency and Performance In The 1970s,” in Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams, eds., *British Women’s Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2009), 124.

section, I will also examine these three parameters and question whether it is possible to argue that girlhood film is a genre using statistics and observations of film data.

To investigate whether girlhood films can be defined as films *about* girls, in the early stages of this study I set out a simple criterion for data collection. I defined the term girlhood as the period of female youth between the ages of 15 and late 20s. Here, I followed the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary's definition of *Qingnian* (青年, youth), which states that youth is the period between the ages of 15 or 16 and approximately 30.¹⁰⁴ As a result, girlhood films typically focus on depicting the young, unmarried lives of girls in this age range, from high school to their early professional careers. To be considered a girlhood film, the film must also feature girls and young women as protagonists, or the female voice must dominate the narrative and plot. Meanwhile, this study only focuses on girlhood stories depicted in mainstream Chinese films; by mainstream, I mean feature films that have been approved by the China Film Administration, and therefore can be widely released in public cinemas. Thus, girlhood stories portrayed in Chinese independent films, "internet big film,"¹⁰⁵ short films, TV films and DV film works are not the main research subject of this project. By following this set criteria, I collected 320 films among the features released in Mainland China between 2008 and 2022 which met these standards. As shown in Figure 1, from 2009 to 2022, at least 15 girlhood films were produced and released in China each year (in most years, the number was well over 15), though this number slipped in 2020 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Chinese film market. The peak occurred in 2013, when 36 girlhood films were released into public cinemas.

It is also worth noting that, although I used the established concept of *Qingnian* in the Chinese context to equate girl with female youth to some extent in this study, when analysing the data I discovered that a large number of girlhood films feature girls over the age of 18 and young women in their 20s. There are very few films about girls under 18 or women over 30. Most girlhood stories set in schools occur during college, such as *So Young* (Wei Zhao, 2013) and *Tiny Times* (Jingming Guo, 2013). This is because girls between the ages of 15 and 18 are typically still enrolled in high school. The primary

¹⁰⁴ "Youth," in *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshua Guan, 2016), 1060.

¹⁰⁵ Zhun Gu, *Screen Media and the Construction of Nostalgia in Post-socialist China* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 31.

focus of Chinese students during this phase is fully devoted to study to prepare for the National College Entrance Examination. The romance element – a recurring theme in girlhood films – is discouraged when associated with high school students. Jie Liu, the director of *Young Style* (2013), once revealed in an interview that “when I spoke with the film censorship authority before the filming commenced, I was informed that, first and foremost, criticism of the educational system was not permitted, and secondly, puppy love was permitted, but it was harmful, and it was only allowed to fail, not to succeed. Consequently, I gave particular consideration to the film plot, in which the male protagonist only expressed his love to the heroine after the high school graduation to avoid any censorship issues.”¹⁰⁶ In other film plots, another way to meet this censorship requirement is to have the hero and heroine meet in high school but not express their feelings for each other. Instead, they decide to attend the same university, and their love story begins when they arrive. By this point, the heroes and heroines are usually 18 years or older; examples of such films include *My Old Classmate* (dir. Fan Guo, 2014) and *Fleet of Time* (dir. Yibai Zhang, 2014).

In addition, these girlhood films have not only prevailed in quantity, but they have also enjoyed remarkable box office performance. Using the data from 2013 as an example, among the top 10 Chinese films at the box office, three were girlhood films: *So Young* (dir. Wei Zhao, 2013), *Finding Mr. Right* (dir. Xiaolu Xue, 2013), and *Tiny Times 1.0* (dir. Jingming Guo, 2013). Among these highly profitable films, *So Young*, with its 719 million RMB box office revenue, brought the story of girlhood into the spotlight of the Chinese film industry, simultaneously announcing a new dawn for Chinese girlhood films, or as I call it, *girlhood cinema*. In the years after 2013, the production of girlhood films entered a period of upsurge,¹⁰⁷ as they often achieved huge box office success for a

¹⁰⁶ Bo Li 李博, “Shangyepian Bi Yishupian Haopai – Zhuanfang Dianying Qingchunpai Daoyan Bianju Liujie 商业片比艺术片好拍—专访电影《青春派》导演、编剧刘杰 [Commercial Films are Easier to Make Than Art Films – Interview with Liu Jie, Director and Screenwriter of *Young Style*],” *Zhongguo Yishubao* 中国艺术报 [*Chinese Arts Newspaper*], August 9, 2013.

¹⁰⁷ In much of the literature on the subject, scholars suggest this culmination period was mainly from 2013 to 2016, as they argue that the box office figures for 2017 show that girlhood films were no longer drawing as much money as they used to. However, from the data I collected, the number of girlhood films in 2017 did not significantly decrease. In my view, the real turning point for girlhood films occurred in 2018,

relatively small budget and were therefore considered to be the most lucrative film genre in the contemporary Chinese film industry.¹⁰⁸ The information above indicates that during the 2010s, girlhood films were de facto present in the Chinese film market. Meanwhile, the genre has garnered a great deal of recognition within the Chinese film industry as a result of the positive economic returns it has generated.

Directors	Film Titles
Jinglei Xu	<i>Go LaLa Go!</i> (2010) <i>Dear Enemy</i> (2011) <i>Somewhere Only We Know</i> (2015)
Wei Zhao	<i>So Young</i> (2013)
Eva Jin	<i>Sophie's Revenge</i> (2009) <i>One Night Surprise</i> (2013)
Xiaolu Xue	<i>Finding Mr. Right</i> (2013) <i>Finding Mr. Right 2</i> (2016)
Chun-Chun Wong	<i>The Allure of Tears</i> (2011) <i>The Stolen Years</i> (2013) <i>Girls</i> (2014) <i>Girls 2</i> (2018) <i>Don't Forget I Love You</i> (2022)
René Liu	<i>Us and Them</i> (2018)
Hong Li	<i>My Belle Boss</i> (2010)
Oi Wah Lam	<i>The Truth About Beauty</i> (2014)
Mo Zhang	<i>Suddenly Seventeen</i> (2016)
Vivian Qu	<i>Angels Wear White</i> (2017)
Lun Su	<i>How Long Will I Love U</i> (2018)
Xinyi Zhang	<i>Miss Puff</i> (2018)
Xue Bai	<i>The Crossing</i> (2018)

representing more of a stylistic shift towards realism and a thematic shift towards social issues, such as violence in schools, generational conflicts, and sexual abuse, which I address extensively in the conclusion chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Mengya Li 李梦雅, “Guochan Xiaoyuan Qingchun Dianying Fazhan Kunjing Tanxi 国产校园青春电影发展困境探析 [An Exploration of The Dilemma of The Development of Chinese School Youth Films],” *Dianying Pingjie* 电影评介 [Movie Review], no.3 (2019): 50.

Sun Zhou	<i>Becoming Li Jiahe</i> (2019)
Danyang Wang	<i>The Story of Hay Bo</i> (2020)
Mengying Dai	<i>Love The Way You Are</i> (2019)
Janet Chun	<i>Les Aventures d'Anthony</i> (2015) <i>Passage of My Youth</i> (2021)
Ling Jia	<i>Hi, Mom</i> (2021)
Ruoxin Yin	<i>Farewell, My Lad</i> (2020) <i>Sister</i> (2021)
Yu Shen	<i>The Old Town Girls</i> (2020)
Fenfen Cheng	<i>Go Brother!</i> (2018) <i>Go 2 Brother!</i> (2021)
Lin Sun	<i>Somewhere Winter</i> (2019) <i>0.1% World</i> (2022)

Figure 2: Some of the Girlhood Films Made by the New Generation of Female Directors, 2008-2022

To examine girlhood films as a film genre, the second parameter that needs to be considered is whether or not these films can be understood as films made *by* girls. This necessitates an examination of the contributions made by female filmmakers in various departments. Two significant changes related to girls in the Chinese film industry emerged in the 2010s. Firstly, this period witnessed the significant development of the careers of a new generation of Chinese female filmmakers, including Jinglei Xu, Wei Zhao, Xiaolu Xue, Eva Jin, Mo Zhang, Vivian Qu, Xue Bai, Fenfen Cheng, Mengying Dai, and Yu Shen (Figure 2), who all produced films with girls and young women as their protagonists. Even though most girlhood films produced in the 2010s were directed by men, according to the data collected, the growth in the number of female directors in the mainstream film market is remarkable compared to the previous century.

Moreover, the involvement of a young generation of female filmmakers in the film industry includes, but is not limited to, being a director; female screenwriters and novelists have been involved in numerous film projects. The rise of girl-oriented youth literature in the 2000s can be seen as another contributing factor in the proliferation of girlhood films. In some cases, the works of these female novelists have been adapted into film productions by selling copyrights; in other cases, these female novelists have worked directly as screenwriters. Notable examples of the latter include Xueman Rao, Jingjing Bao, Jiuyehui, Man Gu, Yiwu Xin, and Anni Baobei, who are all known for their girlhood

stories. Their fame can also bring a great deal of attention to the girlhood films in which they are involved.

Year	Male	Female	Unknown
2008	8	2	0
2009	12	6	1
2010	19	5	0
2011	17	5	0
2012	15	4	1
2013	26	10	0
2014	24	9	0
2015	31	11	0
2016	28	5	0
2017	26	7	0
2018	11	9	0
2019	13	6	1
2020	6	7	0
2021	16	7	0
2022	6	4	0

Figure 3: Gender Distribution of Directors in Making Chinese Girlhood Films 2008-2022

While female filmmakers have been and continue to be integrated into the film industry in a variety of ways, they remain a minority in the film industry. Chinese mainstream film is overwhelmingly produced by male filmmakers, and the Chinese film industry, like its US counterpart, has substantial structural and attitudinal barriers that limit women filmmakers' opportunities. Despite the proliferation of images of girls in the contemporary Chinese film market, most of these films are still directed by men. According to our statistics (Figure 3), only about 25% of girlhood films produced between 2008 and 2018 were directed by women. Therefore, due to the significant disparity in the number of male and female directors, films *by* girls cannot be considered a valid parameter for defining girlhood films.

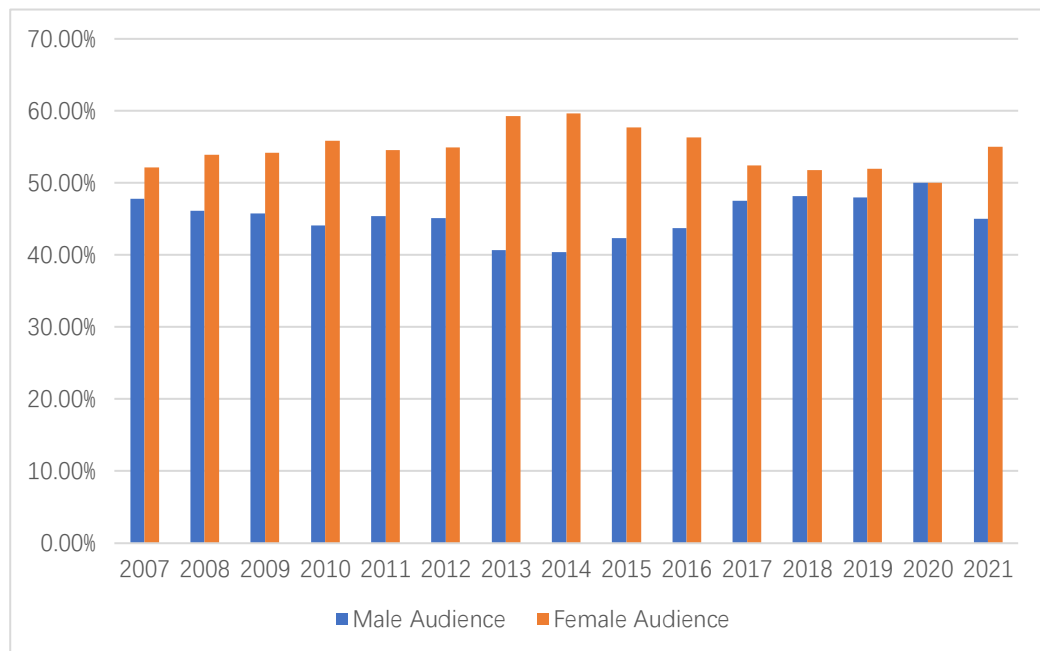


Figure 4: Gender Distribution of Summer Movie Season 2007-2021¹⁰⁹

The third parameter, films *for girls*, can be very useful in analysing girlhood films as an industrial film genre. The decade of the 2010s marked the progression of the industrialization of Chinese cinema towards maturity. Changes in transnational production modes, the emergence of new audience groups, and the evolution of their consumption patterns have all resulted in dramatic changes in the Chinese film industry, from production to distribution. A notable dynamic associated with the rise of girlhood films is the takeover of the Mainland China film market by young female audiences in recent years. From data collected by *The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry* book series (Figure 4), published once a year by China Film Press, taking Summer Movie Season (*Shuqi Dang*, 暑期档) as an example, in 2007 the ratio of male to female audiences was 47.8% and 52.2% respectively, with the difference between the two of only about 5%.¹¹⁰ The gender ratio at this stage is relatively balanced, however, in terms

¹⁰⁹ Data compiled from *The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry* series published by China Film Press once a year. The data used is taken from their audience analysis report on the Chinese market from 2007 to 2021.

¹¹⁰ 2008 Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Yanjiu Baogao 2008 中国电影产业研究报告 [The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry 2008] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2008), 385.

of age distribution, the dominance of young audiences is notable. Among these participants, viewers under 30 accounted for 72.8% of the total, while only 27.2% were over 30.¹¹¹ In 2014, when girlhood films hit their peak, the ratio of male to female audiences in the Summer Movie Season hit 59.61% for females and only 40.39% for males.¹¹² The market share of male and female audiences varied by almost 20%. The age distribution of the audience in 2014 also shows that young audiences occupied a high profile in the film market: viewers under 30 accounted for 80% of the total number of participants, and only 20% of the audience was over 30.¹¹³ In other words, young female audiences emerged as the primary consumer force in the Chinese film market during the 2010s.

In response to changes in audience demographics, film marketing has become a crucial part in the Chinese film industry chain, and its success is closely linked to a film's box office performance. Hence, determining how to effectively target a film's core audience has become an issue that should be considered at the start of a film's production. This is especially true for these girl-centred films. Interviews with film marketing CEOs published in trade journals provide evidence of this type of audience targeting, as they discuss how to identify core audiences and customise marketing strategies accordingly. For example, in the case of *A Wedding Invitation* (dir. Ki-hwan Oh, 2013), the film's distribution team, *Yingxing Tianxia* (影行天下), formed a WeChat group consisting of over 400 post-1990s girls who frequent cinemas. To ensure that every film poster and related marketing material was appealing to the target group, the marketing specialist frequently initiated group polls. The film's title was chosen by a few hundred female

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Liu Yang 杨柳 and Yingjuan Gao 高樱娟, "2010-2014 Nian Shuqidang Dianying Shichang Diaocha Yanjiu 2010-2014 年暑期档电影市场调查研究 [2010-2014 Film Market Research for Summer Movie Season]," in *2015 Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Yanjiu Baogao* 2015 中国电影产业研究报告 [*The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry 2015*], ed. China Film Association and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, Film Art Centre, Industry Research Department (Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Xi'an: World Publishing Corporation, 2015), 187.

¹¹³ Ibid.

viewers aged 25 to 45 from three options.¹¹⁴ At the same time, two rounds of research were conducted prior to the film's official release. An internal screening used a female audience between the ages of 15 and 35 – the results showed that the film was well received by girls between the ages of 15 and 25. The marketing team then ran a second internal screening but adjusted the new female audience to between the ages of 15 and 25.¹¹⁵ The outcome was in line with the previous results, putting the film's core group at between 15 and 25. From the data collected after the film's official release, the audience was 40% male and nearly 60% female. Among these audiences, 85.2% were under the age of 30.¹¹⁶ These figures demonstrate that the film's marketing strategy was extremely successful, as the film only invested 18 million RMB but managed to earn 191 million RMB at the box office.¹¹⁷

This data analysis of film protagonist and audiences, as well as the rise of young female filmmakers in the Chinese film industry, suggests a common conclusion: whether in front of or behind the camera, on or off the screen, girls have proliferated over the past decade. The dynamic of these girls on screen and in the industry, as well as in the audience community that continues to emerge, makes it possible to frame girlhood films as an established genre. In light of Sue Harper's methodology, I contend that the definition of girlhood films in the Chinese context refers to those films made *about* girls (focusing on girls' growth experiences, psychological activities, and living status), and films made *for* girls (young female audiences are the main consumer group of this genre). However, it is not necessary for such films to be produced *by* girl themselves, nor is it even necessary that they are produced by a female. Because there are still insufficient numbers of female filmmakers in the Chinese mainstream film market, they continue to be underrepresented, while the majority of these girl-centred films are made by men.

¹¹⁴ “Qinggan Jingjixue 情感电影经济学” [The Economics of Affective Cinema], Sohu.com 搜狐, last modified 4th October 2015, https://www.sohu.com/a/34284166_114965. (accessed 16th September 2021).

¹¹⁵ “Zhongying Dajiangtang Di Shiqi Qi: Baokuan Dianying Beihou De Jingzhun Yingxiao 中影大讲堂” 第十七期: 爆款电影背后的精准营销” [The 17th Lecture of China Film Group: The Precise Marketing Behind Blockbuster Films], Sohu.com 搜狐, last modified 1st November 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/272740716_100015912. (accessed 16th September 2021).

¹¹⁶ Data collected from Maoyan online film database.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Problematizing the Apparent Conventions of Film Genre

As I mentioned above, a crucial point in studying girlhood films is to sort out its connection as well as discrepancy with two existing and widely used film genres in the Chinese film market, they are *Qingchunpian* (青春片, Youth Film) and *Xiaoniu Dianying* (小妞电影, Chinese Chick Flicks). There is no common definition of *Qingchunpian* in Chinese academia. Scholars generally agree that *Qingchunpian* developed as a film genre in the 1980s. Prior to this decade, films about young people and their lives were only classified as youth-themed films.¹¹⁸ China's film industry underwent a substantial transformation in the 1980s as a result of its economic reforms. As the country moved towards economic modernization, political revolution goals were replaced by economic ones. This era was characterised by ideological liberation, which resulted in a cultural return to humanism as well as a re-evaluation of personal life experiences and humanitarian values. The emergence of individualistic discourse in Chinese society during this period resulted in the production of films that depicted the love and friendships of young people. Consequently, Mo Chen regards this period as the inception of *Chinese Qingchunpian*.¹¹⁹ In addition to this, Hui Wang refers to youth films as films that depict the life experiences and growth of young people, highlighting the current state of their lives and inner worlds through their emotions, actions, and issues, aimed primarily at a youth audience, and characterised by a distinct youth culture.¹²⁰

This definition's emphasis on the cultural nature of youth demonstrates how the image of *Qingchunpian* as a young person evolved over time in tandem with various cultural trends. In the 1980s, youth themes on the film screen began to merge with the era's humanist ideology, scar literature, and critical reflections on the Cultural Revolution, displaying a group of images of rebellious youth. Notable films in this regard include *Samsara* (轮回, dir. Jianxin Huang, 1988), *The Troubleshooters* (顽主, dir. Jiashan Mi,

¹¹⁸ Zhou, *A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s*, 19.

¹¹⁹ Mo Chen, "On the Development of Young Director's Filmmaking in China," *Contemporary Cinema*, no.3 (2006): 81.

¹²⁰ Hui Wang, "Young People's Films and Contemporary Social and Cultural Changes – Youth Films in Mainland China since the Reform and Opening-up," *Film Review*, no.5 (2019): 2.

1988), *Dachuanqi* (大喘气, dir. Daying Ye, 1988), *Yaogun Qingnian* (摇滚青年, dir. Zhuangzhuang Tian, 1988), and *Half Flame, Half Brine* (一半是火焰, 一半是海水, dir. Gang Xia, 1989). Then, in the 1990s, the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers emerged onto the historical stage. Their films often fixated on the traumatic depiction of personal experiences and were keen to portray the sense of wanderlust and confusion amid significant social changes. As a result, their primary focus became the personalized living experiences of youth, leading to a series of films depicting marginalized young people in this period. Notable examples include *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, dir. Yuan Zhang, 1993), *The Days* (冬春的日子, dir. Xiaoshuai Wang, 1994), *Yingjia* (赢家, dir. Jianqi Huo, 1996), *The Making of Steel* (长大成人, dir. Xuechang Lu, 1997), *The Pickpocket* (小武, dir. Zhangke Jia, 1997), and *The Dream Factory* (甲方乙方, dir. Xiaogang Feng, 1997). These films predominantly center on young individuals in a rapidly evolving society, with protagonists such as rock musicians, painters, thieves, laid-off workers, and other marginalized figures. Through their chaotic youthful lives, these characters reflect the spiritual crisis of society and the disintegration of youthful ideals. In the 2000s, starting with Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (十七岁的单车, 2001), *Qingchunpian* as a genre became closely associated with school settings. During this period, films frequently use a nostalgic perspective to depict youthful life at school, and through the adult perspective of the main characters who have grown up to remember the beauty of their youthful years at school. Films in this regard include *So Young* (致我们终将逝去的青春, dir. Wei Zhao, 2013), *Young Style* (青春派, dir. Jie Liu, 2013), *My Old Classmate* (同桌的你, dir. Fan Guo, 2014) and *Fleet of Time* (匆匆那年, dir. Yibai Zhang, 2014), and *The Ark of Mr. Chow* (少年班, dir. Yang Xiao, 2015).

However, I want to bring up the point that when I examine the Chinese *Qingchunpian* genre in the 1980s and 1990s, most of these films are predominantly focused on male characters and their boyhood experiences. At the start of this youth trend, girls were not central to the film narratives; they were portrayed as secondary characters, often as the boy's girlfriend, sister, or the idealized love interest that motivates the boy. In the late 2000s and onwards, when the image of girls became hyper-visible on the film screen, Chinese *Qingchunpian* were largely set in campus environments and limited to depicting student life, ignoring the urban experiences of girls. Moreover, in terms of the scholarship that examines the contemporary Chinese *Qingchunpian*, the selection of the research sample was also dominated by boyhood-centred youth films. In the past two

decades, for many scholars who have systematically examined Chinese youth films, such as Xuelin Zhou's *Young Rebels in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*,¹²¹ Changsong Wang and Yiming Chen's *Genre Analysis: Chinese Youth on Screen*,¹²² Jing Zhou's *A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s*,¹²³ and Linyu Yang's *A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films (1978-2018)*,¹²⁴ from their case study selections, their monographs mainly concentrate on the unpacking of boys' images and boyhood experiences, or consider youth as a whole to discuss the relationship between cinematic representations with certain socio-political events in different historical periods. Studies that specifically consider the adolescence of girls and female youth as a gendered life experience are only mentioned sporadically in these books. This discovery exposes the fact that the term *Qingchunpian*, in itself, has an unavoidable boyhood bias. Therefore, in this project, I introduce the concept of *Shaonv Qingchunpian*, considering girl-centric youth films as a subgenre of youth films and using the term girlhood films to describe this category in my research.

Another term that may overlaps with *Shaonv Qingchunpian* is *Xiaoniú Diányǐng* (小姐电影, Chinese Chick Flicks). *Xiaoniú Diányǐng* first emerged in the Chinese context in 2009 with the release of *Sophie's Revenge* (dir. Eva Jin, 2009). This term was frequently used in major media and newspapers as a marketing label for the film. *Xiaoniú*, similar in meaning to chick, refers to girls and young women, which is why *Sophie's Revenge* is often considered the first Chinese chick flick. The term *Xiaoniú Diányǐng* was readily embraced by Chinese film critics, researchers, and audiences since then, and it continues to be used today. The term chick flicks in the Anglo-American context originated in the mid-1990s as a derisive term used primarily by reluctant male moviegoers to describe films preferred by their girlfriends.¹²⁵ Ferriss and Young define chick flicks as commercial films that appeal to a female audience, emphasizing the

¹²¹ Zhou, *Young Rebels in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*.

¹²² Wang and Chen, *Genre Analysis: Chinese Youth on Screen*.

¹²³ Zhou *A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s*.

¹²⁴ Yang 杨林玉, *A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films 1978-2018*.

¹²⁵ Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Yong, "Introduction: Chick Flicks and Chick Culture," in *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Yong eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

importance of understanding this term within the broader context of chick culture.¹²⁶ The term chick itself has evolved significantly in the Anglo-American context. During the second wave of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, chick was seen as an insulting diminutive that depicted women as infantile and in need of protection.¹²⁷ By the third-wave feminist movement, however, the term chick began to be used deliberately, like girl, to express solidarity and empowerment.¹²⁸ This shift in meaning does not occur in the Chinese context for the word *Xiaoniu*.

Moreover, in the context of Western media culture, chick culture is often seen as being closely linked to post-feminism. According to Ferriss and Young, “Chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girl power, a focus on female pleasure, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories.”¹²⁹ These elements of the chick aesthetic are evident in several early 2010s Chinese films about young women, such as *Sophie's Revenge* (非常完美, dir. Eva Jin, 2009), *Go Lala Go!* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010), *Say Yes* (101次求婚, dir. Zhengdao Chen, 2013), and *One Night Surprise* (一夜惊喜, dir. Eva Jin, 2013). However, films like *Love is Not Blind* (失恋三十三天, dir. Huatao Teng, 2011), *Women Who Know How to Flirt Are the Luckiest* (撒娇女人最好命, dir. Ho-Cheung Pang, 2014), and *The Rise of a Tomboy* (女汉子真爱公式, dir. Dalei Guo, 2016) critique hyper-feminine styles and chick postfeminist aesthetics, despite these elements still being present in some other Chinese girlhood films. For instance, in *Love is Not Blind*, the protagonist Xiaoxian is dumped by her boyfriend because she is too focused on her work, lacks gentleness, and doesn't emphasize her femininity through improving her appearance. In the film, she is depicted as hot-tempered women with a gender-neutral characteristic in terms of her appearance. Conversely, the other female character, Li Ke, is criticized for her complete dependence on a man, lack of a career, and express a very childish, weak femininity. This rejection of hyper-femininity by Xiaoxian reflects a return to the socialist femininity of

¹²⁶ Ferriss and Yong, “Introduction: Chick Flicks and Chick Culture,” 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 4.

the Mao era, where appearing feminine was considered bourgeois, thus, femininity as a symbol of the bourgeoisie and of the culture of old Chinese society should be eliminated.¹³⁰ And this image of girls with socialist femininity cannot be found in Western chick flicks.

Then, let us go back to the term *Xiaoniu*, a dialect word from northern China that refers to girls and young woman. This term became widely recognized in Chinese popular culture during the 2000s, not because of the film *Sophie's Revenge*, but due to three critically acclaimed TV programmes directed by Baogang Zhao. Actress Luodan Wang, who played Milai in *Struggle* (奋斗) and Qian Xiaoyang in *My Youth Who Makes the Decision* (我的青春谁做主), was known as the original representative of the *Xiaoniu* character. It's important to highlight that the word *Xiaoniu* has its unique developmental path within the Chinese context, making it more than just a Chinese equivalent of chick. More importantly, as a northern dialect term, *Xiaoniu* suggests a distinctive kind of spirited femininity, characterized by eloquence and frankness. This contrasts with the typical western chick flick, where the heroine often finds herself in awkward situations.

Both *Xiaoniu Dianying* and Chinese Chick Flicks have their own limitations. *Xiaoniu* is geographically restricted, and as a northern dialect, it is unfamiliar and unrelatable to those in southern China. The term chick carries specific cultural connotations in the Anglo-American context, making it challenging to apply this term to the study of girl-centred films in Chinese film history. This discussion does not advocate for a complete replacement of *Xiaoniu Dianying* and Chinese Chick Flicks with the term girlhood films. Instead, it highlights the need for caution in academic research regarding these marketing terms. The concept of *Xiaoniu Dianying* has become widely accepted in the contemporary Chinese film market because the femininity implied by *Xiaoniu* aligns with the positive, light-hearted image of girls that promoted during the period of booming neoliberalism in China. However, if the portrayal of girls in films cease to feel happy and brave, does these films lose its qualification as a *Xiaoniu Dianying*? To what extent has this term become outdated for audiences after the 2010s? Particularly since girlhood films have taken a more realistic approach after 2018, a topic I will address in the conclusion.

¹³⁰ Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference," 41.

Four Paradigms of Chinese Cinema Studies



Figure 5: Annual Production of Feature Films in China 1999-2013¹³¹

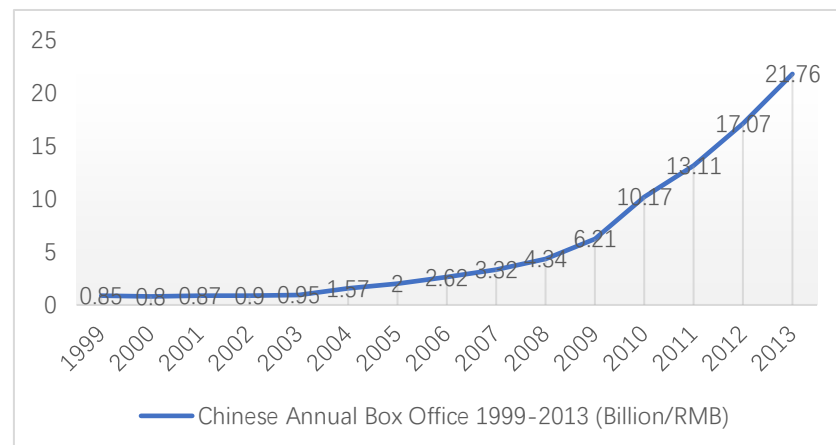


Figure 6: Chinese Annual Box Office 1999-2013 (Billion/RMB)¹³²

The beginning of the 21st century marked an important turning point in the development of Chinese cinema. Huijun Zhang and colleagues point out in *The China Film Industry*

¹³¹ Data collected from Hong Yin 尹鸿 and Liu Liu 刘浏, “Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Fazhan Gaikuang 中国电影产业发展概况 [The Overview of China's Film Industry Development],” in *Zhongguo Chuanmei Chanye Fazhan Baogao 2007-2008 中国传媒产业发展报告 2007-2008 [Report on Development of China's Media Industry 2007-2008]*, ed. Baoguo Cui 崔保国 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2008), 191-192; Partly collected from Yanling Yang, “Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 14, no.1 (2016): 72.

¹³² Ibid.

Annual Report 2005-2006 that market reform in China's film industry first began in 1993 with the establish of Suggestions on the Deepening of Chinese Film Industry's Institutional Reform (关于当前深化电影行业机制改革的若干意见).¹³³ Although this regulation broke the monopoly of the China Film Corporation (中国电影公司, renamed China Film Group Corporation 中国电影集团公司 in 1999) in terms of film distribution, other crucial issues such as film financing and production efficiency was not addressed.¹³⁴ Meanwhile, the state did not loosen its control over film content. Chinese film in this period was continuously situated in a bad cycle of low investment, low quality and, therefore, low returns. In addition to the impact of foreign imported commercial films in the 1990s and new modes of viewing (such as cinema channels on TV, the production of VCDs and DVDs), as well as strict regulations on film censorship and the licensing system – Regulations on the Administration of Movies (电影管理条例) – all meant that the Chinese film business was ‘dancing with shackles’, which resulted in a nearly decade-long film market depression in the 1990s. It was not until the early 2000s that the domestic box office gradually returned to a positive growth pattern (as shown in Figure 2).

After nearly a decade of market depression in the 1990s, Chinese cinema finally began its comprehensive industrialization process after China's accession to the WTO. With the implementation of a series of encouraging and stimulating policies, including The Implementation Rules for Film Distribution System Reform (关于改革电影发行放映体制的实施细则) in 2001, The Provisions on the Administration of Chinese-foreign Cooperative Production of Films (中外合作摄制电影片管理规定) and The Interim Provisions Concerning Foreign-invested Cinemas (外商投资电影院暂行规定) in 2003, and especially the establishment of Some Opinions of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Expediting the Development of the Film Industry (关于加快电影产业发展的若干意见) in 2004, Chinese cinema was finally defined as a form of cultural industry,¹³⁵ and gradually shifted from a state-controlled planned economy

¹³³ Huijun Zhang 张会军 et al., eds., *Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Nianbao* 中国电影产业年报 [*The China Film Industry Annual Report 2005-2006*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2006), 2.

¹³⁴ Ying Zhu, “Chinese Cinema’s Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the Mid- 1990s.” *Journal of Communication* 52, no.4 (2002): 907.

¹³⁵ In China, the concept of film being recognized as a “viable cultural industry” (可经营的文化产业) first emerged in 2002 during the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. During this event,

mechanism to a relatively open yet competitive market economy scheme. Thanks to these encouraging policies, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) gradually relaxed state control over film production and distribution in this period, allowing private production studios as well as non-public capital to produce films independently,¹³⁶ while promoting the construction of industrialized cinemas nationwide.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the globalization of the Chinese film industry and the inclusion of foreign investment in film financing, production, and distribution paved the way for a period characterized by a wide range of international collaborations in the realm of Chinese cinema. As a result, in the first decade of the 21st century, the number of films produced each year in Mainland China and the total domestic box office both increased exponentially. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, annual domestic feature film production was only 88 films in 2001, while this number had risen to 745 by 2012. Along with the expansion of industrialized theatres and the rapid growth in the number of screens, the total box office of Chinese films continued to grow from 800 million RMB in 2000 to

there was a call to proactively nurture cultural endeavours and cultural sectors. From that point onward, the Chinese film industry began to take shape with the aim of achieving the industrialization of cinema uniquely tailored to Chinese characteristics. Before this, China commonly referred to the field of film as *Dianying Hangye* (电影行业, film sector), as evidenced in documents like the launch of Suggestions on the Deepening of Chinese Film Sector's Institutional Reform (关于当前深化电影行业机制改革的若干意见) in 1993, which used the term *Dianying Hangye* (电影行业) in its title. It was not until 2004, with the release of Some Opinions of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Expediting the Development of the Film Industry (关于加快电影产业发展的若干意见), that the government's official stance shifted to using the term *Dianying Changye* (电影产业, film industry) in its policy titles. While occasionally in English scholarship, I realise some scholars may mistakenly interchange the terms *Dianying Hangye* (film sector) and *Dianying Changye* (film industry) when translating official documents, it is important to note that in Chinese, these terms have distinct connotations, particularly when it comes to describing the industrialization of Chinese cinema.

¹³⁶ Prior to this, even when private film companies started to be allowed to produce films in 1993, they still had to cooperate with one of the state-run film studios to obtain a license.

¹³⁷ Hong Yin 尹鸿, "Shiji Zhijiao: 90 Niandai Zhongguo Dianying Beiwang 世纪之交: 90年代中国电影备忘 [Turn of the Century: China's Film Memo in the 1990s]," *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.1 (2001): 26.

21.76 billion RMB in 2013, when China overtook Japan as the world's second-largest film market.¹³⁸

In tandem with the burgeoning domestic industry, Chinese cinema, as it fosters a global discourse, has incrementally assumed a recurring role in major international film festivals. Simultaneously, it has garnered increasing attention and investment in scholarly examination within anglophone academia. Over the past three decades, scholars have frequently engaged in various critical discussions about how to define Chinese cinema, as well as its scope and boundaries in English scholarship, in response to the complex geopolitical national identity, and linguistic issues associated with this term. Current studies on Chinese cinema in Anglophone scholarship can be roughly divided into four paradigms: Chinese national cinema (民族电影, *Minzu Dianying*), Transnational Chinese cinema (跨国中国电影, *Kuaguo Zhongguo Dianying*), Chinese-language cinema (华语电影, *Huayu Dianying*), and Sinophone Cinema (华语语系电影, *Huayu Yuxi Dianying*). The first three critical paradigms were identified inductively by Song Hwee Lim in *Celluloid Comrades: The Representation of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas*, and Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu later brought the term Sinophone Cinema into the discussion in his article "Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies."

The representative work of the study of Chinese National Cinema comes from Yingjin Zhang's book in 2004. Zhang suggests that despite the complex geopolitical, ideological, and historical circumstances, as well as multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multicultural differences that abound between China's three territories (Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), "what we have seen since the mid-1990s is the apparent consensus that films from all three Chinas may be covered under the umbrella term 'Chinese cinema(s)'.¹³⁹ Nick Browne, in his co-edited book *New Chinese Cinemas*, expressed his concern about taking the definition of Chinese for granted as something already known. He noted,

the presumption that Chinese cinema is the monolithic cultural expression of a Chinese nation has been dramatically undercut by history. "China" appears today

¹³⁸ Yang, "Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power," 72.

¹³⁹ Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

largely as the consequence of the 1949 Communist revolution, forming an interregional social and economic network defined and sustained by politics. The People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and their cinemas are marked as socialist, capitalist, and colonialist, respectively. Yet to exaggerate these differences would be to overlook a common cultural tradition of social, ideological, and aesthetic forms that stands behind and informs Chinese cinema as a whole.¹⁴⁰

Therefore, the question of how to redefine the term Chinese cinema to address the plurality of Chineseness presented by this term becomes an urgent one. Zhang proposes a macro conceptualization of Chinese cinema as a national cinema, in which he advocates a positive view of its messy attributes and strategic use of the word Chinese in a cultural and historical way.¹⁴¹ According to Zhang, the term Chinese national cinema refers to “all films produced in Mainland China (including those prior to 1949), Hong Kong and Taiwan, and instruct the reader to keep in mind all problematics or messiness – theoretical as well as geopolitical – surrounding ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’.”¹⁴² He invokes Chris Berry's conception of “national agency,” and indicates the possibility of considering “several distinct but equally valid” Chinese national cinemas as “socially, politically, and historically specific projects contesting each other in the construction of Chinese national agency, which is itself defined in various ways.”¹⁴³ Based on this logic, Zhang reconceptualized the term in his subsequent book *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* by including Chinese diasporic cinema within this term,¹⁴⁴ in response to the transnational mobility of Chinese filmmakers in the age of globalization. Despite Zhang's attempt to negotiate the diverse connotations of Chineseness under this term, his theory has been frequently criticised by scholars for its lack of adaptability and flexibility

¹⁴⁰ Nick Browne, “Introduction,” in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, eds. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁴¹ Zhang, Chinese National Cinema, 5.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Chris Berry, “If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or, Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency,” *Boundary* 225, no.3 (1998): 132.

¹⁴⁴ Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 19.

in dealing with groups from different territories and political regimes. Sheldon Lu challenges the territoriality factor in Zhang's concept, pointing out that “it might not make sense to label ‘diasporic cinema’ as Chinese cinema, especially if ‘territoriality’ has been a factor in the historical process of nation-building.”¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, and more notably, as Pang discovered, there is hardly any English language scholarship on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporic Chinese cinema studies that uses the category of the ‘national’ as a positive term to define these films.¹⁴⁶ For scholarship that adopts Chinese national cinema as their framework, they are often highly Mainland China-dominated and emphasise historical perspectives.¹⁴⁷

Given the urgent quest to bring Hong Kong cinema, Taiwan cinema as well as Chinese diasporic cinema into the discussion, some scholars have begun to propose the concept of transnational Chinese cinema and Chinese language cinema. The theory of Transnational Chinese cinema was first introduced by Sheldon H. Lu in his 1997 book *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. He argues that, “Chinese national cinema can only be understood in its properly transnational context. One must speak of Chinese cinemas in the plural and as transnational in the ongoing process of image-making throughout the twentieth century.”¹⁴⁸ To study Chinese cinema through a transnational lens is crucial and appears to have been particularly popular in Anglophone academia in the past two decades. This is not only due to film as a kind of Western invention – its very notion and techniques are always associated with a “undeniable

¹⁴⁵ Sheldon H. Lu, “Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no.1 (2012): 17.

¹⁴⁶ Laikwan Pang, “The Institutionalization of ‘Chinese’ Cinema as an Academic Discipline,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, no.1 (2006): 56.

¹⁴⁷ Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999); Sheila Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002); Jubin Hu, *Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2003); Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁸ Sheldon H. Lu, “Historical Introduction,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon H. Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 3.

Western origin”¹⁴⁹ – but also because the advent of the globalisation era made transnational and transregional coproduction practices of Chinese cinema increasingly vibrant and inescapable in all three Chinese territories. Therefore, the concept of transnational Chinese cinema offers “a larger arena connecting differences so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest.”¹⁵⁰ Moreover, taking a transnational perspective can help us focus on the films that have normally been marginalized when benchmarking using geographical or national factors. As Gina Marchetti suggests, this paradigm is especially beneficial for the study of diaspora Chinese filmmaking or the filmmaking of minority groups, “particularly for those who radically may be at odds with a conservative Chinese patriarchy, such as many heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men, the ability to cross borders and to participate in a wider, global sphere transcends ethnic and cultural ties.”¹⁵¹ However, Song Hwee Lim is concerned about putting Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas together under such an umbrella term as it does not displace but reiterates the dominance of nation within a larger framework.¹⁵² Berry and Pang also reflect on how “simply asserting this global local transnational model as a corrective to the prior national model without carefully delineating the complex issues at stake is an inadequate basis for remapping the topography of cinema in the age of globalization.”¹⁵³

Another attempt to remedy the theoretical limitations of Chinese national cinema comes from the critical paradigm of Chinese-language cinema. This term was first coined by Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh in the 1990s, when she argued that to study Chinese cinemas from a linguistic perspective allows scholars to break through research limitations

¹⁴⁹ Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2003), 17.

¹⁵⁰ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁵¹ Gina Marchetti, “Introduction: Plural and Transnational,” *Jump Cut*, no.42 (1998): 72.

¹⁵² Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: The Representation of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁵³ Chris Berry and Laikwan Pang, “Remapping Contemporary Chinese Cinema Studies,” *The China Review* 10, no.2 (2010): 91.

brought about by national and geographical factors. Meanwhile, the use of Chinese-language cinema instead of Chinese cinema could more accurately reveal the equal states between the three cinemas without privileging one over another.¹⁵⁴ Later, she further refined this theory with Sheldon H. Lu, defining the term as “films that use predominantly Chinese dialects and are made in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora, as well as those produced through transnational collaborations with other film industries.”¹⁵⁵ This critical paradigm has been widely adopted by many Chinese-language scholars,¹⁵⁶ seemingly because this approach offers relative flexibility to study cinema from three major Chinese communities and allows researchers “to circumvent certain thorny issues without getting into the pitfalls of the politics of the modern Chinese nation-state.”¹⁵⁷ Other scholars also point out one of the problems with the paradigm of Chinese-language cinema is that “the issue of non-Han minorities and their languages, which cannot be classified as ‘Chinese’, is not addressed; more and more directors from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora begin to make films in non-Chinese languages”¹⁵⁸ and it overlooks “Japanese-language films made in the so-called ‘isolated

¹⁵⁴ Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Defining ‘Chinese’,” *Jump Cut*, no.42 (1998), 74.

¹⁵⁵ Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Introduction: Mapping the field of Chinese-language cinema,” in *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, eds. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁵⁶ Xihe Chen 陈犀和, *Huayu Dianying: Lilun, Lishi he Meixue* 华语电影：理论、历史和美学 [Chinese Language Cinema: Theory, History and Aesthetics] (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 2011); Xuguang Chen 陈旭光, *Huayu Dianying: Xinmeijie, Xinmeixue, Xinsiwei* 华语电影：新媒介、新美学、新思维 [Chinese Language Cinema: New Media, New Aesthetics, New Perspectives] (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2012); Shaoxiong Lin 林少雄, *Jingzhong Hongyan: Huayu Dianying de Xingbie Tiren* 镜中红颜：华语电影的性别体认 [Cinematic Beauty: Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Language Cinema] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2013); Linyu Yang 杨林玉, *Dangdai Huayu Qingchun Dianying Yanjiu 1978-2018* 当代华语青春电影研究 1978-2018 [A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films 1978-2018] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2021).

¹⁵⁷ Sheldon H. Lu, “Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies,” 20.

¹⁵⁸ Lim, *Celluloid Comrades*, 5.

island' period (孤岛时期), as well as silent films made in the early twentieth century."¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, this paradigm disregards the long-standing linguistic hierarchy in which each of the three major Chinese territories had its own dominant language, that is, Mandarin (普通话), Cantonese (广东话), and Hokkienese (闽南话). Therefore, as Yingjin Zhang notes, this concept "may not be sufficient to capture the rich variety of geopolitics, regionalism, ethnicity and polylocality in Chinese cinema."¹⁶⁰

Based on Lim's discussion of three major critical paradigms, Lu added the term Sinophone Cinema into the mix. This term originates from Shu-mei Shih's study about Sinophone literature, which refers to "literature written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China as distinguished from 'Chinese literature' – literature from China."¹⁶¹ Later, she expanded this term into the field of visual studies, and specifically included filmmaking from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, Chinese diasporas as well as ethnic minority groups from Mainland China in this framework.¹⁶² According to Shih, Sinophone is "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries."¹⁶³ Sheldon H. Lu, however, argues that Shih's conceptualisation of Sinophone has an ideological bias of anti-China-centrism.¹⁶⁴ Lu borrows some examples from popular culture in the Chinese-speaking regions, such as Jin Yong's novels, to demonstrate that pop culture in these areas does not always have the core spirit of anti-China, and Shih's definition of Sinophone denies Mainland China and other Chinese-

¹⁵⁹ Yongchun Fu, Maria Elena Indelicato and Zitong Qiu, "Research Note towards a Definition of Huallywood," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10, no.1 (2016): 55.

¹⁶⁰ Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 20.

¹⁶¹ Shu-mei Shih, *Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition*, *PMLA* 119, no.1 (2004): 29.

¹⁶² Shu-mei Shih, "Theory, Asia and the Sinophone," *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no.4 (2010): 474.

¹⁶³ Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁶⁴ Sheldon H. Lu, "Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies," 22.

speaking regions are mutually imbricated in the globalizing world.¹⁶⁵ Hence, Shih excludes Mainland China from the scope of Sinophone, which makes her theory seem more like a theory of Chinese diaspora.¹⁶⁶ Yiman Wang also criticises Shih's Sinophone/the margin versus Mainland China/the centre dichotomy by arguing that the relationship between the centre and the margin is not a static one of hegemony versus resistance, but may also include intervention, subversion, acquiescence and replication of the centre.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, "the simple removal of Mainland China from the Sinophone can hardly guarantee elimination of the hegemonic structure."¹⁶⁸ Hence, Lu redefined this paradigm by reincorporating Mainland China into its parameters. In Lu's reinterpretation, Sinophone cinema constitutes "a pan-Chinese world"¹⁶⁹ that encompasses diverse identities and positionalities, and cannot be defined simply by one geopolitical, linguistic or national factor, and through which the cultural symbiosis between the Mainland and other Chinese-speaking communities can be readdressed.

Huallywood as the Research Framework

This project adopts a theoretical structure for the study of Chinese cinema that is independent from the four frameworks discussed above and is derived from Chinese-language scholarship: Huallywood (华莱坞, *Hualaiwu*). In this segment, I initially comprehensively explain the theory, followed by an explanation of why I opted for this particular framework to study Chinese girlhood films. The term Huallywood was first coined by Peiren Shao in 2013 in his article "Imagination and Expectation of Huallywood" – since then it has gradually developed into a popular theoretical framework in Chinese-language academia. In 2016, Yongchun Fu, Maria Elena Indelicato and Zitong Qiu

¹⁶⁵ Sheldon H. Lu, "Review of Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific," *MCLC Resource Center Publication*, last modified January 2008, <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/visuality-and-identity/> (accessed 10th June 2021).

¹⁶⁶ Sheldon H. Lu, "Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies," 22.

¹⁶⁷ Yiman Wang, "Alter-Centring Sinophone Cinema," in *Sinophone Cinemas*, eds. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Sheldon H. Lu, "Dialect and Modernity in 21st-Century Sinophone Cinema," *Jump Cut*, no.49 (2007).

introduced this concept into English scholarship and published their article “Research Notes Towards a Definition of Huallywood.” According to Shao,

Huallywood can be defined as a kind of films, an industry, a space, as well as a symbol, a culture, a spirit and a vision. In other words, Huallywood refers to films that use *Huaren* (华人, ethnic Chinese people) as the subject of film production, *Huayu* (华语, Chinese languages) as the common film language, *Huashì* (华事, affairs concerning Chinese people or China) as the film’s main theme, *Huashǐ* (华史, Chinese history) as an important film resource, and *Huadi* (华地, locations including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and Chinese diaspora communities that live outside of China) as the film production space and living environment. Using this approach to define Chinese cinema can break through the geographical and linguistical constraints from the past Chinese cinema studies, and thus, allowing for a broader future based on five thousand years of Chinese history and culture as well as Chinese-language cinema in the world.¹⁷⁰

Just as Fu and colleagues observe, the word *Hua* (华) was originally used to refer to China and its Han-centred socio-cultural system in ancient Chinese, and afterwards, *Hua* was more often combined with other words and used to describe Chinese immigrants as well as their descendants living in parts of the world other than the three main Chinese territories, such as *Huaqiao* (华侨) or *Huayi* (华裔).¹⁷¹ It is also worth noting that, in the late Qing period, Qichao Liang introduced the concept of *Zhonghua Minzu* (中华民族, Chinese nation); by using the Chinese nation-state as a boundary, Liang uses *Hua* to include all ethnic minorities as well as the Han Chinese, considering them as a whole belonging to “a huge Chinese family.”¹⁷² While the meaning of the word *Huaren* overlaps

¹⁷⁰ Peiren Shao 邵培仁, “Hualaiwu de Xiangxiang yu Qidai 华莱坞的想象与期待 [Imagination and Expectation of Hullywood],” *Zhongguo Chuanmei Baogao* 中国传媒报告 [China Media Report], no.4 (2013): 1.

¹⁷¹ Fu et al., “Research Note towards a Definition of Huallywood,” 55.

¹⁷² Wenshan Jia, Yueh-Ting Lee and Haiyang Zhang, “Ethno-Political Conflicts in China: Toward Building Interethnic Harmony,” in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, eds. Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert (New York, Dordrecht, Heidelberg, and London: Springer, 2012), 182.

and differs from the meaning of both *Huaqiao* and *Huayi*, Shao's use of *Huaren* clearly draws on the concept of *Zhonghua Minzu* and accords with the notions of *Huaqiao* and *Huayi*, since he uses the term to refer to all “ethnic Chinese and their descendants living anywhere else in the world, regardless of their citizenship status.”¹⁷³ Therefore, as Fu and colleagues indicate, “by mobilizing *Hua* as a semantic matrix, the Huallywood paradigm attempts to break down the Chinese nation-state or, more precisely, the epistemic construction of people, language, history, affairs and places in relation to cinema.”¹⁷⁴ More importantly, the use of the concept of *Hua* shifts the study within this framework from a focus on *Zhongguoxing* (中国性, Chinese-ness) to a focus on *Zhonghuaxing* (中华性, *Hua*-ness), thus “decentring the People’s Republic of China from the theoretical conceptualization of nationhood.”¹⁷⁵ In other words, the employment of Huallywood can provide a strategic means for global Chinese filmmakers to reconfigure a cinematic cultural community when confronted with their differences or constraints in cultural, linguistical, geopolitical, and other perspectives.

Certainly, Huallywood is not a perfect theoretical framework, which not only reflects Shao's uncritical application of the industrial expression of ‘-llywood’ when naming his term. In his monograph *Hualaiwu Dianying Gailun*, Shao confesses that he approaches the suffix ‘-llywood’ only as a neutral concept, one that is neither hegemonic nor colonial in its connotations.¹⁷⁶ In addition, as David H. Fleming and Maria Elena Indelicato point out, “Huallywood still runs the risk of reinstating Mainland China as the imagined yet ineluctable centre.”¹⁷⁷ This risk is evidenced by the paradox that even though the word *Hua* is used as a means to express Shao’s global vision, most of the studies that have adopted Huallywood as their theoretical framework are usually weighted towards Mainland China and mainly focus on its mainstream film industry (including its trans-national/regional coproduction practices). In putting together the theory of

¹⁷³ Fu et al., “Research Note towards a Definition of Huallywood,” 56.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Peiren Shao, *Hualaiwu Dianying Gailun* 华莱坞电影概论 [An Introduction to Huallywood Cinema] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁷⁷ David H. Fleming and Maria Elena Indelicato, “Introduction: On transnational Chinese Cinema(s), Hegemony and Huallywood(s),” *Transnational Screens* 10, no.3 (2019):142.

Huallywood, Shao's aim is to build a Chinese national film industry and national brand that can be widely recognized as well as accepted around the world through learning from the Hollywood model. As such, Fu and colleagues consider that Huallywood has a schizophrenic nature, that is, "a de-territorialized Chineseness in definition, and a latent tendency to a national(istic) agenda in practice."¹⁷⁸

I draw on the framework of Huallywood precisely because of its paradoxical nature. First, Huallywood is a transnational perspective: it acknowledges the long-term influence of Hollywood on the Chinese film industry. Hollywood transnationally disseminates not only the film genre, equipment, and technology from the West, but also affects Chinese cinema culturally and perceptually. Ying Zhu in her study on Chinese cinema in the late 20th century discovered that, the global popularity of Hollywood films, to a certain extent, even "(re)defined what counted as quality films for Chinese audiences."¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Fu also suggests that "China's response to Hollywood involved different stages of response, including duplication, imitation, integration, Sinification and even rejection."¹⁸⁰ Fu's and Zhu's arguments hold particular relevance when I consider several girlhood films in the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as, *Sophie's Revenge*, one of the so-called "First Chinese Chick Flicks."¹⁸¹ During its release, this film received considerable attention from the media, which portrayed it as Ziyi Zhang's triumphant return from Hollywood.¹⁸² Magazines like *Business Man* went as far as to praise it as the most successful attempt at a domestically produced romantic comedy that emulated Hollywood,¹⁸³ presenting it as the epitome of this genre's evolution at the time. The film

¹⁷⁸ Fu et al., "Research Note towards a Definition of Huallywood," 57.

¹⁷⁹ Ying Zhu, "Chinese Cinema's Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the Mid-1990s," 905.

¹⁸⁰ Yongchun Fu, "From 'Parrot' to 'Butterfly': China's Hybridization of Hollywood in Distribution Systems in the 1920s and 1930s," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 8, no.1 (2014): 14.

¹⁸¹ Luo, "'Nalai Zhiyi' Zhishang," 73.

¹⁸² "Feichang Wanmei: Zhangziyi Xuecheng Guiguo Paiyangqi Xiju 非常完美:章子怡学成归国拍洋气喜剧 [Sophie's Revenge: Ziyi Zhang's Triumphant Comeback from Hollywood to Make a Fashion Comedy]," ifeng.com 凤凰网, last modified 13th August 2009, https://ent.ifeng.com/movie/review/200908/0813_40_1300495.shtml (accessed 16th September 2021).

¹⁸³ Hailong Zhou 周海龙, "Feichang Wanmei: Wanmei Xijin Fengbao 非常完美 完美吸金风暴 [Sophie's Revenge: The Ideal Storm of Financial Drain]," *Jingyingzhe* 经营者 [*Business Man*], no. Z8 (2009): 60.

strategically utilized the international composition of its production team and the fashionable appeal of its costumes as marketing tactics, even fashioning its sets to evoke a “very New York” aesthetic, as reported in the news.¹⁸⁴ These practices embody the replication, imitation, and fusion of Hollywood style within the contemporary Chinese film industry. The framework of Huallywood validates the presence of Western influence and allows us to employ the concept of post-feminist theory, which originates from the anglophone discourse, within the Chinese context. This confirmation underscores that the portrayal of post-feminist girls that populate Hollywood screens does indeed transcend geographical boundaries through diverse media outlets. While my primary focus in this thesis is on examining the national specificity of post-feminist sensibility in China, it is essential to acknowledge that post-feminism also operates as a kind of global cultural sensibility.

The second reason for employing Huallywood as the framework is primarily due to its ability to aptly depict the dynamic transnational/transregional flow of both capital and filmmakers in contemporary Chinese cinema during the era of globalization. The concept of Huallywood emerged one year after China attained the status of the world's second-largest film market by the close of 2012.¹⁸⁵ The rise of this theory has seen positive outcomes resulting from the swift growth of the Chinese film industry. In the ten years following its accession to the WTO, China has actively fostered its domestic film industry through various means, including the promotion of transnational as well as transregional coproduction. A significant catalyst for the growth of the Chinese film industry was the initiation of the 2003 Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (内地与香港关于建立更紧密经贸关系的安排, CEPA). This arrangement notably facilitated the entry of Hong Kong films into the Mainland film market by treating co-production projects between Hong Kong and the Mainland as local films during Mainland distribution.¹⁸⁶ There is no cap on the percentage of Hong Kong contributors in these co-productions, yet, actors from the Mainland must constitute at least a third of the film's total cast.¹⁸⁷ Consequently,

¹⁸⁴ ifeng.com, “Feichang Wanmei.”

¹⁸⁵ Yang, “Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power,” 72.

¹⁸⁶ Wendy Su, “Cultural Policy and Film Industry as Negotiation of Power: The Chinese State’s Role and Strategies in its Engagement with Global Hollywood 1994–2012,” *Pacific Affairs* 87, no.1 (2014): 104.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

over the past 20 years, there has been a notable mobilization of Hong Kong filmmakers as well as actors to move to the Mainland for filmmaking.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the introduction of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (海峡两岸经济合作框架协议, ECFA) in 2010 fostered collaboration in the film sector between the Mainland and Taiwan, covering both personnel and financial investments.¹⁸⁹ Co-productions between Mainland and Hong Kong and Taiwan proliferated in the 2010s Chinese film market. The samples selected for study in Chapter 5 are all co-productions between Mainland and Hong Kong; they are *Girls* (闺蜜, dir. Chun-Chun Wong, 2014) and *Soul Mate* (七月与安生, dir. Derek Tsang, 2016). The research samples in Chapter 4, *Go Lala Go* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016), both reflect the close collaboration between the Mainland and Taiwan, in which both of these films' male leading actors are Taiwanese. There is also *Sophie's Revenge*, mentioned above, which is a co-production film between Mainland China and South Korea. These aspects of the films were not chosen intentionally for the study, rather, it reflects that co-productions are becoming more ubiquitous and inevitable in the contemporary Chinese film market.

Moreover, overseas capital also began to actively enter the Mainland film market under the encouragement of film policies, such as the launch of The Provisions on the Administration of Chinese-foreign Cooperative Production of Films (中外合作摄制电影管理规定) in 2003, Notice on Strictly Implementing the Interim Provisions on Foreign-funded Cinemas (外商投资电影院暂行规定) in 2004, and Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Prosperity and Development of the Film Industry (关于促进电影产业繁荣发展的指导意见) in 2010.

Thanks to these policy incentives, by 2014, the six leading film conglomerates of Hollywood – Disney, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Sony/Columbia, and Universal – had all set up operational branches in China.¹⁹⁰ In particular, Sony/Columbia

¹⁸⁸ Gary Bettinson, "Yesterday Once More: Hong Kong-China Coproductions and the Myth of Mainlandization," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no.1 (2020): 16.

¹⁸⁹ Carol M. Liebler, Wei Jiang and Li Chen, "Beauty, Binaries, and the Big Screen in China: Character Gender in Feature Films," *Asian Journal of Communication* 25, no.6 (2015): 586.

¹⁹⁰ Nanyan Zhou 周南焱, "Huanqiu Yingye Chengli Zhongguo Banshichu: Haolaiwu 'Liuda' Jun Neidi Luohu 环球影业成立中国办事处: 好莱坞"六大"均内地落户 [Universal Pictures Opens China Office,

(American) partnered with China Film Group (Mainland China), Emperor Entertainment Group (Hong Kong), Media Asia Entertainment Group (Hong Kong), CJ Entertainment (South Korea), and My Space (Mainland China) to co-fund a Young Filmmaker Development Project in 2007, to invest in more film work of the young generation of Chinese filmmakers.¹⁹¹ In the same year, the collaboration between China Film Group and the American-based International Data Group (IDG) led to the creation of the IDG China Media Fund, which provided financial support for the production of the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (山楂树之恋, dir. Yimou Zhang, 2010). It is also a film that fits the definition of Chinese girlhood film. The merging of foreign and Chinese capital by setting up new collaborative ventures within China – or as Bettinson phrases it, a kind of “mainlandization”¹⁹² – has seen a notable increase in the past decade. The increasing mobility of filmmakers and actors, along with the transnational consolidation of financial resources, has slowly dismantled the boundaries that once separated film industries in these regions, which has paved the way for more dynamic interactions between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and foreign film industries with Mainland China. The concept of Huallywood provides a comprehensive framework that accommodates those films released in different regions, produced or invested in by various production companies, and starring actors from multiple cultural origins, therefore breaking through the cultural, geographical and linguistic limitations of previous studies of Chinese cinema. Meanwhile, the concept of Huallywood is more reflective of its response to Mainland China’s film policy, which is frequently overlooked or bypassed by the paradigm of Transnational Chinese cinema, Chinese-language cinema, and Sinophone cinema.

The third reason for choosing Huallywood as a framework is precisely due to one of its widely criticized aspects, which is a latent tendency towards Mainland China. The

Hollywood's Six Big Film Studios All Set Up in Mainland China],” Renminwang 人民网 [people.cn], last modified 18th November 2014, <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/1118/c40606-26043401.html> (accessed 16th September 2021).

¹⁹¹ Jing Liu 刘静, “Shichang Jingji Gaige Jincheng Zhongde Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Rongzi Jizhi Fazhan Yanjiu 市场经济改革进程中的中国电影产业融资机制发展研究 [The Financing Mechanisms of the Chinese Film Industry in the Process of Market Economy Reform],” *Xinan Zhengfa Daxue Xuebao* 西南政法大学学报 [Journal of Southwest University of Political Science & Law], no.6 (2019): 94.

¹⁹² Bettinson, “Yesterday Once More,” 16.

concept of Huallywood came into existence during the 2010s along with the industrialization of the Chinese film industry, which was reaching maturity. This makes it inevitably possess a bias towards industrialised mainstream Chinese cinema. This bias towards mainstream films (主流电影) is consistent with the research scope of this project, by which I mean those feature films that have passed the censorship of the Chinese government agencies, been granted the Film Public Screening Permit (电影公映许可证), and therefore can be widely release in commercial cinemas in Mainland China. At the same time, Zhe Dai points out that the expansion of the Huallywood film market is largely due to a notable shift in Chinese cinema's production paradigm: switching to an audience-driven production mode, with a specific focus on young viewers (those born after the 1980s and 1990s).¹⁹³ This audience-centric production model places increased importance on treating films as commercial products and tailoring them to suit the tastes of the audience. This point coincides with the idea that this thesis attempts to define Chinese girlhood films not only from its themes and protagonists, but also from the perspective of its target audience, that is, film made for girls. Lastly, I would like to clarify at the end of this chapter that I will persist in employing the term Chinese girlhood films as the primary terminology throughout this thesis. However, it is important to note that this term is contextualized within the Huallywood framework.

¹⁹³ Zhe Dai 戴哲, "Xinshidai Shouzhong Yu Hualaiwu Dianying Shengchan Fanshi De Zhuanyi: Yi Xinshiji Yilai De Hualaiwu Dushi Aiqing Dianying Weili 新世代受众与华莱坞电影生产范式的转移——以新世纪以来的华莱坞都市爱情电影为例 [New Generation Audience and Huallywood Film Production Pattern Transfer: A Case Study of Huallywood Urban Romance Since 2000]," *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.2 (2017): 172.

Chapter 3

Where are the Girls before the 2000s?

Before girls and young women became the focus of a genre on contemporary film screens, Chinese film history had already experienced three distinct waves of girls' images. From the data I collected, the first wave of girl-centred films appeared in the 1920s to 1930s, just a few years after the "May Fourth era" (五四时期).¹⁹⁴ As a result of the extensive entanglement with different political ideologies, when contemporary film scholars look back at the films of modern China, the *Xin Nvxing* (新女性, the New Women) and the *Modeng Nvlang* (摩登女郎, Modern Girls) are two of the most frequently discussed girl figures. The former is regarded as carrying an early proletarian revolutionary idea, and the latter was deeply influenced by Western culture. This trend ended with the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937.

After the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the second wave of girl-centred films appeared during the so-called Mao era (1949-1976). Influenced by the state's promotion of collectivism and socialist ideology, girls in this period were typically presented as patriotic revolutionaries or socialist builders. This wave ended with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1967. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, with the PRC entering its market reform era from 1978 onwards, the state gradually

¹⁹⁴ The May Fourth era ran from 1915 to 1926 and relates to two terms: the New Culture Movement (新文化运动, 1915-1919, 1919-1926) and the May Fourth Movement (五四运动, May 4, 1919). The New Culture Movement is a cultural movement that grew from the beginning of the 20th century. The movement's goal was to dismantle long-standing feudal ideologies and promote Western cultural modernity, particularly democracy and science. Its spirit and focus later stimulated the May Fourth Movement in 1919. These two movements had a profound impact on Chinese society for a long time. During this time, many activists proposed gender equality and women's liberation. Thus, some scholars consider the influence of these two movements together and call them the May Fourth New Culture Movement (五四新文化运动). The creation of the journal *Qingnian Zazhi* (青年杂志, *Youth Magazine*) in 1915 (which became *Xin Qingnian* (新青年, *New Youth*) in 1916) is commonly considered the beginning of the May Fourth era. In July 1926, the suspension of *Xin Qingnian* marked the end of this era. See Dikun Xie, "The Eternal 'May Fourth Movement': Between Enlightenment and Tradition," *Social Science in China* 38, no.2 (2017): 165.

relaxed its absolute control of film production, and the Chinese film sector began to revive. Thus, in the later decades of the 20th century, the image of girls and young women re-emerged as prominent figures on screen.

However, within these three waves, the hyper-visibility of girls' images coincided with some significant periods in the development of Chinese feminism. For instance, the appearance of the first wave of girl-centred films was deeply influenced by many propositions related to women's liberation during the Late-Qing period and May Fourth era, such as gender equality, women's freedom of marriage, and women having the same rights as men to receive education. With the progress of Chinese feminism and following changes in social practice, there emerged a group of new girls both in society and in films. Such girls included the modern girls who enjoyed a Westernized lifestyle and pursued self-willing romantic love, like Naifan Yang who escaped her family to chase her first lover in *Love and Duty* (恋爱与义务, dir. Wancang Bu, 1931); the professional girls who worked hard to live an independent life, such as the make-up salesgirl Cuifen Li in *Rouge and Powder Market* (脂粉市场, dir. Shichuan Zhang, 1933); the factory girls who had initial revolutionary spirit, such as Aying Li in the *New Women* (新女性, dir. Chusheng Cai, 1935); and the educated female students who exhibited their intelligence, like Shangwen Hu in *Det. Girl* (女侦探, dir. Shichuan Zhang, 1928).

The emergence of new images of girls in the second wave (1949-1966) can be seen as the result of the 'Women's Liberation Movement' during the Mao Era. After 1949, the PRC implemented a series of legal measures to liberate women in the new China, such as women enjoying equal citizenship and suffrage rights with men, women receiving the same pay as men for doing the same work, encouraging women to leave the family to participate in employment and other public affairs.¹⁹⁵ With the slogan, "Chinese women can hold up half the sky (妇女能顶半边天),"¹⁹⁶ girls at this stage were frequently shaped into patriotic warriors or proletarian socialist builders. Such girls include the girl student Daojing Lin in *Song of Youth* (青春之歌, dir. Wei Cui and Huai'ai Chen, 1959), who was a bourgeois intellectual but then becomes a proletarian revolutionary; and Shan Gao, a female soldier who fought in the ranks of men in *The Youth in Flames of War* (战火中的青春, dir. Yan Wang, 1959). In contrast to this progressive image of girls, and to

¹⁹⁵ Wang, *Revisiting Women's Cinema*, 46.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

demonstrate the benefits of the socialist communist system, another common image of a girl is one from the lower classes who is oppressed by feudalism. The notable example in this regard is Qionghua Wu, a former slave girl for her landlord's family, later became a proletarian warrior in *The Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, dir. Jin Xie, 1961).

In the 1980s, as China entered a period of market reform, a women's studies movement started by elite urban women scholars grew in strength. From their individual experiences, these female intellectuals began to reflect on the double burden (domestic duty and work duty) imposed on women in the Mao era, and to call for a renewed emphasis on gender differences, rediscover of femininity, individual subjectivity, and female desire.¹⁹⁷ As a direct consequence of this, during this period, the young girls depicted on screen started wearing bright colourful dresses instead of Mao period uniforms as a means to reclaim their femininity. Simultaneously, the affirmation of women's desires also reintroduced the theme of romance back to the screen. All the above points can be found in films like *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (庐山恋, dir. Zumo Huang, 1980) or *Red Skirt Popular in the Street* (街上流行红裙子, dir. Xingjia Qi, 1984).

In this chapter, my aim is to reorganise the images of girls on the Chinese cinema screen in these three phases since the turn of the 20th century, in accordance with the historical timeline. Hence, this chapter is divided into six parts. The first two examine the birth of Chinese feminism from the late Qing (1840-1912) to the May Fourth period (1915-1926) and the newly emerged portrayal of girls and young women on screen during the 1920s and 1930s. The third and fourth sections examine the portrayal of girls in cinema after the founding of the PRC, when state feminism and its ideology were strictly regulated. The final two sections focus on the specifics of the new path of the women's liberation movement initiated by female intellectuals in China during the market reform period as well as how it has influenced the girls and young women's depicted on China's film screens. Specifically, through searching the archives, I also aim to bring out the images of girls that have been forgotten by other scholarly works. By doing so, I argue that the transformations of girls' images in films have consistently been in dialogue with the development of Chinese feminism.

¹⁹⁷ Xiaojiang Li 李小江, *Nvxing Wutuobang- Zhongguo Nvxing Xingbie Yanjiu 20 Jiang* 女性乌托邦-中国女性性别研究二十讲 [*Female Utopia - Chinese Female Gender Studies twenty Lectures*] (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2016), 22-24.

The Birth of Chinese Feminism

In Chinese history, scholars generally consider that Chinese feminism (女性主义, *Nvxing Zhuyi*) began in the late 19th century. According to Xiaojiang Li, at the end of the 19th century, feminism found its way to China through male intellectuals who, influenced by Western Enlightenment ideals, introduced the concept of “natural human rights” to the country, emphasizing the importance of women’s emancipation as a crucial element for national revitalization.¹⁹⁸ The initial advocates for women’s liberation from these male intellectuals were mainly engaged in two primary endeavours: the liberation of women’s bodies and establishing a girl’s school. In 1884, the Youwei Kang brothers in Guangdong set up a *Buchanzuhui* (不缠足会, Non-Binding Feet Association) which signified the start of *Tianzu Yundong* (天足运动, Natural Foot Movement).¹⁹⁹ Girls no longer needed to wrap their natural feet into *Sansun Jinlian* (三寸金莲, three-inch golden lotus) to suit the aesthetics of the feudal society.

For women’s education, girls’ schools were introduced into China during the late 19th century, primarily by Western missionaries, with 11 church girls’ schools established between 1847 and 1860 in China’s five trading ports.²⁰⁰ This underscores the direct connection between the initial women’s liberation movements in China and the advent of Western modernity. Thus, Chinese feminism displayed a dual nature from its inception, being both locally rooted and transnationally influenced. Shaoqian Zhang points out that these practices of male intellectuals in the late Qing period were only motivated by a strategy of *Qiangguo Baozhong* (强国保种, saving the genes of a strong nation), which was influenced by social Darwinism.”²⁰¹ However, Zhang’s point reveals that, in contrast to the adult-centred nature of early Western feminism, early Chinese feminism was essentially girl-centred. Because today’s girls are tomorrow’s mothers, the strategy of the so-called *Qiangguo Baozhong* was to nourish the bodies of today’s girls and educate them

¹⁹⁸ Li, *Nvxing Wutuobang*, 11.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Shaoqian Zhang, “Shaping the New Women: The Dilemma of *Shen* in China’s Republican Period,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 17, no.3 (2018): 406.

so that they would give birth to children of an even higher calibre, to make the country stronger. In addition, girls, not adult women, are also the direct beneficiaries of the education reform at the time.

Subsequently, during the May Fourth period, the continued development of the women's movement was dominated by a group of male intellectuals, and writing articles about the Western feminist movement became their primary focus during this period. For example, Dazhao Li authored *Funv Jiefang Yu Democracy* (妇女解放与, democracy, Women's Emancipation and Democracy) and *Xiandai De Nvquan Yundong* (现代的女权运动, The Modern Feminist Movement) to describe the accomplishments of the feminist movement in Europe and the US.²⁰² In addition, Duxiu Chen's *Funv Wenti Yu Shehui Zhuyi* (妇女问题与社会主义, The Women's Question and Socialism), Han Tian's *Disi Jieji De Furen Yundong* (第四阶级的妇人运动, The Women's Movement of the Fourth Class), and Da Li's *Funv Jiefang Lun* (妇女解放论, Theory of Women's Liberation), established a connection between women's liberation and socialism.²⁰³ During this period, most advocates in early Chinese feminist movements were men. They used newspapers to debate women's issues with their peers, rather than involving women in the debates. Hence, Yuxin Ma terms early Chinese feminism as "male feminism."²⁰⁴ This 'male feminism' mainly debated women's equality and emancipation in relation to two aspects: equal rights for women to pursue their education and then find employment, and women's freedom in love and marriage.

The issue of women's right to education has been discussed since the male intellectuals of the late Qing period. In 1897, Qichao Liang published *Lun Nvxue* (论女学, On Women's Education) in which he argued that China's weakness lies in the lack of education available to women.²⁰⁵ He further explains that women's education is crucial to strengthening the country; poverty in China was caused by women being wholly dependent, and men had to work to support their whole family; and the reason women

²⁰² Li, Nvxing Wutuobang, 11.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Yuxin Ma, "Male Feminism and Women's Subjectivities: Zhang Xichen, Chen Xuezhao, and The New Woman," *Twentieth-Century China* 29, no. 1 (2003): 1.

²⁰⁵ Qichao Liang 梁启超, "Lun Nvxue 论女学 [On Women's Education]," *Shiwu Bao* 时务报 [*The Chinese Progress*], no. 23 (1897): 1.

lacked employment was because they were uneducated; if the women could receive an education, they would be able to find an occupation and thus support themselves and their families.²⁰⁶ By this logic, a country will become strong when its people are wealthy. Hence, the emphasis he places on women's education is more related to the socioeconomic situation of the time.

Like Liang, Tianhe Jin also considered that a woman's right to education was necessary. In *Nvjie Zhong* (女界钟, the Women's Bell),²⁰⁷ published in 1903, Jin states that, as women's rights have a close connection with the rise or fall of a nation and women are the mothers of the nation and its people, to strengthen, civilise and save China it is necessary to first strengthen, civilise, and save its women.²⁰⁸ Jin further argues that education can subsequently be divided into two parts: the first is foetal education – such education can help women to understand the essentials of caring for the foetus, to give birth to children that are strong and healthy, clever and brilliant; the second is the mother's behaviour, as a child's mind has no independent perspective of its own, rather, its mind depends on how its mother has taught them.²⁰⁹ An uneducated mother, it was believed, would produce stupid, devious and low children, but a wise mother can help her children become worthies, kings and heroes.²¹⁰ Hence, offering educational opportunities for women not only benefits them, but is also good for the entire nation.

At the same time, a few female intellectuals also joined the debate about women's educational rights. One of these was Yin-Zhen He who believed that women's education was fundamental to women's liberation and gender equality. In her essay *Nvzi Xuanbu Shu* (女子宣布书, The Feminist Manifesto), published in 1907, she argued that:

In sum, men and women are both human. By (saying) “men” (*nanxing*) and “women” (*nvxing*) we are not speaking of “nature,” as each is but the outcome of different

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ *Nvjie Zhong* is an important text in the birth of Chinese feminism; it is considered the first systematic championing of women's rights to education, suffrage, employment and livelihood, and human dignity.

²⁰⁸ Tianhe Jin, “The Women's Bell,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, eds. Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 241-242.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

social customs and education. If sons and daughters are treated equally, raised and educated in the same manner, then the responsibilities assumed by men and women will surely become equal. When that happens, the nouns “men” and “women” would no longer be necessary. This is ultimately the “equality of men and women” of which we speak.²¹¹

This statement is similar to Simone de Beauvoir’s later interventions into Western feminism. Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that “no one is born a woman, but rather becomes one through how she is raised and treated by society.”²¹² Like Beauvoir, Yinzhen He’s statement reveals that the distinction between men and women does not depend on their subjective identity but lies with long-term structures of unequal social relations.²¹³ These unequal social relations have been constituted in many ways, such as knowledge, etiquette, wealth, law, and social and labour practices.²¹⁴ In this way, women as a socially constructed category have been consistently embedded in these unequal social relations and the gender distinction between men and women was created. Thus, equal education became the primary approach to mitigate this unequal situation.

These early propositions relating to women’s education resulted in certain changes to women’s lives at the time. The foremost improvement was the establishment of equal educational rights for Chinese women. In 1912, the Republic of China started reforming its education system.²¹⁵ On 28th September 1912, the Ministry of Education announced the first regulation on primary school teaching – *Xiaoxue Xiaoling* (小学校令) – which proposed that both boys and girls between 6 and 14 years old could enter primary school to acquire knowledge and skills.²¹⁶ This regulation was the first legitimisation of

²¹¹ Yinzhen He, “The Feminist Manifesto,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, eds. Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 184.

²¹² Rachele Dini, *An Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex* (London: CRC Press, 2017), 11.

²¹³ Rebecca E. Karl, “Thematic Review: The State of Chinese Women’s History,” *Gender & History* 23, no.2 (2011):431.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Haizheng Lan 蓝海正 and Caimei Liu 刘彩梅, *Chinese Education History* 中国教育史 [Zhongguo Jiaoyushi] (Chengdu: Xinan Caijing University Press, 2018), 215.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

women's right to education; girls and boys could study at the same school, enjoying the same level of education.²¹⁷ This regulation further indicates that, in addition to moral education, social and working skills became the core of the education offered.²¹⁸ This reformation made a substantial change to the predicament faced by women. They were now able to acquire basic knowledge and working skills to support themselves and enter society, participate in social labour, and make a living by themselves, rather than completely relying on men. From this point, education became the fundamental method by which women could pursue equality, freedom, and individual liberation. However, during this period, girls were still not allowed to embark on higher-level education or to enter university like boys; the maximum level of women's education was limited to the middle-school stage.²¹⁹ Meanwhile, women's education in moral thinking and at a spiritual level was still dominated by the traditional concept of good wives and wise mothers.²²⁰ This problem persisted until 1920, when women started to be permitted to enter universities; the first Chinese university that recruited female students was Beijing University.²²¹ After 1921, all Chinese universities began to recruit women and co-education at the university level began at this time.²²²

Co-education promoted social openness between men and women, which directly led to discussion around the traditional Chinese arranged marriage system. Advocating freedom of marriage became the second focal point of early Chinese feminism. Tianhe Jin, in *Nvjie Zhong*, points out that marriage should be based on love and that freedom of marriage is everyone's autonomous right.²²³ Everyone has the right to attract, influence, fall in love with and get married to one another; traditional Chinese arranged marriage deprives people of this right, causing countless marriage-based tragedies.²²⁴ Jin then further argued that freedom of marriage could be a way to achieve equality, as freedom

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Lan and Liu, *Chinese Education History*, 215.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 216-217.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Jin, "The Women's Bell," 280.

²²⁴ Ibid.

and equal rights are twins: when freedom arises, equal rights will be established; a lack of freedom in marriage arises from restrictions placed on and the suppression of individuals; should it persist, people will never gain their liberty.²²⁵

Similarly, in 1917, Zhenying Yuan published and translated American writer Emma Goldman's chapter *Hunying Yu Lianai* (Marriage and Love) in *Xin Qingnian* (新青年, New Youth).²²⁶ This article criticised marriage without love, accusing and protesting men's discrimination and oppression of women in society and at home:

Marriage is primarily an economic arrangement, an insurance pact [...] In taking out an insurance policy one pays for it in dollars and cents, always at liberty to discontinue payments. If, however, woman's premium is a husband, she pays for it with her name, her privacy, her self-respect, her very life, "until death doth part." Moreover, the marriage insurance condemns her to life-long dependency, to parasitism, to complete uselessness, individual as well as social.²²⁷

This article distinguishes love from marriage, stating that marriage without love or an arranged marriage is like an insurance pact. The bond in these marriages is not love but money; women pay for this as such a marriage deprives her of her personality and freedom for her whole life. Thus, such marriages gradually turn the woman into a dependent, useless and parasitic accessory to the man.

Compared with the above propositions, which focus on criticising the old arranged marriage and encourage women to get married through their own choice, the May Fourth intellectuals also believed that women should have the freedom to escape the bonds of marriage. In 1916, Duxiu Chen published a paper in *Xin Qingnian*, appealing to people to respect an individual's independent personality and not be an accessory to others.²²⁸

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Danping Yin 尹旦萍, "Duyu Weinzi Yangmei: Xinqingnian Dui Nvxingzuyi De Changdao "独欲为女子扬眉": 《新青年》对女性主义的倡导 [Only for Women's Voices: Feminist Advocacy in the New Youth]," *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* 社会科学战线 [Social Science Front], no.9 (2015): 24.

²²⁷ Emma Goldman, "Marriage and Love," in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (Read How You Want Classics Library, 2009), 295.

²²⁸ Yin, "Duyu Weinzi Yangmei," 24.

He considered that Confucian morality made all women become an attachment belonging to their father, husband and/or son, rather than an independent person who has their own personality.²²⁹ Later, Xun Lu, Dazhao Li and Shi Hu published a series of articles criticising the harm caused by the traditional virtue of chastity. They considered it unethical that women should be loyal to one man for their entire life, but men were allowed to engage in polygamy, thus the rights for women to get divorced or remarried were also part of their freedom of marriage.²³⁰ These articles caused strong repercussions in society since they attacked the unequal moral ethics expected of men and women and the resulting oppression of women.

Meanwhile, some May Fourth male intellectuals tried to liberate women's thoughts by introducing and translating Western feminist literature into Chinese. At this stage, they were not only paying attention to resistance to arranged marriages, but also reflecting on how women lost their selves in marriage within the patriarchal society. The most significant work on this topic appeared in June 1918, when Hu Shi published an article entitled “*Yibusheng Zhuyi*” (易卜生主义, Ibsenism) in *Xin Qingnian*.²³¹ In the article, he introduced a play by the Norwegian writer Ibsen: *A Doll's House* (1879). According to Shuqin Cui, “Ibsen's Nora stood as a symbol for their mission of modernizing Chinese women [...] Nora's conscious decision to become an individual human being rather than a man's doll and to leave her husband's house set an ideal model for Chinese women to follow.”²³² Her running away from home was given the gendered meaning of women's liberation. Hence, Nora's escape from home became a symbol of women's struggle for individual independence, the freedom to marry, and the freedom to get divorced.

This New Girl Which is Not One

As a result of the ongoing development of the women's liberation movement at the beginning of the 20th century, a group of women gradually escaped from traditional gender roles (as mother, wife, daughter) and created a new female identity in the public

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Cui, *Women Through the Lens*, 18-19.

²³² Ibid., 19.

sphere: *Xin Nvxing* (新女性, thereafter New Women). Here, I do not see new women as one single female archetype, even though many scholars consider it in this way due to the left-wing political environment of the time. Sarah Stevens uses new women as a specific term to refer to those women who have revolutionary sentiments and resist arranged marriages, which distinguishes the phrase from modern girl.²³³ Also according to Kristine Harris, beyond education and independence, both in spirit and economically, one of the necessities for new women is a social conscience in the form of proletarian politics.²³⁴ In my view, in accordance with the data I have collected, these specific new women with a sense of proletarian revolution are mapped onto working-class womanhood, like the factory girl Aying in *New Women*. In other words, Stevens's and Harris's definitions of new women only focus on the image of lower-class new women within the left-wing political discourse, while ignoring the image of new women in other social classes. On another level, as the modern girl was also new image and fresh style for Chinese women in the 1920s, then modern girl is indeed another type of new women.

Therefore, in this study, I intend to consider new women in a broader sense. In Chinese language, *xin* means new; this word has two meanings here. Firstly, in terms of social status, the reform of education in China meant that women could enter universities to gain knowledge and life skills and find independent work following training. Therefore, girl students and working women became two new statuses for women in society during this period. Secondly, from an ideological perspective, the liberation of women's thoughts by early Chinese advocates of feminism led some women to start to reject traditional Confucian values and pursue freedom and independence. Hence, the new woman was not one single specific female archetype. Here, I use the term 'new girls' to refer to all women who took advantage of opportunities that Chinese feminism encouraged, who embraced education, pursued independence, developed their personal careers and resisted the oppression of women by traditional ethics. Such women pursued women's liberation and freedom in choosing romantic relationships. In this section, I use

²³³ Sarah E. Stevens, "Figuring Modernity: The New Women and the Modern Girl in Republic China," *NWSA Journal* 15, no.3 (2003): 82.

²³⁴ Kristine Harris, "The New Women Incident Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai," in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 288.

several female protagonists from 1920s and 1930s Chinese films as examples, showing how the early Chinese feminism contributed to the construction of different images of new women in film.

The first archetype of new women to address is the modern girl. According to Tani Barlow and her co-authors, “the modern girl emerged quite literally around the world in the first half of the twentieth century.”²³⁵ Barlow and colleagues consider that the modern girl is a phenomenon that emerged in many countries and regions and was known by various names in different regions, such as the flapper in the US and many European countries, and the *modeng xiaojie* (摩登小姐) in China during the 1920s.²³⁶ In China, the emergence of the modern girl has benefited from the progress of Chinese feminism as part of the nation’s modernisation. Due to the reform of education, young women could receive education and join the workforce. Meanwhile, feminist advocates in the May Fourth movement encouraged women to liberate themselves, to participate in the public domain and socialise with others, to escape from the traditional role of women in society, and to pursue freedom of marriage rather than arranged marriages. Thus, the modern girl as a cultural symbol of the time began to prevail in China.

In the 1920s, modern only referred to certain Westernised appearances of women that were “widely adopted by women of diverse social groups, including high school and college students, professionals, young wives of the upper and middle classes, and prostitutes.”²³⁷ The look of the modern girl in China was typically considered to include “painted face, bobbed or permed hair, fashionable *qipao*, and high-heel shoes.”²³⁸ However, the social elite groups of the time considered this modern girl’s look to be disturbing to the social order in China, since “when a factory girl or a prostitute dressed up in a ‘modern’ style to attend some social event, they look like high-class young ladies,

²³⁵ Tani E. Barlow, Madeleine Yue Dong, Uta G. Poiger, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas and Alys Eve Weinbaum, “The Modern Girl around the World: A Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings,” *Gender & History* 17, no.2 (2005): 245.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Madeleine Y. Dong, “Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?,” in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization*, Tani E. Barlow et al. eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 196.

²³⁸ Ibid.

and people could not tell that they came from factory worker backgrounds at all.”²³⁹ In line with Madelene’s notion of modern girls, I argue that modern is a gendered bodily property, since fashionable body and Westernized appearance is the key source when constituting this specific female identity. It is also evident in the obsession of modern girl’s female body in the newly emerged urban culture in the late 1920s, where the body of modern girls was ubiquitously displayed, from the theatre to magazines, advertisements to calendar posters. Meanwhile, modern was also a masquerade, as it could be worn by girls from different social classes. However, the premise of women being able to wear such a modern look is that they are no longer need to bind their feet.²⁴⁰ Consequently, the modern body could be viewed as a liberated body, which is a positive result of the women’s liberation movement.

In addition, modern is an English word used frequently in China to serve as a symbol of advanced Western modernity. The arrival of this Western modernity, in early 20th century China, stirred up contradictions between West/new culture and East/traditional culture, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, individual identity and collective identity, women’s liberation and patriarchy, capitalism and communism. Hence, modern, through modern girl’s body, creates a space of difference where various discourses conflict. The body of the modern girls, for one thing, was a vehicle for the embodiment of modernity; for another, it also became a site to process and negotiate all these cultural or ideological conflicts. I discuss this point in detail through observation of the film *Queen of Sports* (体育皇后, dir. Yu Sun, 1934).

Queen of Sports is a classic silent film written and directed by Sun Yu in 1934. It tells the story of Lin Ying, a girl from a wealthy family who comes to Shanghai to study at a sports school and soon becomes an accomplished sprinter, breaking several records at the National Competition. Meanwhile, a wealthy, Westernized young man (who is her suitor) launches a newspaper competition for the ‘Queen of Sports’ in the name of organizing the Far Eastern Games’ preliminaries. Lin Ying has high hopes of winning the crown, but over the course of the competition she comes to realize that the pursuit of

²³⁹ Ibid., 200.

²⁴⁰ The term binding feet refers to the practise of teenage girls who wrapped their feet tightly in cloth to prevent them from growing and to keep them at a length of about three inches to appeal to the aesthetics of men in feudal society.

personal glory and being a sports hero distorts the true meaning of sport, which should be about strengthening oneself and one's teammates, to achieve national strength. At the end of the film, Lin Ying eventually gives up her bid for the 'Queen of Sports' while one of her teammates dies in the race.



Figure 7: Lin Ying climbs to the top of a chimney in Queen of Sports

This film begins with a scene of a steamer arriving at a port on the Huangpu River. The excited protagonist Lin Ying uses her tree-climbing skills to climb to the top of a chimney and enjoy a view of the city (Figure 7). A healthy, active, liberated female body is seen climbing quickly up the chimney (which is also a representation of industrial modernity). The young girl's liberated body embraces the chimney, creating a spectacle of urban modernity. Although the liberated female body succeeds in entering the public arena, her behaviour immediately draws criticism from her father and onlookers. The next scenes feature gossiping people gathered on the quay after Lin Ying climbs up the chimney, and the worried expressions of her servants and her father, foreshadowing the energy and anxiety that both unleash through the physical entrance of women into the public arena, which enacts the imperceptible surveillance of the female body, consciously or unconsciously. However, the anxiety caused by the 'deviant' behaviour of the female body disappears when Lin Ying returns to the domestic sphere. Lin Ying's series of overactive behaviour at home (like running madly with her dog, or even jumping on her male guests) do not reignite the same moral anxiety as before. The different moral

judgement that the modern girl's body receives in different spaces is the trope of the discomfort of old values when women access public space.

Modern girls' bodies are constantly monitored and evaluated by the men who dominate the discourse in the film and are always at risk of being punished. There are frequent scenes with the dean of the school and Mr Yun, Lin Ying's coach, standing together, looking at the female students, discussing and evaluating their training performance. In these scenes, the two men are the only characters present in the shot, but the female athletes, as the bearers of the "to-be-looked-at-ness"²⁴¹ are all absent from view, which represents a kind of habituation or unawareness of the surveillance. Beyond the surveillance is verbal discipline, which is often associated with the places or objects that can be seen as symbols of modernity. In this scene, Lin Ying is undergoing special training with Mr Yun; during a break, Lin Ying sits down, takes out a pressed powder and starts to apply her make-up. Mr Yun immediately comes up to her and criticizes her, saying that a student of sport does not need perfume or rouge. Lin Ying's makeup here refers to what Miriam Hansen describes as, "the clash between traditional Chinese values and contemporary fashionable femininity, the figure of the 'painted lady,' the woman who uses cosmetics to enhance her attractiveness, emerges as a key trope."²⁴² This anxiety about modernity triggers a constant surveillance of the modern girl's body. It shows in the scene that, after criticizing Lin Ying, Mr Yun continuously watches her, until Lin Ying throws away the pressed powder in her hand; he finally turns his eyes away, which represents the temporary end of the surveillance.

The same discipline also occurs when the female body is found in the 'wrong' places. When modern girls are in the school setting, physical training is seen as a means to cultivate a healthy body, which is conducive to the strength of the nation. In the dormitory or on the running track, the girls flaunt their youthful legs, forestall any facile moralist containment of the energy and modernity embodied by the female athletes. In these scenes, their bodies are linked to a collective identity and national glory. However, when the modern girl's body is placed in the dance club (the 'wrong' place), dancing represents excessive pleasure and decadence. It is an act that serves only individual pleasure. Thus,

²⁴¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 19.

²⁴² Miriam Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 17.

modern girls will receive immediate punishment for their unruly body in such scenes. For example, when Lin Ying comes to the dance club, she encounters Xiao Hu, who tries to sexually harass her and prevent her from going home, until Mr Yun comes to rescue her. Thus, the modern girl's body and the events it encounters in different places also symbolize the conflicts between individual identity and collective identity, personal enjoyment and national glory. Similar punishment also happens when Lin Ying gives up her bid for the title of sports queen, which is a symbol of total personal glory: her teammate fights for the crown and dies during the competition. More significantly, from the above scenes, it is evident that modernity has a deep-seated tradition of co-opting the physicality of young girls, simultaneously celebrating their vibrant and aesthetically pleasing bodies akin to the arrival of modernity while also harbouring anxiety stemming from the vitality these bodies represent, showing people's fear that is emblematic of the uncertainties accompanying modernity's advent.

As well as the film discussed above, modern girls were also presented as 'new' in terms of their mind-set towards marriage. Modern girls are often "associated with dating, romantic love and the legitimation of premarital sex,"²⁴³ because modern girls in films were female students who received the new-style education that was reformed after the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Thus, modern girls are associated with the beliefs that men and women are equal, that women should object to the traditional belief in male superiority over women, and to be independent and free new women. On the other hand, under the influence of early Chinese feminism, girls who accepted education were more likely to pursue economic independence and attempt to achieve self-worth and freedom through work. Chinese films in the 1920s and 1930s showed an emerging group of protagonists who were working girls. This type of new girl did not rely on their family's support but lived through their own efforts. However, these self-reliant, independent new girls often met different failures on film. The protagonist Weiming in *New Women* is a well-educated, independent professional young woman. The film shows viewers that Weiming is a female student and has received the new-style education, where both boys and girls study at the same school, having benefited from the education reform in the May Fourth era. As a woman under the influence of the women's liberation movement, Weiming not only acquires knowledge at university, she also accepts the new culture,

²⁴³ Barlow et al., "The Modern Girl around the World," 264-265.

which stimulates her to go against her feudal family and become a new woman in pursuit of her freedom of love and marriage. In the scene where Weiming's sister tells Weiming's story to Weiming's daughter, a flashback (Figure 8) shows that Weiming and her lover enjoyed a happy time at school.



Figure 8: Weiming and her lover at school in New Women



Figure 9: Weiming's father punishes her in New Women

When Weiming's father finds out that Weiming is pregnant before getting married, he punishes her and makes her have an abortion, so that the family will not be humiliated by the scandal (Figure 9). However, Weiming and her lover escape in the middle of the night, leaving to begin a new life together. Here, Weiming shows a spirit of running away to escape the restrictions of her patriarchal family and of feudal ethics, chasing independence and freedom. Even though Weiming escapes from the oppression of her patriarchal family, she immediately becomes the 'doll' of her husband. After Weiming's Western-style wedding, her identity shifts from an independent new woman to a traditional, good Chinese wife and wise mother. Weiming has to spend the entire day

holding her new-born daughter because her husband has abandoned her. This scene visually emphasises areas of responsibility assigned to women. In traditional Chinese familial relationships, even when a marriage has broken down, caring for children is still the woman's responsibility. Therefore, in Weiming's self-willed and self-selected marriage, she is still given the traditional woman's responsibility. However, after being abandoned by her husband, Weiming's feminist consciousness begins to awaken, and she starts trying to escape from this traditional role. She leaves the child with her sister, going to Shanghai to pursue her own career. Thus, in order to escape the traditional female role (becoming a mother and wife), Weiming pursues personal career success, which serves as a means of becoming a new woman.

As Weiming begins to resist the traditional role for women and transforms into a new woman, her attitude towards marriage also changes. This is shown by the scene in which Dr Wang proposes to Weiming, in response to which Weiming rebukes him, saying:

I have heard too much of this! Marriage!

What can marriage give me? A lifelong companion?

It just made me become a lifelong slave!

I won't get married because I can't be a slave for a lifetime!

This response reveals Weiming's attitude towards marriage, which has distinct feminist features. Dr Wang shows Weiming a diamond and proposes to her; this action suggests that women can be commoditised in a marriage relationship – that is, a man can use diamonds or money in exchange for women's agreement to marry. Marriage has become a means by which a woman can attach themselves to a man for money. In such a marriage, the woman will become the subordinate and life-long slave of the man. This kind of marriage, which would make Weiming completely reliant on her husband, is shown to have lost every positive value for her as a new woman. Thus, rather than relying on men, Weiming starts to pursue her own career, becoming a school music teacher and a writer. Her novel (*The Grave of Love*) also shows her changed attitude to marriage.

Although Weiming works hard and tries to support herself, she still fails. Weiming is fired from her work at the school because she does not want to become Dr Wang's mistress. Then, her daughter becomes ill, and she does not have enough money to save

her. As a result, Weiming is forced by circumstance to become a prostitute to earn money, following the death of her daughter. Eventually, Weiming dies by suicide after taking sleeping pills. Weiming is shown as the Chinese 'Nora', a doll for her father and then for her husband. Even though Weiming escapes from her traditional family and liberates herself from her marriage, she is still a doll in this patriarchal society. When she begins to resist, she is eventually punished. The tragic ending of the film reflects the still tense negotiation between the new ideas brought about by modernization and the deeply rooted Confucianism in 1930s Chinese society. On the one hand, the film constructs the image of the new girl to shape a more democratic world, but on the other hand, the subversive aspects of the new girl are severely restricted.

What kind of girl can escape such punishment? This question leads to the third new girl archetype: the early female proletarian revolutionaries. This image is concentrated and shaped into factory girls and progressive female students on screen. Kristine Harris notes that the emergence of female proletarian revolutionaries is "derived from the urban left wing's approach to feminism [...] where the emphasis was shifted from the category of gender to that of class."²⁴⁴ In 1930s left-wing political discourse, modern girls are just feudal women who look new and trendy. They are inseparable from the support of their original family and indulge in the enjoyment of romantic relationships. Or Weiming, a well-educated professional woman who escapes from her family as above, receives punishment – suicide – when she refuses to be a doll in a patriarchal society. Therefore, the identity of a female proletarian revolutionary has become the only way for women to gain real freedom and independence in films.

In *New Women*, Aying is Weiming's next-door neighbour; while Weiming is a middle-class music instructor, Aying works in a factory. One day, Dr Wang invites Weiming to a dance. Weiming is aware that Dr Wang has feelings for her; she does not like Dr Wang, but she enjoys dancing, so she attends the party regardless. At that point, Aying, who just came back from work, sees the two who are about to go out, but says nothing and turns to go to home. In *New Women*, the film uses a contrasting approach to shape this revolutionary proletarian girl, Aying. Through parallel editing, the film shows a strong distinction between Weiming and Aying (Figure 10 and Figure 11). When Weiming and Dr Wang are sitting in a luxury car on the way to the dance party, Aying is

²⁴⁴ Harris, "The New Women Incident Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai," 288.

still working at the factory. Then, when Weiming and Dr Wang start drinking at the party, Aying is teaching the factory girls how to read at the night school, using her free time. Weiming returns from the party and meets Aying in front of their door. The scene shows the contrast between the large shadow created by Aying's body and Weiming's tiny body on the wall. This scene has a critical meaning, especially within the left-wing political context: Weiming's body symbolises the bourgeois women who are chasing an enjoyable life, while Aying's shadow represents the progressive working-class revolutionary women. This strong contrast expresses the idea that only when women are engaged in the struggle for national liberation and democratic revolution can they achieve their own liberation and become the real 'new women' in the progress of revolution.



Figure 10: Weiming on a date with Dr Wang in New Women



Figure 11: Aying teaching factory girls to sing a song in her free time in New Women

Shown with the group of female workers in the factory, the young female worker Aying has almost no feminine characteristics. Shuqin Cui considers Aying to be a “counterpart figure with masculine physical features.”²⁴⁵ She wears black tops and short trousers; her hair is short and badly cut, totally different to that of modern girls. However, at the end of the film, she is the only one who has not received punishment from the patriarchal society. Weiming’s suicide and Aying’s ‘good’ ending seem to expose an ideology behind the girl’s image; namely, that if new women want to achieve real independence, they will need to limit signs of gender identity and remove their sexual attraction to men if they are to avoid forced prostitution. This kind of gender-neutral women’s image also became the basis of the image of Mao-era women.

State Feminism in the Mao Era

The development of the first wave of Chinese feminism ended silently during the long war period after 1937. After the founding of the People Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Chinese feminism ushered in its second wave, through a completely different path to that of the May Fourth era. Scholars such as Wang Zheng call this second wave of Chinese feminism ‘state feminism.’ This term derives from the term ‘state feminists’: it was then conceptualised and introduced into Chinese feminist discourse.²⁴⁶ The notion of state feminism refers to the “activities of government structures that are formally charged with furthering women’s status and rights.”²⁴⁷ When applied to China, it literally means the government championing women’s liberation, guaranteeing equality between men and women through state power. Essentially, the main way to achieve women’s liberation in the Mao era was through the state policies and laws that were used to guarantee women’s equal rights from a legislation perspective.

Firstly, after 1949, the new government of the PRC adopted a series of laws and policies to raise women’s social and family status. The first was the ‘Common programme

²⁴⁵ Cui, *Women Through the Lens*, 22.

²⁴⁶ Zheng Wang, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 519.

²⁴⁷ Dorothy M. Stetson and Amy G. Mazur, “Introduction,” in *Comparative State Feminism*, eds. Dorothy M. Stetson and Amy G. Mazur (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 1-2.

of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference' which passed in September 1949. In Article 6, it states:

The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of marriage for men and women shall be put into effect.²⁴⁸

Then, in March 1950, the Marriage Law was established. Article 1 and 10 confirm that:

Article 1: The feudal marriage system based on the arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and supremacy act of man over woman, and in the disregard of the interests of children, is abolished. The new democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, is put into effect;

Article 10: Husband and wife have equal rights in the possession and management of family property.²⁴⁹

The promulgation of these two laws enabled women to have equal rights with men both inside and outside the family. The 'Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference' established equal rights for women in terms of legal status as well as in the public sphere. Women were allowed to participate in politics and in work, and receive the same education as that offered to men. As such, women have gained equal rights in society, at least from a legislative perspective. The implementation of the Marriage Law, especially the implementation of monogamy in Article 1, ended the subordinate status of women in the family. Men and women's marital relationships moved to being monogamous, rather than the polygamy seen in earlier Chinese history. In this way, equal status for women and men in marriage was

²⁴⁸ Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 233.

²⁴⁹ Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press: 1983), 235.

legislated. Article 10 guaranteed women's equal rights to ownership and management of family property. This laid the foundation for women to gain an equal share of land to that given to men in the later state land reform.

Some scholars argue that the promulgation of the Agrarian Reform Law also had a significant effect on women's liberation in China. Kay Ann Johnson observes that economic conditions are the necessities to achieve women's liberation, and "land reform is also thought to have made an important contribution to raising women's status because it gave women property." The Agrarian Reform Law executed rural land reform, which essentially involved the taking of land from landlords, temples, monasteries, churches, schools and other social groups, and then giving each individual a certain amount of land. Women as equals to men could take their equal share of land to participate in social production and become part of the waged labour force. As Elisabeth Croll argues, "entry into the waged labour force would improve women's material conditions and aid them in acquiring a new confidence, power and authority within the domestic and public sphere."²⁵⁰ Therefore, the implementation of this regulation became an indispensable step for women to achieve independence and real liberation.

However, with the development of women's liberation in the Mao era, when all women's rights had been established by state policies and law, a top-down model (from state to woman) also formed. This model allowed the state (not the women themselves) to decide what rights women should acquire. Women could only be passively informed of what rights they had and could not take the initiative to fight for them. This was especially true in China, where the government and the legal system were overwhelmingly dominated by male members: "it is never clear how pro-women laws and policies come to be initiated and passed by a patriarchal centralized power structure."²⁵¹ State feminism, as Divya C. McMillin argues, "resulted not in women's emancipation, but a shift in power from micro domestic patriarchy to macro state interventionist patriarchy."²⁵² Thus, state feminism in China, to a certain degree, became state patriarchy.

²⁵⁰ Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, 233.

²⁵¹ Wang, "State Feminism," 520.

²⁵² Divya C. McMillin, *International Media Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 96.

The consequence of this state patriarchy in China was that ‘woman’ became a genderless identity. According to Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, “in socialist state feminism, which does not emphasize the male-female binary, it has been difficult for women to assert independence from a male state machinery, since the very category of ‘women’ in opposition to men is no longer salient.”²⁵³ In new China, the spirit of ‘men and women are equal’ is a subversion of gender discrimination; it is also a denial of women as an independent gender group, which led to the de-sexualisation of women in the Mao era. The gender characteristics of women were erased, so that they could achieve equality and liberation. Meanwhile, “women’s freedoms were subjugated in favor of nation-building projects.”²⁵⁴ The so-called women’s liberation (women’s equal participation in the labour force and public sphere) in the Mao era resulted from demands for nation building and improvement, both of which were driven by state ideology. As such, the social identity of both men and women became the genderless social labour force and proletarian revolutionaries who worked in nation-building and socialist construction. Women became the auxiliary force, helping men with nation-building, and their interests were, from necessity, subordinated to collective goals. In this way, women could achieve liberation during this historical period.

‘Woman’ as a gender identity became blurred; this does not, however, mean that gender characteristics were completely removed from women in the Mao era. On the contrary, “the state then not only managed gender and sexuality but was gendered itself, a masculinizing project that was undertaken by both its male and female inhabitants.”²⁵⁵ On the one hand, the elimination of women’s feminine characteristics is related to class contradictions in place at the time. Chinese state feminism was driven by the state ideology, which converted gender relations into class relations. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang found that, in the Mao era, “to look feminine was to look bourgeois,” thus, femininity as a symbol of the bourgeoisie and of the culture of old Chinese society should be

²⁵³ Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality and Women’s Public Sphere in China,” in *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota press, 1999), 40.

²⁵⁴ McMillin, *International Media Studies*, 96.

²⁵⁵ McMillin, *International Media Studies*, 97.

eliminated.²⁵⁶ On the other hand, when women no longer conform to the feminine norms of patriarchal culture, male norms become the only standard for women to follow, if they are to remodel their gender characteristics. Masculinity also becomes the way for women to show they are liberated; it marks the rescue of women from the oppressed gender relations prevalent in old Chinese society. Shuqin Cui asserts that, “masculinization convinces Chinese women that they can perform all tasks as well as men.”²⁵⁷ Therefore, women had to or were encouraged to cut their hair and wear plain working clothes; that is, to dress, live, work and act like a man in Maoist society.

Socialist Girls in the Mao Era

State patriarchy granted Chinese women the equal right to participate in work and social life, while also dissolving their gender identity. Women became proletarian revolutionaries and the builders of socialist society, equal to men in society. This equal but genderless status attracted a lot of attention from Chinese socialist films. Relying on the new China’s promotion of women’s status, in the early period of the PRC (or the ‘17-year’ period), many films depicting women’s stories were produced. According to the data collected, of the 677 feature films produced in Mainland China between 1949 and 1966, more than 100 used female characters as protagonists. The themes of these films revolved around the growth and liberation of women. These themes can be divided into two main categories: firstly, the oppressed woman from the lower class is rescued by the Communist Party before devoting herself to the proletarian revolution and growing into a heroine. Such heroines include Liu Hulan, who makes sacrifices for the benefit of the revolution in the film *Liu Hulan* (刘胡兰, dir. Feng Bailu, 1950), and Lin Daojing, who was a girl student and becomes a proletarian revolutionary in *Song of Youth* (青春之歌, dir. Cui Wei and Chen Huaiai, 1959). Another example is the female soldier Wu Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, dir. Xie Jin, 1961). The second category shows women under the influence of the women’s liberation movement in China, striving for equality, independence and freedom of marriage, and who actively participate in social construction. An example is seen in Cai Guizhen and Wang Caifeng

²⁵⁶ Yang, “From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference,” 41.

²⁵⁷ Cui, *Women Through the Lens*, 55.

in *Spring Forever* (万紫千红总是春, dir. Shen Fu, 1959); both are involved in production activities despite their family members' resistance. Another example is the rural woman Li Shuangshuang, who pursues the liberation of women in *Li Shuangshuang* (李双双, dir. Lu Ren, 1962).

Although these two categories of women's films are different in terms of story content, the inherent pattern for women's growth in films is very similar. These two main categories of socialist films follow a similar pattern when shaping the image of women in the Mao era. The different routes for the two film categories are shown below.

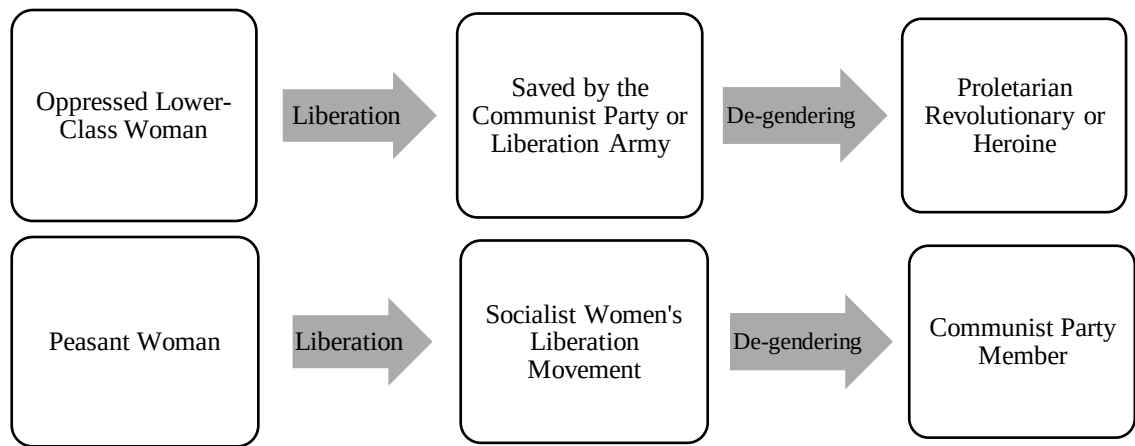


Figure 12: Two Main Routes for Socialist Films to Construct the Figure of the Liberated Woman

The above chart shows that, at the beginning of the films (in the first boxes), women retain their gender identity (as women). After they are liberated by the Proletarian Revolution or the Women's Liberation Movement, they gradually grow into revolutionaries, party members, or social builders by the end of the films, thus joining the genderless collective identity (the third box). Thus, the common pattern by which socialist film shapes women is through the liberation and de-gendering of women; such films change the women's gendered and individual identity, replacing it with a genderless collective social identity. Under this patriarchal-state narrative pattern, there are two ways to achieve the emancipation of women in socialist films: one is to dispel her individual identity and make her a member of the collective, so that she can obtain equality; the other is to dispel her gender identity and make her a masculinised woman. These approaches can sometimes co-exist in the films. In this section, I use *The Red Detachment*

of *Women* as an example, exploring how this pattern was applied in socialist films to construct the figure of the liberated woman.

In *The Red Detachment of Women*, protagonist Wu Qionghua is a maid of the landlord Nan Batian. As a female slave, Wu Qionghua has no personal freedom and lives at the lowest level of society. The film explains that Nan Batian has persecuted Wu's parents, leading to their death. Wu Qionghua's tragic background makes her a typical example of the oppressed and enslaved women of old Chinese society. Her road to liberation involves joining the revolutionary army and becoming a revolutionary warrior. After Wu Qionghua and Fu Honglian join the women's army, quickly gaining acceptance due to her proletarian status, Hong Changqing, the party representative, gives a speech:

In the past, you were all working women who were heavily oppressed.

You lived like a cow and horse. No one looked up to you.

But, from today, you are now one of the 120 people – no, 122 people – that have become glorious warriors!

This inspiring speech exposes the tremendous change that is brought about by Wu Qionghua's changing identity. In the past, Qionghua's identity was that of 'oppressed women who lived a life like a cow and a horse.' Now, Qionghua is a warrior; she can escape the oppression of the old society and become a member of the revolutionary collective. Moreover, after Qionghua joins the army, she acquires a new collective identity, but her individual identity and characteristics still exist. Her individual identity is then gradually eliminated by subsequent events. This is shown in a scene where Wu Qionghua meets Nan Batian in a reconnaissance activity. Qionghua wants to avenge herself and her parents but has failed to do so. Because of her mistake, she contravenes military regulations and receives punishment. The elimination of Wu Qionghua's individual identity takes place at this time. Qionghua wants revenge for her personal grievances; the company commander reprimands her for this, saying "Is this brave? You are no longer the country girl you were three months ago. You are a warrior!" Hong Changqing, the party representative, is similarly disapproving: "Do you think that you are the only one who has grievances? Which proletarian does not have a tearful heart? Everyone does this by personal meaning, is that work? You are a revolutionary warrior now!" Through these two conversations, which emphasise the importance of the

collective identity of revolutionary soldiers, Wu Qionghua begins to truly recognise her collective identity and starts to follow the discipline of the collective. These two conversations also reveal that, while liberated women are no longer required to obey men, they and the men they work with are equally obliged to obey the genderless collective.²⁵⁸ From this point, Qionghua has completed her initial transformation: from individual identity to genderless collective identity.

When women's identity became a genderless collective identity used to achieve emancipation, their appearance in films also began to adopt a masculine transformation. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, when Wu Qionghua is working as a slave, she dresses in rags and does not wear shoes (Figure 13). At this point, her appearance shows she is an oppressed and suffering woman who comes from the lowest level of society. Then, she is sold to Hong Changqing by Nan Batian. When she is rescued, the clothing she wears becomes red and new (Figure 14). At this point, Wu Qionghua still has a long braid, which has obvious feminine characteristics in the old Chinese society. When she joins the Women's Army and becomes a revolutionary warrior, Wu Qionghua's clothes are replaced with a standard grey military uniform, and her long braid become short hair (Figure 15).



Figure 13: Wu Qionghua is arrested by Nan Batian's hatchet men in *The Red Detachment of Women*

²⁵⁸ Cui, "Constructing and Consuming the Revolutionary Narratives," 55.



Figure 14: Wu Qionghua is sold to Hong Changqing in The Red Detachment of Women



Figure 15: Wu Qionghua joins the women's army in The Red Detachment of Women

In the narrative of socialist films, once a woman becomes a warrior, her feminine characteristics are suppressed and modified; she will undergo a masculine transformation. Qionghua's act of cutting off her braids and replacing her feminine clothes can be seen as her separation from her old gender identity. At the same time, cutting the long braid gives a strong sense of gender resistance. The Chinese Feudal Society prescribed different performance patterns for men and women in order to establish gender differences. Therefore, the most effective way to break gender inequality is through cross-dressing. Clothes, hairstyles and acts are the main criteria by which men and women could be distinguished in old Chinese society. Once the gender boundaries were broken, women could be liberated from their gender roles. Hence, the masculine transformation that takes place in Chinese socialist films is an indispensable step towards the emancipation of women.

As China entered the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese films (as a cultural field) were strongly impacted by political circumstances. After 1966, China's film industry stagnated. From 1967 to 1972 the entire film industry produced no feature films other than the *Xinwen Jianbao* (Newsletter) filmed by the central studio of News Reels

Production.²⁵⁹ From 1970 onwards, to expand the influence of revolutionary model operas, some film studios began to organise filmmakers, getting them to record and produce model opera films. In the late 1970s, Chinese film gradually resumed its development. Hence, between 1966 and 1976, the extreme lack of film samples and the special historical environment make it impossible to compare the model opera films of this period with the films produced during the previous two periods.

Women's Studies in the Market Reform Era

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, state feminism lost its autonomy; in the social environment of the time, rural youth returned to cities in large numbers, labour was surplus, and jobs were scarce.²⁶⁰ In 1979, China ushered in market economy reforms. According to Alicia Leung and Robert Westwood: “the ‘Four Modernisations’, the ‘Open Door Policy’, and the turn to a ‘socialist market economy’ have given rise to significant changes to all aspects of life in China, but they have had a specific impact on labour markets, enterprise form and governance, management, and the whole context of work and employment.”²⁶¹ Women’s work and employment, as one of the most significant points discussed by male feminists in the May Fourth era and by the ideology of state feminism in the Mao era, is seen as fundamental to women’s freedom and emancipation in China. However, under the drastic social policy changes of the 1980s, gender discrimination and inequality in society gradually emerged again. Official policies of

²⁵⁹ The *Xinwen Jianbao* (Newsletter) was born in 1949 and used film to record and disseminate news. It was shown weekly, with each showing lasting about ten minutes, and was usually played before the opening of feature films. Its content covered all areas of social life. After 1978, its name was changed to *Zuguo Xinmao* (The New Look of the Motherland). This programme ended in 1993.

²⁶⁰ During the Mao era, the Chinese Government carried out the Shangshan Xiaxiang (上山下乡, “young people go to poor areas”) movement: urban and educated young people went to rural areas to be re-educated by peasants. This movement continued until the end of the Cultural Revolution. After 1979, the State Council of China began to allow educated youth to return to their original cities and to continue their studies and careers.

²⁶¹ Alicia S.M. Leung and Robert I. Westwood, “Between Dogma and Reality: Women and Employment in China,” *International Employment Relations Review*, no. 4 (1995): 57.

gender equality that were promoted in the Mao era were later ignored and an unemployment trend affecting women quietly appeared. Leung provides some data from this situation: “Over two-thirds of work units prefer male to female employees, and 80%-90% of women graduates have difficulty securing work assignments.”²⁶² Unlike the Mao era, which encouraged women to leave their homes and participate in the social labour force, in the 1980s women encountered a social debate calling women to go back to their homes.

If women’s liberation in the Mao era is understood to have been obtained by women losing their gender identity in favour of the collective and a genderless identity to achieve equality, women’s liberation and gender equality resulted in women becoming an invisible gender group. The changes to China’s economic structure in the reform era not only enabled people to escape the collective identity and gain individual identities; they also made women unequal again once they regained their gender identity. Women were no longer required to wear the common black or navy uniforms of the Mao era, nor were they forced to fit into the image of *Tie Niangzi* (iron women). However, reform policies, women-specific welfare issues, longer maternity leave, earlier retirement age and responsibility for family affairs (a specific burden for women) meant that women could not compete with men in the labour market. Alicia Leung quotes Chen’s report as saying that “if a woman and a man apply at the same time for a job, they’ll consider the man; they won’t talk to the woman.”²⁶³ Although some regulations were specifically set for women’s welfare, or with the intention of protecting them, they also became the accessory of discrimination, as a kind of “benevolent sexism.”²⁶⁴ For example, women’s retirement age: Leung states that “women are compelled to retire earlier and so have a shorter career life-span: the retirement age is 60 for men and 55 for professional women.”²⁶⁵

²⁶² Alicia S.M. Leung, “Feminism in Transition: Chinese Culture, Ideology and the Development of the Women’s Movement in China,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, no. 20 (2003): 367.

²⁶³ Chen K., “Chinese Women Face Barriers on the Job,” *Asia Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 1995, cited in Alicia S.M. Leung, “Feminism in Transition: Chinese Culture, Ideology and the Development of the Women’s Movement in China,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, no. 20 (2003): 367.

²⁶⁴ Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, “The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no.3 (1996): 491.

²⁶⁵ Leung, “Feminism in Transition,” 367.

In the process of modernisation, China largely abandoned women's interests in favour of socioeconomic development; this unexpectedly led to the awakening of the female subject's consciousness. The women's community started to become aware that it could not count on unreliable state policies or laws to achieve women's equality; rather, women would need to fight for equality themselves. In this phase, women's issues were mostly discussed in academic institutions and through scholarship. Chinese women's studies also officially started at this point. A large number of women's research centres and gender research centres were established at various universities in China in the 1980s: the Association of Women's Studies was founded by Li Xiaojiang in Henan in 1985; the Association of Women's Studies was founded at Beijing Foreign Languages Institution in 1985; and the Centre of Gender Studies was founded at Zhengzhou University in 1987 (also by Li Xiaojiang). Contrast this with the discussion of women's issues in the May Fourth era (which was dominated by a bunch of male intellectuals) or the approach taken by Maoist state feminism, which was dominated by state ideology. This new wave of women's studies was conducted primarily by women; specifically, by female scholars.

Criticising Maoist state feminism was the first step towards building women's feminist discourse in the 1980s. Maoist state feminism could be evaluated as "to abandon women's state, nation, historical time, class, and age in order to obtain a conceptual generalization."²⁶⁶ It is a theory that neglected sexual differences both in a biological and psychological sense.²⁶⁷ However, "Maoist gender equality was still male-centred; women were measured and judged according to men's standards," leading to them suffering a double burden (both taking care of family affairs and participating in social production).²⁶⁸ Within this discourse, women became the victims of both Maoist feminism and a still-patriarchal society. Hence, the image of the sick woman (as the victim) constitutes a cultural phenomenon worthy of attention in the early 1980s. At that time, there were many female images in literature and movies, all of which were tragic

²⁶⁶ Zheng Wang, "Research on Women in Contemporary China," in *Guide to Women's Studies in China*, eds. Gail Hershat, Emily Hong, Susan Mann, and Lisa Rofel (Institute of East Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, 1999), 20.

²⁶⁷ Zheng Wang, "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no.4 (1997): 138.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

roles. A good illustration is Lu Wenting in the film *People in their Middle Ages* (dir. Wang Qimin and Sun Yu, 1982). The film tells the story of a female doctor, Lu Wenting, an ophthalmologist. Due to the long-term pressures of both her life and work, she finally comes down with heart disease. She is a professional woman who has left the family home but who must take on both work and family affairs. This double burden causes her to become sick and die.

How to recover the gender differences or feature the gender characteristics of women became another main topic of feminist discussion during this period. According to Wang Zheng, “the late 1970s and early 1980s were characterized by a surge of interest in gender differentiation” as “the ultra-left egalitarian policy on women had distorted women’s nature.”²⁶⁹ From this point, women’s genderless figures were considered an ultra-left mistake or ‘crime’ caused by the Cultural Revolution that needed to be corrected. The masculinisation of women in the Mao era went against women’s natures; thus, the feminisation of women become a method through which to recover their human nature. Tani Barlow summarises this as follows: “as Li Xiaojiang’s contemporaries Ruo Shi and Feng Yuan argued explicitly, the task of women’s liberation in the late 1980s was to reinstate an appropriate sex difference that is fundamental to a healthy humanity.”²⁷⁰ Therefore, the goal of women’s liberation in this period was not only to help women become equal people, but also equal ‘women.’

²⁶⁹ Wang, “Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women,” 136.

²⁷⁰ Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 261.



Figure 16: A Xiang working in the factory in *Red Skirt Popular in the Street*



Figure 17: A Xiang wearing a red dress in *Red Skirt Popular in the Street*

Retrieving and remodelling women's femininity became the emphasis in this period. Wang Zheng points out that there are two ways of retrieving femininity: one is by adopting feminine clothes and social roles, another is by separating women from the class struggle.²⁷¹ From an external perspective, women stopped wearing the genderless uniforms of the Mao era and returned to wearing feminine dresses; this phenomenon became a popular theme in many films produced in the mid-1980s. The film *Red Skirt Popular in the Street* (dir. Qi Xingjia, 1984) tells a story in the market reform period: a Shanghai factory girl – A Xiang – who is also a *Lao Mo* (model worker) appears at the beginning in a perfect but also characterless image. She works hard and only wears the common uniform (Figure 16). The story uses her trying on a red dress as an opportunity

²⁷¹ Wang, "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women," 137.

to depict how the dress inspires her to remove her uniform, escape the bondage of the perfect *Lao Mo* image, and bravely pursue her individual character (Figure 17). Compared to the grey Maoist uniform, the brightly coloured dress becomes the representation of feminine clothing. Emily Hong and Gail Hershatter reveal the political implications behind the feminine clothing, saying that “feminine dress advocated in the media in the early 1980s suggested a call for freedom of choice of personal lifestyles and a rejection of the state control of private life.”²⁷² Thus, when A Xiang bravely removes her old factory uniform and puts on a red dress of her own choice, it reflects her detachment from the collective identity and the manifestation of her individual subjectivity. The rise of individual discourse in China since the 1980s has also laid the foundation for the spread of post-feminist sensibilities in China. The next chapter will continue to discuss the screen presence of individual discourse in the post-2000s.

²⁷² Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 42.

Chapter 4

Fashioning the Post-Feminist Subject in Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films

Since the late 2000s, girlhood films have proliferated on mainstream Chinese screens, bringing a variety of girls' images to audiences. It is also worth noting that contemporary girlhood films emerged at a time when the gender discourse in China took a neoliberal post-(state)feminist turn. With the development of the women's studies movement in the 1980s, female intellectuals such as Xiaojiang Li started to reflect on the rigid gender concepts of state feminism in the Mao era. De-gendering and (re)masculinizing the feminine to make women into qualified socialist builders only resulted in gender sameness rather than equality.²⁷³ Hence, the call for emancipation of the mind and the emergence of multicultural trends during the 1980s, the (re)focus on gender difference, and the rediscovery of femininity and (re)sexualization of women sparked "a youth-led sexual revolution" in China.²⁷⁴ Around the same time, following Xiaoping Deng's 1992 Southern Tours speech, which marked the commencement of a robust market-oriented economy in China, so-called "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" began to take shape.²⁷⁵ The government started to reduce regulations on many facets of people's lives, transitioning from the collective economy in the socialist period to a newly formed "individualized personal responsibility system."²⁷⁶ Under this neoliberal market system, the concept of individualism started to gain prominence in China.

Meanwhile, also thanks to China's market economy reform, the rapid economic growth in the 1990s enabled China to quickly grow into a consumer society. Under the influence of consumerism, the reclaiming of femininity of women on screen was achieved by showing how they reconstruct their body through the consumption of fashion items such as clothes and beauty products.²⁷⁷ Then, since China's entry into the World Trade

²⁷³ Min, "Duihua (Dialogue) In-Between: A Process of Translating the Term 'Feminism' in China," 180.

²⁷⁴ Jeffreys and Yu, *Sex in China*, 47.

²⁷⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 120.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁷⁷ Wallis, "Chinese Women in the Official Chinese Press: Discursive Constructions of Gender in Service to the State," 98.

Organization (WTO) in 2001, gender discourses in China became complicated in the course of its globalization. Some rhetoric from Western post-(liberal)feminist culture is invoked by popular culture and mass media, such as individual choice and empowerment.²⁷⁸ On this basis, it is possible to apply the concept of post-feminism in the Chinese context to examine contemporary girlhood films. I strategically employ post-feminism as a critical analysis tool. On the one hand, I agree that post-feminism is globally circulated through consumer culture, transnationally co-produced media images, and other channels. On the other hand, I see post-feminism as the infiltration of neoliberalism into the gender discourse in a society. The grounds on which post-feminism survives requires a neoliberal state environment that “enabled by the optimism and opportunity of prosperity (or the perception of it).”²⁷⁹

In this chapter, I will discuss the evolution of the concept of post-feminism and its theoretical turn as a transnational cultural sensibility. Then, I attempt to connect the concept of Western Post-feminism to contemporary Chinese girlhood films, in order to ask, how has girl’s subjectivity been expressed in cinema in an era that promotes individual agency? How has the expression of girl’s subjectivity been simultaneously celebrated as well as regulated? And how has the regulation of girl’s images on Chinese film screens changed over the last decade? Drawing on Angela McRobbie’s concept of “post-feminist masquerade” and “complete perfection,” I consider the latter an intensified version of the post-feminist masquerade, with the emphasis on “a set of self-directed goals.”²⁸⁰ In this chapter, through the examination on *Go Lala Go* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016), I argue that these two examples show a transformation from post-feminist masquerade to the regime of complete perfection, which reveals a more comprehensive and intensified discipline on girls and young women on the contemporary Chinese film screen, albeit in

²⁷⁸ Thornham and Feng, “‘Just a Slogan’: Individualism, Post-feminism, and Female Subjectivity in Consumerist China,” 209.

²⁷⁹ Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, “Introduction,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media Culture in an Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.

²⁸⁰ Angela McRobbie, “Notes on The Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no.83 (2015): 4.

a way that celebrates girls' achievement through constant self-monitoring and self-improvement as well as their desire to be perfect. By looking at these on-screen portrayals, I analyse their dynamic connection with contemporary gender discourses in neoliberal China.

The Discourse of Post-Feminism

Although post-feminism has been a widely employed term in Western academia for the past four decades, it remains a controversial concept. There are two primary explanations regarding the emergence of the term post-feminism: the first posits that 'post-feminism' originated in the early 20th century in the United States and was primarily found in traditional media outlets like journals and the press. According to Nancy Cott, the term post-feminism first appeared in a magazine called *Judy* in 1919:

a group of female literary radicals in Greenwich Village – the very grassroots of Feminism – had founded a new journal on the thinking, “we’re interested in people now – not in man and women.” They declared that moral, social, economic, and political standards “should not have anything to do with sex,” promised to be “pro-woman without being anti-man,” and called their stance “post-feminist.”²⁸¹

While Susan Faludi offers a similar account, she suggests that post-feminist sentiments first emerged in the American press during the 1920s.²⁸² This was a time when women had just won the right to vote, some state legislatures began to allow women to serve on juries, and equal-pay laws had been enacted.²⁸³ Feminists had successfully secured the civil rights they initially advocated for, leading to the perception that the feminist movement had fulfilled its goals and transitioned into a post-feminist era. There was a growing opposition to feminism during this period. Feminists started to face enduring

²⁸¹ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 282.

²⁸² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991), 64-65.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 65.

societal stigmatization, characterized by perceptions of them as threats to women's happiness and national security.²⁸⁴ Consequently, feminist organizations witnessed a sharp decline in their membership, with some even transforming into mere social clubs.²⁸⁵ Notably, the editor of the erstwhile feminist magazine *Judy* even altered its name to "human liberation beyond the now-resolved male-female dialectic" to reflect their shift in political stance.²⁸⁶ At the time, however, the general public interpreted the feminist movement's retreat differently, as pointed out by Ethel Klein: "the dissipation of interest in the women's movement was taken as a sign not of failure but of completion."²⁸⁷

Another account of the emergence of the term post-feminism points to its rise in the 1980s, predominantly within popular media and academic research debates. Although most of the scholarship below on post-feminism is from an anglophone context, the discussion and definition of post-feminism can be categorized into three primary directions: "an epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with 'difference,' an historical shift within feminism, or as a backlash against feminism."²⁸⁸

To begin with, post-feminism, seen as an extension of feminism, is associated with significant historical and political transformations. British historian Andrea Stuart highlights that feminism underwent two significant shifts during the 1980s, one in the way it was portrayed in popular media, and another in its theoretical stances. She uses the term professional Feminism (with a capital F) and popular feminism to describe these two shifts.²⁸⁹ Stuart suggests that professional Feminism is typically associated with academic institutions and feminist organizations, making it challenging to connect with

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Lillian S. Robinson, "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no.2 (1991): 276.

²⁸⁷ Ethel Klein, *Gender Politics: From Consciousness to Mass Politics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 17.

²⁸⁸ Rosalind Gill, "Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.2 (2007): 148.

²⁸⁹ Andrea Stuart, "Feminism: Dead or Alive?," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1990), 29.

the broader women's community due to its highly academic and theoretical nature.²⁹⁰ Whereas popular feminism, later known as popular post-feminism, reaches most people through various forms of media, both mainstream and alternative, presenting itself in diverse ways.²⁹¹ Popular feminism employs images, such as the confident depictions of women found in fashion magazines *Cosmo* and *Elle*, that “tapped into a new generation's attitudes and expectations, with which the feminist establishment simply hasn't caught up.”²⁹² Fashion, as Stuart states, “far from being a source of oppression and manipulation of women, has become increasingly associated with strategies of resistance to fixed images of femininity.”²⁹³ Hence, consumption practices have effectively engaged the younger generation through the dissemination of images in popular culture, and consumption is linked to how individuals express their sense of freedom and derive pleasure. It is essential to note, however, that the feminist agenda has been individualized and stripped of its political aspects through its portrayal in media and popular culture. As Sue Thornham contends, popular feminism is “grounded in consumption as play, it is knowing and ironic, and it celebrates individuality and not collective action, pleasure not politics.”²⁹⁴ Thornham also points out that the terminology of popular feminism underwent a transformation during the 1990s, evolving first into power feminism and subsequently into post-feminism.²⁹⁵

Secondly, post-feminism has also been interpreted as a backlash against feminism. Based on her observations of various American news media in the 1980s, American journalist Susan Faludi found that media has been employed as a powerful tool in attacking the gains of second-wave feminism by shaping a negative understanding of it. For Faludi,

just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-1980s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 30.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., 32.

²⁹³ Stuart, “Feminism,” 32.

²⁹⁴ Sue Thornham, *Women, Feminism and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 15.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

were calling themselves feminists, the media declared that feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that ‘post-feminism’ was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women’s movement.²⁹⁶

The hostile media, on the one hand, suggests to the public that feminism is outdated and no longer needed, and implies that feminism is “an equality trap,” and has only condemned women to “a lesser life.”²⁹⁷ On the other hand, it criticizes feminism for contributing to a range of new identity crises and problems for women, thus attacking the previous achievements of feminism. For example, spreading images in which “professional women are suffering ‘burnout’ and succumbing to an ‘infertility epidemic;’ single women are grieving from a ‘man shortage;’ childless women are ‘depressed and confused.’”²⁹⁸ Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon argue that such negative narratives towards feminism embody a kind of “new traditionalism,” which presents the idea of the home as a refuge for women to escape the pressures of their professional careers.²⁹⁹ They find corroboration in the film *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987), which reaffirms the patriarchal family by pitting the two identities of independent unmarried women and housewives against each other.³⁰⁰ The economically independent urban girl, as McRobbie comments, has been positioned as “a threat to the lives of men and women who have chosen [...] the country-living nuclear family with a professional male breadwinner and a wife and mother who is apparently his equal, but who has chosen to stay at home.”³⁰¹ Consequently, the domestic space becomes another venue to highlight women's autonomy, as they give up paid work to return to the family by choice, which is in contrast to the previous feminist critique that the family confines women’s self-realization.

²⁹⁶ Faludi, *Backlash*, 11.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹⁸ Faludi, *Backlash*, 1.

²⁹⁹ Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Post-feminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 51.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC: SAGE, 2009), 35.

A third direction considers post-feminism as an epistemological break within feminism. British sociologist Ann Brooks asserts that feminism has been fundamentally concerned with the issue of epistemology from the very beginning.³⁰² She argues that “the emancipatory goals and epistemological assumptions of second wave feminism based on the interrelationship between knowledge and liberation can be clearly traced to the liberal humanism of enlightened modernity.”³⁰³ She references Maureen McNeil's concept, in which she contends that “the women who gave birth to second-wave feminism can be thought of as daughters of the Enlightenment in that they seemed to have inherited some Enlightenment assumptions.”³⁰⁴ In other words, for McNeil, the feminist movement partly aimed at women's liberation through the cultivation of knowledge and consciousness-raising, thereby establishing the groundwork for a unique feminist epistemology. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, when feminist theory began to embrace a more diverse perspective, it was primarily associated with its intersection with cultural theories such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalytic theory, as well as its engagement with theoretical and political discussions related to post-colonialism.³⁰⁵ Additionally, the concept of the fundamental female experience has faced criticism within feminism itself, particularly from women of colour, lesbian feminists, and Third World women.³⁰⁶ These crossroads of diverse theories and experiences highlight feminism's epistemological shift in this period, from equality to difference, from binary thinking to embracing diversity, and from seeking consensus to celebrating differences. This evolution has invigorated feminist theoretical progress. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, when post-feminism is transformed into a deeply intellectual and theoretical idea, it also carries the potential risk of disconnecting it from the practical realm of political

³⁰² Ann Brooks, *Post-Feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 29.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Maureen McNeil, “Dancing with Foucault,” in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 149.

³⁰⁵ Brooks, *Post-Feminisms*, 8.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

involvement and societal advocacy. The terminology and discussions employed in feminist theory could gradually become less accessible to the everyday woman.

My comprehension of post-feminism has been significantly shaped by the contributions of Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill within the realms of cultural and media studies, where they utilize post-feminism as a critical analysis tool. For McRobbie,

through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism [...] by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of young women, feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant.³⁰⁷

McRobbie maintains that viewing post-feminism solely in terms of a backlash view prevents recognition of the contradictory dynamics embedded within it. Indeed, post-feminism does not shun feminism, but “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.”³⁰⁸ She uses the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (dir. Sharon Maguire, 2001) as an example to illustrate how this film paradoxically portrays its heroine as a figure of new traditionalism in order to reclaim a kind of old-fashioned femininity that aims to “pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children,”³⁰⁹ as well as show little ambition in the workplace. However, on the other hand, there are elements of what could be seen as aged feminism on display in this film, such as the heroine still having “sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent.”³¹⁰ Hence, McRobbie uses “double-entanglement” to describe post-feminism as a conjunction of “neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life” as well as “processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and

³⁰⁷ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 11.

³⁰⁸ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 12.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations.”³¹¹ The key to this entanglement is that post-feminism retains some elements of a transformed and acceptable feminism, such as women’s sexual freedom and having a certain degree of economic independence; while at the same time allowing girls to reclaim their femininity and encouraging them to actively engage in gender roles (as a wife or mother) under conservative family values, packaged as a girl's personal choice. This ambivalent combination of conservative values as well as the ideas of women's liberation has played a pivotal role in shaping my approach to post-feminism in China. I delve deeper into this subject in subsequent sections.

Drawing from McRobbie's concept, Gill similarly views post-feminism as the coexistence of “feminist and anti-feminist ideas.”³¹² She conceptualizes post-feminism as a kind of sensibility that contains several features, including,

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.³¹³

For Gill, a key aspect of post-feminist sensibility is the surveillance of the self, and this surveillance is primarily enacted on one's own body. In the post-feminist media landscape, “girls and women are interpellated as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects.”³¹⁴ This is because “possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity.”³¹⁵ Young women's self-surveillance and ongoing self-improvement of their bodies becomes a way of shaping their identity and for them to

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture,” 161.

³¹³ Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture,” 149.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 151.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 149.

become a representative post-feminist subject. Such self-regulation is packaged as personal choice and self-fulfilment. However, as Gill asked, if everything is based on a woman's own personal choice, then why is it that ultimately a woman's choice is to construct a “hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks?”³¹⁶

More notably, the stimulation of women's self-regulation enacted by a post-feminism sensibility is gradually deepening and widening. In 2017, Gill revisited her theory of post-feminism as sensibility. In her new article, she highlighted the intimate connection between post-feminist media culture and neoliberalism and argued that post-feminism “has made itself virtually hegemonic [...] has become the new normal, a taken-for granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism.”³¹⁷ Gill attributes the strong resonance between post-feminism and neoliberalism to two dimensions, one is that, “both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves.”³¹⁸ Second, Gill and Scharff define the concept of neoliberalism as “a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising.”³¹⁹ Whereas the ideal subject of neoliberalism bears a striking resemblance to the ideal subjects of post-feminism, that is “active, freely choosing, self-reinventing.”³²⁰ Thus, Gill concluded that “post-feminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.”³²¹ Simultaneously, such neoliberal post-feminist sensibility also carries a stark sense of “relentless individualism,”

one that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions, that renders the intense surveillance of women's

³¹⁶ Ibid., 154.

³¹⁷ Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism,” 609.

³¹⁸ Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” in *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

³¹⁹ Gill and Scharff, “Introduction,” 5.

³²⁰ Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture,” 164.

³²¹ Gill and Scharff, “Introduction,” 7.

bodies normal or even desirable, that calls forth endless work on the self and that centres notions of empowerment and choice while enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of ‘the perfect’.³²²

Therefore, to achieve this perfect post-feminist normativity, the self-regulation of women has been re-enforced, and expanded to more areas. Gill points out this affective and psychological turn of the operations of post-feminism, “the central significance of a ‘makeover paradigm’ that extends beyond the surface of the body to an incitement to ‘makeover’ one’s interior life, developing a new, ‘upgraded’ post-feminist subjectivity.”³²³ That is to say, women not only need to monitor their own body, but also their psychological status. An attractive body, confidence, positivity and happy emotions are considered signs of empowerment, while a less sexy body, low self-esteem, insecurity, or anger are considered ugly. Under this context, “the notion of perfection had entered into the common currency of contemporary femininity,”³²⁴ for women to strive for through their endless self-optimization.

Another noteworthy theoretical development is that scholars have begun to discuss post-feminism from a transnational perspective. This perspective is significant to my subsequent discussion of conceptualizing post-(state) feminism in the Chinese context. In prior academic research, while post-feminism has been recognized as present in non-Western societies, the term always carries an assumption that “white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual young women are the privileged – or indeed the sole – subjects of post-feminist discourse.”³²⁵ Michelle M. Lazar was an early scholar who considered the global circulation of post-feminism. She suggests that “popular (post)feminism is a global discourse [...] it is put into circulation by international media corporations.”³²⁶ She uses discourses used in beauty advertisements in local English newspapers in Singapore between 2001 and 2005 to show these advertisements heavily invoke some of the rhetoric

³²² Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism,” 609.

³²³ Ibid., 607.

³²⁴ McRobbie, “Notes on The Perfect,” 4.

³²⁵ Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism,” 612.

³²⁶ Michelle M. Lazar, “Discover the Power of Femininity! Analyzing Global ‘Power Femininity’ in Local Advertising,” *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no.4 (2006): 506.

in feminism, such as agency and empowerment, inviting multiracial models to present the campaign, to construct a global consumer identity. Local consumers are invited to actively participate in self-management through consuming these products, while this self-management also displays a post-feminist ethos: wearing make-up is their own choice, for their own pleasure. Hence, Lazar defines the concept of popular (post)feminism as “a hybrid media discourse that blends feminist and post-feminist elements with consumer capitalism to produce a de-politicized power femininity as one of its subject effects.”³²⁷ However, Lazar situates post-feminism as an imported product of cultural globalization that originated in the West. In her study, this global circulation of post-feminism is a unidirectional one, operating implicitly within the framework of the binary of “the West and the rest.”³²⁸ This approach ignores the history of local feminist movements and fails to examine how the globally circulated post-feminist media culture is grafted on to local sociocultural contexts and gender discourse. Nevertheless, she adds briefly in another 2011 article examining local advertising in Singapore, that the circulation of post-feminist discourse requires a “benevolent government bestowing ‘gifts’ of equality upon women.”³²⁹ Women can obtain relatively equal opportunities and rights in such a society, thus making women in Singapore distance themselves from feminism.³³⁰

In contrast to Lazar, Joel Gwynne's study on post-feminist girlhood culture in Japan highlights the socio-economic underpinnings behind the global proliferation of post-feminism in non-Western contexts. For Gwynne,

it is, however, a mistake to conceptualise post-feminist culture as an exclusively Western phenomenon, especially if we follow Rosalind Gill's foundational argument

³²⁷ Ibid., 513.

³²⁸ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in *Race and Racialization*, eds. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Chris Andersen, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Roger C.A. Maaka (Toronto and Vancouver: Canadian Scholars, 2018), 85.

³²⁹ Michelle M. Lazar, “The Right to Be Beautiful: Post-feminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising,” in *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 39.

³³⁰ Ibid., 39.

that post-feminism ‘should be conceived of as a sensibility’ and not a culturally specific historical moment, since it is marked by a number of characteristics that are not unique to Western cultures [...] while it would be a mistake to assert that post-feminism as a cultural sensibility may operate in any society across the globe, it is perhaps accurate to suggest that it more commonly operates in economically prosperous neoliberal nations, regardless of their geographical location. Post-feminism is, after all, strongly implicated in neoliberal governance and citizenship – as Gill herself implies in her reference to ‘individualism, choice and empowerment’ – and should be understood as imbricated with global neoliberal ideologies that serve not only to affirm the individualistic values of late-capitalist culture, but also function to position feminism as redundant within democratic and ostensibly egalitarian societies.³³¹

Gwynne's argument resonates with Gill's perspective on the interdependent relationship between post-feminism and neoliberalism. Essentially, Gwynne suggests that the global dissemination of post-feminism hinges on how neoliberalism has transcended its Western origins, extending its influence into diverse markets. This insight proves highly valuable for my examination of post-feminism in China, as it implies that post-feminism can be viewed as a transformation in local gender discourse, reacting to the forces of neoliberalisation. This opens up the possibility for post-feminism's presence or potential integration into non-Western nations like China, which has embraced neoliberal economic reforms.

Simidele Dosekun addresses the views of both Lazar and Gwynne in her study of post-feminism as a transnational cultural phenomenon in Nigeria. Firstly, Dosekun affirms Lazar's perspective that post-feminism is globalized through media and consumption channels,

(yet) because post-feminism is a commodification and hollowing out of this feminist history, I am arguing that under conditions of globalization, post-feminism is sold and consumed transnationally without this history. In fact, the literature on post-

³³¹ Joel Gwynne, “Japan, Post-feminism and the Consumption of Sexual(ised) Schools in Male-Authored Contemporary Manga,” *Feminist Theory* 13, no.3 (2013): 326-327.

feminism in the West supports my contention that the culture sells without an explicit consciousness of feminism, with findings that young women take for granted celebratory and now commonsensical rhetorics of “choice,” “having it all,” “empowerment,” yet cannot articulate their national or local feminist histories or make sense of their personal experiences of pervasive sexism in critical feminist terms.³³²

Put simply, the spread of post-feminist ideas in non-Western countries does not necessarily hinge on a shared history of feminism. Post-feminism is more about promoting the rhetoric of choice and empowerment, as well as an optimistic middle-class image rather than a serious feminist consciousness. However, Dosekun also noted that “the transnationalization of post-feminism through the kinds of mechanisms [...] is highly structured and exclusionary,” since consumption is primarily shaped by one's material resources.³³³ In making this argument, Dosekun highlights a deficiency in Gwynne's viewpoint because he overlooks the role of class disparities within the female community. The key distinction between Gwynne and Dosekun's arguments lies in how Gwynne asserts that the rise of post-feminism necessitates a foundation of a neoliberal society, whereas Dosekun emphasizes that girls themselves require a certain economic footing to perform as post-feminist subjects. Hence, Dosekun's point suggests that the presence of post-feminism in non-Western countries can be better understood by emphasizing individual economic capability as a crucial factor, rather than solely relying on neoliberal socioeconomic frameworks. In other words, women who have the necessary financial resources can still embody post-feminist sensibilities in countries that lack a neoliberal economic system.

In this section, I traced the development of Western post-feminist theory and discussed its transnational conditions as a kind of global cultural sensibility, such as a neoliberal social system, frequent international media co-operation and dissemination, a benevolent government, or a group of middle-class consumers. Having acknowledged the

³³² Simidele Dosekun, “For Western Girls Only? Post-feminism as Transnational Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no.6 (2015): 968.

³³³ Simidele Dosekun, *Fashioning Post-feminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press), 14.

possibility to see post-feminism as a transnational concept, we are now able to incorporate related theories into the investigation of Chinese girlhood films. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to rethink the content of post-feminism in the local context of China. In the following sections, through the examination on *Go Lala Go* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016), I examine how post-feminism gradually reinforces the disciplining of the girls' cinematic representations, albeit in a way that celebrates the girls' constant self-monitoring and self-improvement as well as their desire to be perfect.

Post-Feminist Masquerade and Underlying Retreatism in *Go Lala Go*

Go Lala Go (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) is an adaptation of a bestselling novel of the same title, published in 2007. The film tells the story of Lala Du, an office lady who decides to change her job and join the prestigious international company, DB, following a distressing incident of sexual harassment by her former boss. The film's male lead is David, a sales manager at DB, who secretly maintains a romantic relationship with Rose, deputy director of HR. However, the demands and pressures of their respective careers compel them to part ways, as neither can allocate sufficient time to tend to their familial obligations. Simultaneously, Lala becomes more familiar with David due to an elevator incident, leading to a gradual deepening of their connection. Later, they develop romantic feelings for each other during a business trip. Concurrently, Lala undergoes personal growth through her professional journey. Through her personal struggle, she evolves from an executive secretary into an experienced HR manager. Nevertheless, her relationship with David faces challenges as her career thrives. Lala is thus placed in the dilemma of choosing between her career and her love life. The film depicts Lala in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, it shows her agency as a typical post-feminist subject through her constant struggle for a career and to refine her body. On the other hand, it also makes her a kind of victim of the loss of her lover because she chooses work over a man. This analysis focuses on three different aspects of how Lala's subjectivity is portrayed in the film while also discussing its underlying retreatist tendency. Additionally, it considers how Lala negotiates the patriarchal social structure in the film through the subjectivisation process.

At the beginning of the film, as a new employee, Lala quickly becomes acquainted with Helen, who is also a secretary. As Helen guides Lala through the process of becoming familiar with the company, she introduces Lala to the hierarchy of the company:

The level below manager is called petty, which actually means poor, with a monthly salary of no more than 4,000 RMB; the manager level is considered middle class, with their own private car and an annual salary of more than 200,000 RMB; the director level is the upper class, with an annual salary of more than 500,000 RMB; the conservatives like to go on holidays abroad, and the new leaders tend to train themselves very hard. The president is a typical rich man who makes over a million RMB annually.

Beyond this organizational structure, Helen further explains to Lala one of the firm policies of the company, emphasising the ban on romantic relationships with coworkers, though at the time Lala does not think the policy has anything to do with her. Lala initially finds herself at the bottom of this hierarchy. However, in this neoliberal working environment, she is motivated to put in more effort to achieve success, by the alluring lifestyle that those at the top enjoy. Lala gains a wealth of knowledge by working tirelessly to better herself. Her first promotion results from her success on an office decoration project, which demonstrates her abilities to her superiors.

The depiction of Lala can be seen as the epitome of fashioning a post-feminist subject, and her subjectivity is articulated in a variety of ways in the film. This is firstly embodied in her ongoing self-reflection through the feedback she gets from work. In a scene where she is criticised by her boss, Rose, for not keeping her working materials organized effectively, Lala does not feel frustrated, instead, she reflects on herself and improves her working skills. When she returns home, she writes her opinion on her blog: Rose is strict but is a good boss; the sign of a good boss is to be able to learn from her; and the sign of a good employee is to be in high alignment with the leader. Through the process of self-reflection, Lala undergoes a psychological development as she actively adopts and internalizes the company's principles. Such psychological growth becomes evident when Rose pretends to be pregnant, so that she can have 6 months leave to dodge the company's decoration project, while Lala steps up to the challenge. The film starts with a set of fast cutting shots to show Lala running everywhere in the company to make

sure the project goes smoothly. Later, Lala encounters a problem whereby people from the company are arguing with people from removals department. When Lala arrives, she improves herself again by adopting Rose's tough approach to address the issue and ultimately achieves a successful resolution. Then, the camera pans over to a cardboard box with the inspirational words "be unafraid, stay the course, fight," as triumphant music plays in the background, Lala walks away proudly. Despite Lala's successful completion of the renovation project, when the head office's director comes for an inspection, Rose returns from her vacation and claims sole credit for the project's success, overshadowing Lala's contributions. This situation triggers a second round of self-introspection for Lala. She returns home and continues in her journal: "How do you convince your boss to take you seriously? You need to perform well, but you also need to be able to effectively communicate your findings. You're miserable if you don't put in the effort. If you work hard but are unable to present yourself, then you are equally miserable." Lala's process of keeping a diary exemplifies her as "self-monitoring subject."³³⁴ In this process, she constantly reshapes her identity and re-evaluates her path for the future. As in the context of post-feminism which is deeply rooted in individualism, girls are expected to possess a blueprint for their lives. They are urged to engage in deep introspection about all facets of their lives, from selecting the ideal marriage partner to being accountable for their professional trajectories.

Therefore, Lala's subjectivity is also evident in her well-defined career ambitions. Throughout the film, she is depicted as an individual with a strong focus on her professional life. This is demonstrated in that after she sleeps with David for the first time while on a business trip to Thailand, she purposefully avoids him when she returns to the office. However, when David confronts her in the pantry, she slyly tells him, "I drank too much, let us just pretend nothing happened that night," and then leaves the room as if she were running away. Lala is depicted in this scene as a subject with complete sexual autonomy on the one hand, in her decision to not let this relationship impede her professional advancement on the other. When she is reflecting on this situation with her family, she says, "I think I should focus on my work, and besides, the company has a rule that when two people get together they have to walk away, and when the time comes it's going to be me who walks away. I feel this job is quite promising. It is difficult for me to

³³⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 19.

find a good job, and I don't want to leave things that way.” Lala’s narration clearly shows that she values her career success and financial stability much more than a romantic relationship. As a result, when David says he wants Lala to be his secretary, she objects more than once, although Rose eventually convinces her, and she has to be David’s secretary for a short period. Even after she and David start dating, she continues to make it clear that her priorities are her career and her aspirations for the future, telling him, “I don't want to be your secretary for the rest of my life, I still have my career aspirations.” Then she takes the initiative to apply for the position of HR manager.



Figure 18: David and Lala in the meeting in Go Lala Go



Figure 19: David on a business trip in Thailand

The expression of Lala’s desires also reveals her subjectivity. These two scenes occur after Lala becomes David’s secretary, the first occurring when Lala is working alone in the office. The fast-cutting shots alternate between Lala working and Lala kissing

David in Thailand; she cannot focus on her work because she keeps thinking about David. Another scene shows Lala and David in the same meeting: the shots take the form of a split screen, with David on the left looking at everyone in the meeting room as he speaks, and Lala on the right, continually staring intently in the direction of David (Figure 18). Then the camera starts to flash back, cutting between David talking to Lala on the bus and his half-naked body on the beach in Thailand (Figure 19), showing the audience what Lala is currently thinking about. From this point forward, Lala confronts her desire for David and realises that she cannot really see him as a simple co-worker. She informs David that she is unable to distinguish between business and private matters, so she no longer wants to serve as his secretary. Lala is finally forthcoming about her desires and receptive to being with David.



Figure 20: When Lala first starts working at DB



Figure 21: When Lala becomes David's secretary

Moreover, Lala's continued shaping and enhancement of her body as a post-feminist subject serves as a metaphor in the film for her professional development. Before the film began production, its fashion-related elements were already a significant marketing ploy. In an interview conducted during the film's production, Jinglei Xu stated that she had asked Patricia Field, a well-known Hollywood film stylist, to serve as the gatekeeper for *Go Lala Go*, and intended to turn the film into a Chinese version of *The Devil Wears Prada* (穿普拉达的女魔头, dir. David Frankel, 2006).³³⁵ Therefore, it is clear that a physical makeover was always a key selling point for the film. From the T-shirt and slacks with a bare face and black-rimmed glasses at the beginning (Figure 20), to a stylish pink silk dress with make-up and accessories (Figure 21), Lala's attire changes as her career advances. Her mental development is also shown through these physical changes. The outward changes reflect her inner development as she grows more confident and ambitious, as well as at ease in her position and bold enough to pursue promotions. The combination of her desire for a successful career and her feminine appearance is an example of what McRobbie refers to as a "post-feminist masquerade."³³⁶ For McRobbie, the post-feminist masquerade serves to reaffirm male power structures by neutralizing the assertiveness and competitiveness of women as they assume authoritative roles, ultimately reinstating traditional gender dynamics and heteronormative constructs through the repetitive and ritualized performance of highly-stylized femininity.³³⁷ In the same logic, Lala's increasingly fashionable and feminine attire as she advances in her career neutralises the threat she poses when competing with men in the workplace, allowing her to maintain a desirable position and remain attractive to David.

The post-feminist masquerade, however, can also be undermined when a direct conflict of interest between the hero and heroine arises. When Lala is appointed HR manager, the relationship between Lala and David is severely tested. The company is prepared to keep Rose and fire David due to the impending merger of David's and Rose's

³³⁵ Qi Wu 吴祺, "'Nymotou Baguan': Jinglei Xu Dazao Shishang Dulala 女魔头把关: 徐静蕾打造时尚杜拉拉" ['The Devil' is the Gatekeeper, Jinglei Xu Creates a Fashionable Dulala], Yangshiwang 央视网 [CCTV.com], last modified 10th August 2009, <http://ent.cctv.com/20090810/105797.shtml> (accessed 21st March 2020).

³³⁶ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 59.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

departments. Before the official announcement, the president of the group specifically explains to Lala that David should not be informed, but Rose has already told David about it privately. Here, Lala must choose between the competing demands of work and love. She agonises for days by herself and chooses not to tell David, demonstrating her work-first attitude as she strictly complies with her boss's instructions. This plot echoes one of Diane Negra's findings in her study of Hollywood chick flicks, namely, "for men work can be a healthy expression of self/individuality but for women it leads to confusion and bad faith."³³⁸ David asks Lala if she would like to travel the world with him if he stops working at DB because he already knows the truth from Rose. Lala grins and declines his offer, stating that she has not yet considered quitting her job. This decision by Lala to prioritise her career over men results in swift punishment.

During the company's mid-year banquet, David learns that Rose decided to leave her position so that he could remain. Rose cannot help but kiss David as they exchange goodbye hugs, and when Lala sees this, they get into a heated argument. Lala accuses him of keeping many secrets from her. She thinks that David still has feelings for Rose and considers her as a substitute for Rose. At this point, David lets out his long-suppressed rage that has been building up inside, yelling, "isn't there anything you haven't told me? I'm not sure if you've ever treated our relationship seriously. Your job and what the company thinks of you are more important to you!" Following this disagreement, the two of them break up. This scene demonstrates how women who put men in different positions face different rewards and penalties. David offers his heartfelt gratitude and a kiss to Rose since she decides to quit her job to protect him, while the career-focused Lala is abandoned. When Lala arrives at work the following day, she learns that David has resigned and chosen to leave her so that she can stay at the company to pursue her career goals. This scene serves as an illustration of how the working girl's love life is threatened by her career success.

³³⁸ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 96.



Figure 22: Lala sits in her new sports car, repeatedly calling David

In the following scene, a black screen reveals that two years later, 33-year-old Lala is now a HR manager, but her life is in a state of deep depression. Lala demonstrates this by sitting in her new sports car after work and repeatedly calling David's phone but receiving no response (Figure 22). Later, Lala attends her brother's wedding, her lonely figure and the smile on her face contrasting sharply with the joyful atmosphere around her. Lala's ambitions for her career have now fully vanished and her continued frustration shows that she is a failure who is unable to maintain romantic relationships. Even though she has reached a certain level of success in her career, she is no longer able to be happy. The film then takes on what could be called, a subtle "retreatism," a term borrowed from Diane Negra, referring to a typical plot that shows a professional working woman deciding to downshift her career and return to the domestic space by choice, to regain the family and romance of those whose lives are in jeopardy as a result of her career advancement.³³⁹ Lala runs away from her job after her brother's wedding to vacation in Thailand, where she and David first fell in love. In Thailand, she runs into David once more, and they reconcile. Although the film does not explicitly state whether Lala quits her job to return to her love/family at the conclusion of the story, the final image depicts Lala and David embarking on the around-the-world trip that David had initially proposed.

Go Lala Go's concluding narrative follows a pattern Negra refers to as "narratives of adjusted ambition."³⁴⁰ Rather than a direct retreat of women from the workplace, the

³³⁹ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 88.

³⁴⁰ Negra, *What a Girl Wants?*, 96.

film emphasises an ideological shift, that is, women retain their role in the workplace but are psychologically distanced from ambition.³⁴¹ In Chinese girl films, the depiction of young women's direct retreat from the workplace is uncommon, and is typically portrayed metaphorically or through a psychological shift. As a feminist legacy of state feminism in the Mao era, women are still encouraged to work and participate in social production to realise their personal value, as long as it is done in a manner that does not challenge patriarchal hierarchy. Much of the film maintains a positive attitude towards Lala's career aspirations, but this is not due to a feminist agenda; rather, the image of the girl is once again grafted onto the metaphor of national development. As Jinhua Li indicates when she decodes Lala's image, the film's "juxtaposing [...] Lala's career success and financial independency with China's economic development and Beijing's transnational commercialization."³⁴² A gendered personal struggle (个人奋斗) is frequently referenced in the film as a tactic to regulate the disparities of various social structures within this broad narrative of the neoliberal state's rapid development. This makes it clear that the opening sequence of the movie only briefly and subtly mentions the subject of sexual harassment in the workplace. The film avoids exploring and criticising the power structure of a patriarchal society by suggesting that the problem of sexism caused by this structural inequality can be solved through women's choice and self-improvement, such as switching to a better company or getting promoted to a higher position. Lala's career advancement also exemplifies a 'class crossing' delusion. The organisational structure of positions in Lala's company is a metaphor for social class. However, through Lala's personal struggle, class can be easily crossed within the company. This contrasts with the social reality in which the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen and class divisions cannot be overcome. Although the film attempts to portray Lala as an ordinary girl through her habit of packing leftovers to take home even though she would rather take the bus, Lala's living environment and packing of clothes reveal her as a typical post-feminist image: a well-educated, Han-nationality, able, young urban middle-class girl.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Jinhua Li, "Consumerism and Chinese Post-feminism: Visual Economy, Chick Flicks, and the Politics of Cultural (Re)Production," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 6, no.4 (2014): 564-565.

The film *Go Lala Go* was produced in 2010. By that point, the movie had already emphasised post-feminism's emergence on Chinese girlhood films' screens as a form of gendered neoliberalism. However, while "post-feminism has tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic,"³⁴³ shifts in the changing ideals images of girls and their depictions in the girlhood films of the second half of the 2010s remain to be seen, and are investigated in the case study below.

Self-Fashioning in the *Nei-Wai* Realm in *Suddenly Seventeen*

Suddenly Seventeen (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016) tells the story of a 28-year-old girl, Liangxia. She and her boyfriend Maoliang have been in love for ten years. Every day she wishes that she will marry Maoliang one day. Dreaming about marriage is a very common plot in many Chinese girlhood films and is related to the definition of girls in the Chinese context discussed in Chapter 2, since the term girl refers to unmarried women. However, Maoliang only cares about his career and ends up breaking up with Liangxia, who is devastated. She accidentally eats magic chocolate, which transforms her psychological status back to her 17-year-old self (she does not physically become 17 but just has the memory of her younger self). The 17-year-old bold, rebellious, and talented Liangxia is very different from the 28-year-old Liangxia. Through the magic chocolates, the younger Liangxia and the older Liangxia continue sharing the same body. Later, the younger Liangxia falls in love with a young man named Yanyan. Soon after, her rebellious personality and excellent painting skills made Maoliang interested in her again. However, not everything goes smoothly for younger Liangxia. The emotional entanglement with Yanyan also saddens her. The story unfolds around the engagement between the two different aged Liangxia and their love interests. At the end of the film, Liangxia – at both ages – finally realises that the most important thing in life is herself and her dreams, not a romantic relationship. Hence, the older Liangxia is inspired by her younger self and regains her ambition and career. Eventually, these two different Liangxia merge into one and become a new, perfect version of Liangxia who is attractive, with a confident attitude and a successful career.

³⁴³ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism," 609.

This film is a very specific example of girlhood films in the late 2010s because it focuses on girls' self-fashioning process and how they create the ideal and perfect subject through dialogue, interaction, and ultimately the union of two spirits in one body. As Angela McRobbie observes, "the notion of 'perfection' had entered into the common currency of contemporary femininity."³⁴⁴ This process of self-construction exemplifies the intensifying post-feminism's regulation of girls and young women, which imposes a higher standard on them to strive – the triple combination of successful domesticity, successful career, and flourishing sexuality. Next, I conduct a close reading of the film's text to determine how the film constructs female subjectivities and the transition from post-feminist masquerade to complete perfection in the post-feminist ideal landscape.

In this film, the heroine has two different female identities throughout the whole story, 28-year-old Liangxia and 17-year-old Liangxia (older Liangxia and younger Liangxia thereafter). Older Liangxia and younger Liangxia are two different embodied subjects of their own desire and experience. Somewhat complicated here is that they are two different female subjects (psychologically) belonging to the same biological body. Of these two subjects, older Liangxia represents a conservative subject: the subjectivity she embodies maintains the traditional Confucian patriarchal value's expectation for women of being a "good wife and wise mother (贤妻良母, *Xianqi Liangmu*)."³⁴⁵ In the opening scene, a series of cogent close-ups convey to the audience the good wife trait of older Liangxia. After dressing herself in the morning, Liangxia rushes into her kitchen to wash fruit, slice oranges, and prepare breakfast while her partner, Maoliang, is still asleep. The background music and Liangxia's smooth cooking movements in the kitchen give the viewer the impression that she is working on the house chores with joy.

Younger Liangxia represents a rebellious subject, and the subjectivity she embodies manifests a clear confrontation with the former one in many aspects. Many of her actions show her alienation from conservative values and social expectations for women. This can be concretely reflected in the change in attitude from obedience to disobedience when she faces the male character Maoliang. The difference between them is most pronounced in their life goals. While younger Liangxia wants to study in France and then become a famous painter, older Liangxia wants to marry Maoliang as soon as possible. As a result,

³⁴⁴ McRobbie, "Notes on The Perfect," 4.

³⁴⁵ Wang, "The 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' as a Social Discourse of Gender," 58.

older Liangxia gives up her painting career early and stays at home to take care of Maoliang. These two subjects stand in for the two traits that have traditionally been viewed as a binary opposition between women: beauty versus intelligence, family versus career. In the following paragraphs, I use the embodiment of female subjectivities and intersubjectivities in terms of female body, look and voice, to investigate how the film represents these two distinct female subjects.



Figure 23: Older Liangxia applying lipstick in Suddenly Seventeen



Figure 24: Older Liangxia measures her weight every morning in Suddenly Seventeen

The female body has always been a central issue in post-feminist media culture, framed as “women’s source of power” and “as a window to the individual’s interior life.”³⁴⁶ This suggests that the bodily representation of the character not only embodies their experiences but also contributes to their identity construction. Moreover, the body also possess an active nature. As Joan Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo indicate,

³⁴⁶ Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture,” 150.

“people learn about the world and about themselves through their bodies; thus, the body is the basis of subjectivity and self-expression.”³⁴⁷ Therefore, it is crucial to examine how cinema shapes the subject through the reading of the body.

The opening sequences of *Suddenly Seventeen* directly show an ideal female image in a patriarchal culture. The scenes start from the back of older Liangxia, as she is slowly pulling on the zipper of her exquisite dress. The camera slowly moves up from her back to her head. She fiddles with her hair but does not turn around her face to the camera, the camera stays on her back. The next scene switches to a close-up of her lips. She picks up lipstick and carefully rub it on her lips (Figure 23). The connection to this scene is another close-up of the makeup products: powder foundation and female perfume. She sprays the perfume on her wrist and smells it. The camera pans right, and finally shows the face of Liangxia – next, she uses her weighing scale (Figure 24). For Liangxia, it has become a habit to check her weight every morning. This habit is a direct reflection of how older Liangxia is actively involved in self-management in her daily life. After a closeup of the scales, the camera pans up to show Liangxia dancing in the mirror, and this sequence ends with Liangxia shooting herself a satisfied glance in the mirror.

In this sequence, from the close-up scenes at the beginning, viewers can only see and perceive some parts of Liangxia’s body, such as her back, head, lips, and wrists, until the last scenes when Liangxia is facing the mirror. These close-up shots show a process of configuring Liangxia’s body parts into a unified entity. She finally sees a complete self-image in the mirror, obtaining her identity through the image in the mirror, and then completes the process of forming a self-subject in this film. The use of the mirror takes a very positive function in building older Liangxia’s subjective identity. Since in the post-feminist culture, how the power of the gaze operates changes, as Gill elaborates on the internalization of the objectifying male gaze into a new self-disciplinary framework where women’s narcissistic gaze shapes their subjectivity.³⁴⁸ In the film, the mirror serves not as a voyeuristic viewing position for the audience but rather as an active instrument of self-surveillance for Liangxia, embodying her agency. However, this agency is contingent upon her self-motivated adherence to an appearance that aligns with

³⁴⁷ Joan Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo, *Woman’s Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2018), 3.

³⁴⁸ Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture,” 152.

heterosexual male expectations. A sequence of shots depicting Liangxia engaging in self-costuming prior to the introduction of the mirror serves as substantiation for her active self-discipline as a post-feminist subject. These close-up shots of Liangxia's body also show the status of young women's life under the influence of neoliberalism and consumerism. They actively join in the refinement programme of the female body. After Liangxia uses of a variety of cosmetics in the film, her voice-over emerges and affirms that this act of self-costuming is "bringing out the best in yourself," it is a kind of self-empowerment. Her subjectivity is thus embodied in her active self-discipline and self-improvement practices.



Figure 25: Younger Liangxia changes to her new look in *Suddenly Seventeen*

The female body reflects the culture it carries and is also a place for resistance. The body as the implementer of subjective practice can be actively shaped by the subject to obey existing gender norms or it can be shaped by the subject's resistance to such norms. In this film, the resistance of the female body is not only reflected in the change of younger Liangxia's appearance, but also shown in her behaviour and movements. These are shown in several groups of scenes after Liangxia becomes a 17-year-old.

After Liangxia turns into her 17-year-old self, her body begins to show a kind of sassy femininity. When younger Liangxia experiences the transition for the first time on her way home from a wedding, she immediately takes off her smart white dress and changes into a much different look. In this sequence, the film uses continuous close-ups to show her body actions, through the representation of her putting on a black leather boots, grey jeans and green bomber jacket to complete her cool girl image. The following scene is a mid-shot, with the screen divided into two parts (Figure 25). On the right half

of the screen is a mirror. Liangxia stares at the mirror and then turns to look at her friend and asks, “how do I look?” The left half of the screen is Liangxia’s friend Ning who turns to look at Liangxia and answers: “wow, I like the way you look when you are 17.” In this way, the younger Liangxia, as the rebellious subject in the film narrative, is established through the recognition of her friend Ning and Liangxia’s narcissistic gaze in the mirror.

Younger Liangxia’s change in appearance also frequently appears in the subsequent plot. Every time younger Liangxia dominates this body, she wears a short wig and jeans instead of dresses. Changing hairstyle and wearing trousers are two of the most notable ways for women to confirm to the autonomous power of their body in Chinese films. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the scenes of female soldiers ‘cutting their braids’ are always used to represent the female awakening subjective consciousness in films in the Mao era. The history of women wearing trousers and keeping their hair short in China is not long. In ancient China, trousers were considered to be vulgar clothes because they separated women’s legs, so they were not allowed to be worn by women. Long hair is also seen as the most significant feature of being a woman. Losing hair length to a certain degree is seen to be damaging to femininity. Until the rise of the Chinese feminist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women gradually began to wear trousers and cut their braids: wearing trousers and keeping hair short is more convenient for women to go to work, participate in social life, and become an independent labourer. In 2010s girlhood films, to show the autonomy of young women through their body modification is still very much in force. It has been extensively combined with post-feminist culture and redefined as choice and empowerment. Therefore, when younger Liangxia changes from styled long hair and elegant dresses to messy short hair and jeans, it also becomes a way to rebel against the older Liang Xia’s conservative feminine image and demonstrate her rebellious subjectivity.



Figure 26: Younger Liangxia dancing in the club in Suddenly Seventeen

When the appearance of her body changes, Liangxia's behaviour and movement also changes accordingly. In this sequence, after younger Liangxia gets changed and wants to go out to have some fun in her new look, she meets Maoliang who has just returned home. During a conversation with Maoliang, younger Liangxia steps over a chair and sits cross-legged, listening indifferently to Maoliang's words with a poker face. This is in stark contrast to the previous scenes where older Liangxia maintained a dignified and elegant body posture and had a smile on her face when looking at Maoliang. This subtle change in younger Liangxia's movements shows her completely different subjectivity from older Liangxia. This embodiment of subjectivities by body movements extends to scenes of Liangxia dancing in a nightclub. When she arrives at the night club, she finds that the song being played there is one of her favourites and immediately enters the dance floor, encouraging everyone to dance with her (Figure 26). This sequence shows several shots of her solo dance at the beginning. Through the camera moving slowly around the scene and then speeding up, the film shows that Liangxia is happily and excitedly dancing with the noisy music and the colourful lights. These fast-moving shots share her vitality with the viewer through the rhythm of her body. Although Liangxia's dancing has no skill, her movement clearly makes her and the people around her feel happy. They gradually join her and dance with excitement, sharing pleasure through the same physical movement. This segment uses full or long shots to show the interaction and bonding between younger Liangxia and the outside world, instead of the more isolated state of older Liangxia. Dancing has become a way for younger Liangxia, as a subject, to enjoy her own pleasure. It is a subjective expression as well as a way to express her desire for a different life.

As the rebellious subject in this film, younger Liangxia's subjectivity is also embodied in her connection with the external world (in contrast with the domestic space). For older Liangxia, as the conservative subject, her main activity space is indoors, such as the kitchen and living room. Her recognised function within the domestic space is to cook, clean the house and be a competent future wife. Every time she appears in an external environment, she usually becomes the companion of the male character Maoliang. An illustration of this point can be seen in a later part of the film when older Liangxia and Maoliang go to tennis with Mr Gao, Maoliang's client. Maoliang specially reminds her that she must lose beautifully during the game, because "it is not important whether we lose or not, it is important that Mr Gao does not lose." In these scenes, although older Liangxia's body appears in these external spaces, it is actually used to serve other people's will rather than her own. However, the younger Liangxia creates the true connection between herself and the outside world through her talent. When younger Liangxia encounters a boy she likes, Yanyan, on the tube, she spontaneously draws a portrait of him. Younger Liangxia loses the drawing when she gets off the tube, where Yanyan discovers it, photographs it, and uploads it to the Internet. Because of this painting, Younger Liangxia quickly becomes a famous artist online. When Maoliang's client sees the drawing, he asks Maoliang to hire her to do his design work. Due to the public's recognition of her abilities, younger Liangxia is able to establish a genuine connection with the outside world. Drawing, as a form of body practice for the younger Liangxia in a public space, becomes a way for her to embody her unique subjectivity.

Before proceeding with the further analysis of the film, I must reiterate that the above differentiated presentation of the female body in different spaces precisely reflects entanglement between the *nei-wai* (内—外) gender concepts of Chinese Confucian concepts and feminist ideas. In other words, this is also the concept of Chinese post-feminism under my definition: an ambivalent combination of (state)feminist and anti-(state)feminist ideas, stemming from the legacy of socialist state feminism as well as the (re)emergence of conservative Confucian patriarchal values and individualism, spurred by the influence of Chinese neoliberalism during the post-Mao era. Confucianism has made a comeback in 21st-century China, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and some of its traditional family values have been revived by neoliberal China as a tool to stabilise

society and manage its people.³⁴⁹ Traditional Confucian gender discourse, using the *nei-wai* distinction, defines women's functions within the domestic sphere. According to Lisa Rosenlee,

the *nei-wai* signifies a functional distinction that defines the property of two gendered spheres and the normative gender-based division of labor [...] its regulative force, where women are formally confined to the familial real of *nei*, the real of domestic skills and household management, and men to the realm of *wai*, the realm of literary learning and public services, is not just theoretical but also reflected in social reality.³⁵⁰

Rosenlee's concept suggests that, according to traditional Confucian ethics, men are usually recognised for their talents displayed to the outside world (*wai*, 外), while women are usually more valued for their abilities in terms of managing chores in the domestic space (*nei*, 内). The mobility of women among the *nei-wai* realm is significantly impacted by this functional difference. In *Suddenly Seventeen*, the film's presentation of older Liangxia's domestic skills makes her a qualified traditional woman who stays within the domestic space. Younger Liangxia, through her talent at painting, breaks the limitations imposed on women in the domestic sphere and puts herself back into the public sphere. In this sense, younger Liangxia can be seen as a feminist icon who challenges the patriarchal distinction between the inside and the outside world. However, as Rosalind Gill claims, "post-feminist logics currently operate through a celebration of (a certain kind of) feminism, rather than its repudiation."³⁵¹ The film celebrates the younger Liangxia's talent while also calling for a higher standard for the ideal image of Liangxia. Older Liangxia is portrayed as an abandoned victim who has lost her glamour because she has no personal career to pursue. Younger Liangxia, however, also falls short of

³⁴⁹ Xianlin Song, "Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The 'Cultural Craze' and New Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 99.

³⁵⁰ Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A philosophical Interpretation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 6-7.

³⁵¹ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-Feminism," 612.

success as a result of losing her favourite boy because she cannot actively embrace sexual autonomy (she refuses Yanyan's request to have intimate relationship with her). In other words, in a neoliberal post-feminist world, when women only participate in domestic or external spheres, they continue to be an incomplete subject. They must therefore motivate themselves to strive for complete perfection. In the following section, I elaborate on how the point-of-view (POV) shot is used to shape not only the subjectivity of the two Liangxia, but also the intersubjectivity that flows between them.

Intersubjectivity and the 'Perfect' in *Suddenly Seventeen*

Apart from the female body, women's looking is another embodiment of female subjectivities in Chinese girlhood films. In her later research on fetishism and curiosity, Laura Mulvey discusses the myth of Pandora's box and argues that one of the figures for feminist desire is curiosity, which "describes a desire to know something secret so strongly that it is experienced like a drive [...] curiosity is active [...] curiosity lay behind the first woman's desire to penetrate a forbidden secret that precipitated the fall of man."³⁵² In films, this curiosity is usually expressed through the female characters' own active looking. In *Suddenly Seventeen*, women's active looking can be examined in two ways. Firstly, women's active looking expresses her female subjectivity, as it shows her desire, emotion, and pleasure. More importantly, looking as an action of female subject bears the responsibility of driving the film's narrative. We can understand these two points through the analysis of the following scenes.

³⁵² Laura Mulvey, "Fetishism and Curiosity Revisited," in *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind's Eye* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), viii.



Figure 27: Older Liangxia making breakfast for Maoliang in Suddenly Seventeen



Figure 28: Maoliang getting ready for work in the morning in Suddenly Seventeen

In *Suddenly Seventeen*, Liangxia's first active looking (at others) appears after her status as subject has been established at the beginning of the film. As mentioned in the previous section, the film uses a series of close-up shots to show older Liangxia's actions, like dressing up, doing makeup, and looking at herself in the mirror to accomplish the establishment of her conservative subject status. Following that sequence is continuous activity of her in the kitchen. These activities, such as cutting an orange and making breakfast, deliver some contextual information to show her typical 'good wife' characteristics. Here, the film uses cross-montage editing, cutting scenes of Liangxia's kitchen activities with several scenes of the vague shape of a man showering in the bathroom. The man's face and body are blurred, so the viewer cannot recognize who he is. This mysterious atmosphere continues until Liangxia finally finishes her breakfast and walks to the dining room; she suddenly stops and turns around, looking at the camera (Figure 27). In the next shot, Liangxia's looking merges with the camera function as a POV shot: the fusion of the lens and Liangxia's active looking is used to tell the viewer

what she is looking at – the male character, Maoliang, who is wearing a suit (Figure 28). At this time, Liangxia's voiceover also reveals a secret to us: "today he will propose to me." In this way, the film uses older Liangxia's active looking to create suspense for the viewer and thus start the film's narrative.



Figure 29: Younger Liangxia keeps looking at Yanyan when they first meet in Suddenly Seventeen

Meanwhile, as the rebellious subject in this film, younger Liangxia also shares the function of launching and establishing the film's plot. In the middle of the film, younger Liangxia rides the subway; after she enters the carriage, she looks around, expressing her curiosity about the world and the joy she feels. The film uses an over-the-shoulder shot to show Liangxia's line of sight: in the next shot, it switches back to a subjective shot which is a close-up of the second male character, Yanyan, showing the viewer what attracted younger Liangxia's attention. The film also uses a conventional shot-reverse shot to show younger Liangxia and Yanyan's relationship through their peeking at each other, which shows the love that is quietly blossoming between them, and thus begins the film's subplot. While countless films organize stories around men's looking, here both the story progression and emotional appeals are organized around women's looking. Thus, girlhood films do not just show young women, they can show young women as narrative catalysts and agents (as opposed to characters who can only respond to others' actions). In addition, looking as the embodiment of female subjectivity also shows the female subject's desire and pleasure through their active looking. In this series of shot-reverse shots, whenever the camera returns to younger Liangxia, her face appears on the screen in a close-up. She continues to look at Yanyan with joy (Figure 29). Her gaze is sustained

and intense and her facial expression shows her desire and pleasure, and thus, expresses her female subjectivity.



Figure 30: Older Liangxia shoots a video for younger Liangxia to send her a message



Figure 31: Reverse view as older Liangxia shoots a video for younger Liangxia to send her a message

In this film, the second significance of women's looking is that it is not just an action to express their own subjectivity, instead it forms an interactive relationship or an intersubjectivity between different female subjects through the action of looking and speaking. Meanwhile, this communication through looking and speaking allows them to receive the subjective influence from each other, and thus, helps them to reshape their own subjectivities. In *Suddenly Seventeen*, the active looking between female subjects is accomplished through reflective media, including a mirror and a mobile phone, the latter of which allows them to communicate through video recordings. The younger Liangxia and the older Liangxia are different subjects in terms of consciousness but share a physical body. This prevents them from appearing at the same time and in the same space, and only one of them can dominate the body at any one time. Therefore, their

communication must be achieved by recording video messages to each other. The scene in question occurs after the younger Liangxia's painting is appreciated by Maoliang's client, Mr Gao. Maoliang takes the secretary to dinner with Liangxia and asks if she can cooperate with him. However, the one who dominates this body at the dinner is the older Liangxia. Even though she would like to cooperate with Maoliang and take this as an opportunity to win him back, she lacks her younger self's painting ability. Hence, she walks to the ladies' room, opens her phone, and records a video message to younger Liangxia (Figure 30). The next shot provides a hypothetical point-of-view shot³⁵³ of younger Liangxia watching this video (Figure 31). In this video message, older Liangxia asks younger Liangxia to help her complete the painting, by doing this she would forgive all the trouble she caused. Then, when younger Liangxia is dominant, she turns on the phone and looks at the screen as older Liangxia's voice rings out from it. Through the mobile phone video, this is the first time they achieve interaction and communication.

In the following sequences, the mobile phone becomes the main tool for their communication, as they continue to influence and change each other through their indirect looking and speaking. Meanwhile, since younger Liangxia and older Liangxia cannot appear in the same space at the same time, when the occupier of the body changes, they always cause some trouble for each other. Consequently, they must negotiate the trouble caused by the former occupier and sometimes help each other to fix the problems they caused. After they switch the occupier of the body and watch the video message on the phone, they become the executors of each other's requests. Across several transformations, they continue to negotiate and compromise with each other through the action of looking. Both had a mutual hostile consciousness with each other at the beginning, because they did not agree with each other's values and both wanted to seize control of the body. Through several conflicts, they achieve a state of mutual compromise and interdependence, alternately expressing their subjectivity and desire. This communication and conflict help them to develop a better understanding of themselves and reshape their female subjectivities.

³⁵³ The reason I say it is a hypothetical POV shot is the one who holds the phone is still the older Liangxia; the film uses the reverse shot to indicate the character relationship between younger Liangxia and older Liangxia.

However, it is worth noting that in the way older Liangxia and younger Liangxia interact with each other, due to the premise of the film (two psychological subjects belonging to the same biological body), on the one hand, their interaction and mutual influence can be interpreted as a demonstration of intersubjectivity. The two female subjects are equal to each other, affect each other, and are subjects of their own desires and looking. On the other hand, looking and speaking here embodies a kind of self-reflexivity, because both younger Liangxia and older Liangxia are, in the end, Liangxia herself. Hence, it is also herself that she looks at and reflects upon when she faces the other subject by using the mobile phone. Therefore, all the changes in Liangxia are inner-directed rather than externally imposed. This setting again reinforces the neoliberal discourse of individual struggle. Based on this logic, the relationship between older Liangxia and younger Liangxia is not about female friendship, but rather, a journey of self-discovery. Considering this against the film's ending, where the younger Liangxia disappears forever as the transforming chocolate runs out, all her intelligence and her bravery and all of her good qualities remain in older Liangxia's body, making older Liangxia a completely perfect version of herself. At the end of the film, while Liangxia is presenting her beauty and enjoying the success of her career, Maoliang, who has left her before, also goes out of his way to run naked in the streets to get her love back. This ending suggests to the audience a new post-feminist scenario, which is that as you continue to remake yourself to have both a beautiful appearance and a successful career, men will automatically come to you, thus creating a kind of complete perfection, as mentioned above, comprising a triple combination of successful domesticity, career, and sexuality. Then, what if the film is truly a presentation of a friendship between the girls? And how should postfeminist emotions influence the girls' interactions? The following chapter will be devoted to examining this topic.

Chapter 5

Centring Post-Feminist Girlfriendship in Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films

Friendship contains the possibility of becoming not the other, but becoming self-sentient. I become aware of my own desire, of what I *do not* desire, of what I *do aspire* to, through my interactions with my friend.³⁵⁴

----- Felicity Colman

The ubiquity of girls and young women on the contemporary Chinese film screen has brought various women's topics into the spotlight. One of the themes that has (re)gained popularity in the 2010s is female friendship. Girlhood films in this category are not just confined to the theme of heterosexual relationships but instead explore the single lives of girls, their pursuit of careers, and especially, homosociality. These films typically depict a dyad or a group of girls' friendship stories that can take place at different stages of girlhood, but mostly emphasise the period after they go to university at the age of 18, up until their late 20s, before they set up their own families. The detailed depiction of the emotional connection between girlfriends in such films, on the one hand, "provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women."³⁵⁵ Girls' homosocial experiences become the main storyline in these films rather than just being a subplot of their romantic stories with men. The pleasure of girls "does not rely on the hope generated through a heterosexual 'happy ever after', instead it takes pleasure in the presence of girlfriends."³⁵⁶ Male characters are either largely absent from the main film narrative or merely bystanders in the girlfriends' world. On the other hand, female friendships portrayed in many contemporary Chinese girlhood films showcase a kind of contradictory girlfriend culture that has a strong association with both

³⁵⁴ Colman Felicity, "Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent," *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no.3 (2005): 357.

³⁵⁵ Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 4.

³⁵⁶ Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

post-feminist and neoliberal cultures. Namely, female friendship revolves around a homosocial form of surveillance that is reconfigured as intimate and sentimental. Alison Winch's study of post-feminist girlfriend culture is crucial in understanding the interwoven female friendship on the Chinese film screen. She uses the term "girlfriendship" to refer to a strategic neoliberal relationship between girlfriends in post-feminist media culture.³⁵⁷ According to Winch, "girlfriendship" is "an investment in the individual" since girls' friendships enact an intimate network of "girlfriend gaze," which enables girls to achieve post-feminist normativity through the form of mutual monitoring and regulation between girlfriends.³⁵⁸ But at the same time it inspires jealousy and self-surveillance among girlfriends, who fight and compete with each other because they all want to become normatively distinctive. Such a strategic and nurturing relationship of girls is also portrayed in the Chinese female friendship films, which showcases the importance of girl's friendship in relation to the construction and regulation of their self-identities.

In this chapter, based on a textual analysis of *Girls* (闺蜜, dir. Chun-Chun Wong, 2014) and *Soul Mate* (七月与安生, dir. Derek Tsang, 2016), my aim is to engage the depiction of paradoxical female friendship in contemporary Chinese girlhood films with the ongoing scholarly discussion of post-feminist girlfriend culture. I draw on Winch's work on girlfriendship as an entry point and use its logic of the penetration of post-feminism and neoliberalism into girls' intimate relationships to determine the ambivalent presentation of female friendship in contemporary Chinese girlhood films. First, I consider how contemporary Chinese female friendship films embody this strategic post-feminist girlfriendship, and how these films transnationally resonate with Winch's studies and other Western scholarships on post-feminist culture. It is also important to investigate this post-feminist girlfriend culture within its specific geo-cultural context. The portrayal of intimate female friendships in Chinese and Western films can differ widely. In Chinese girlhood films, the body is not only the main site for mutual surveillance, but also a way to build their intimacy. Meanwhile, girlfriends regulate and police each other not only physically, but also psychologically. The regulation of girlfriend gaze in Chinese female

³⁵⁷ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 2.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

friendship films does not directly take the same form as “normative cruelties”³⁵⁹ or “the gestures of loving meanness”³⁶⁰ in Hollywood friendship films,³⁶¹ but rather commonly involves girls sacrificing themselves to preserve the representative status of their girlfriends. Furthermore, the content of post-feminist representability also needs to be updated after taking the Chinese context into account. For instance, a girl who comes from a complete and loving family can also serve as an embodiment of a representative identity, since the complete family is frequently portrayed as a girl’s source of security, which is also a manifestation of the “positive psychology”³⁶² that is promoted by post-feminist culture. Therefore, in light of Winch’s theory of girlfriend gaze in neoliberal post-feminist girlfriendship, I incorporate Diane Negra’s notion of representability in the “post-feminist lifecycle”³⁶³ into my research to investigate various forms of interaction between girlfriends in contemporary Chinese girlhood films. I consider in particular neoliberalism’s infiltration of girls’ social relationships, inspiring their self-management and peer control while spreading nationally specific post-feminist ideas through their desire for homosocial bonding.

This chapter is divided into four broad parts. Given the limited exploration of the representation of female friendship in Chinese girlhood films throughout its history, I start with an overview of historical precedents in the portrayal of female friendship stories from early Chinese classical literature to Chinese film history. In this section, I also employ Karen Hollinger’s framework for analysing female friendship in Hollywood films and apply it to identify eight different representations of female friendship in Chinese

³⁵⁹ Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold, “Normative Cruelties and Gender Deviants: The Performative Effects of Bully Discourses for Girls and Boys in School,” *British Educational Research Journal* 36, no.4 (2010): 575.

³⁶⁰ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 29.

³⁶¹ In the works of Ringrose, Renold, and Winch, both “normative cruelties” and “the gestures of loving meanness” are used to describe a strategic as well as traumatic girlfriend network that involves a combination of humiliation, exclusion and support wrapped in the guise of friendship, often manifesting as derogatory comments about one’s body among girlfriends.

³⁶² Gill, “The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism,” 619.

³⁶³ Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Post-feminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 47.

films throughout the 20th century to explore how these representations have evolved in the 21st century. Then, in light of Winch's theory of girlfriend gaze in neoliberal post-feminist girlfriendship and other scholarships, I (re)conceptualise the two main type of female friendship films and the representation of contradictory post-feminist girlfriendship in the contemporary Chinese context. In the third section, I use *Girls* as the example to discuss how the pre-existing female friendship in this film has been commodified through girlfriends' self-branding in the public space. I explore how this strategic girlfriend relationship echoes yet differs from the girlfriend culture in the Western context, and how these girls maintain each other's occupation of post-feminist representability by relying on the power of the girlfriend gaze. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I use the film *Soul Mate* to consider the portrayal of female friendship under the retrospective framework. As this film has a detailed portrayal of how the friendship between two girls develops, I specifically focus on how the body is positioned at the centre of the girlfriend network in *Soul Mate*, because it serves as both a portal for developing intimacy and a site for inflicting punishment on one another.

The Portrayal of Female Friendship: From Literature to the Screen

Before the arrival of Chinese film in 1905, female friendship was a rarely discussed theme in Chinese literary history. In the Ming (明朝, 1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (清朝, 1636-1912), there were many familiar folk tales or legends about male friendship, such as "Taking Oath in the Peach Garden" (桃园三结义), a story of three men's friendship featured in the literary work *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义, Guanzhong Luo, 14th century). However, there were very few stories of female friendship, even in the literature that specifically focused on women, for instance, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦, Xueqin Cao, mid-18th century). This book depicts many different female characters and the boudoir culture in the Qing dynasty but fails to contain a single complete story of girls' friendship. Xiaoping Song argues that this historical gap in the depiction of female friendship is because male-dominated history is obsessed with weaving the myth of "heroes cherishing heroes" (英雄惜英雄, *Yingxiong Xi Yingxiong*), while women are repeatedly portrayed as a divided group that is jealous of and alienated

from each other, as a contrast of valuable male camaraderie.³⁶⁴ Yiwei Zhang also examines the reason for this gender-biased situation in classic Chinese literature. She suggests that the popularity of male friendship stories is because they are typically associated with deep trust based on shared interests or goals, such as lending money, entrusting an orphan to a friend, or going to jail for a male friend.³⁶⁵ These plots can convince the reader that loyalty, solidarity, and trust between male friends are valuable and powerful, which is worth depiction.³⁶⁶

However, such plots are rare in the portrayal of female friendship. More than that, in Chinese language, the equivalent word for intimate girlfriends is *Guimi* (闺蜜) or *Guizhong Miyou* (闺中密友). *Gui* (闺) means boudoir or a girl's bedroom. It reflects that Chinese women's historical socio-spatial limitations have influenced their friendships and homosocial activities, both of which are confined to the domestic space. According to the *Zhengshi Guifan* (郑氏规范) – a well-known text from the Song dynasty (宋朝, 960-1279) that discusses family management in the Confucian Chinese society – girls up to the age of eight should be kept in the boudoir and not have contact with men outside the family members.³⁶⁷ In the Ming Dynasty, the social criticism of the phenomenon of women going out in groups can be seen in Wu Yuancui's *Linju Manlu* (林居漫录). It states that the custom in Jiangsu and Zhejiang was very lascivious, since women always dress up and go out together during the spring months.³⁶⁸ This long-standing critique of

³⁶⁴ Xiaoping Song 宋晓萍, “Nvxing Qingyi: Kongque Huo Xushi Yizhi 女性情谊：空缺或叙事抑制 [Female Friendship: The Gaps or Narrative Suppression],” *Wenyi Pinglun* 文艺评论 [Literature and Art Criticism], no.3 (1996): 60.

³⁶⁵ Yiwei Zhang 张怡微, “Ningju De Kewang — Cong Nvxing Youyi De Shuxie Tanqi 凝聚的渴望——从女性友谊的书写谈起 [Desire to Bond: Discussion from the Writing of Female Friendship],” *Shanghai Wenxue* 上海文学 [Shanghai Literature], (2019): 126.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Yanping Lei 雷艳平, “Cong Haofang Dao Zhenjing — Lun Wenhua Zhuanxing Houde Songdai Guigevjiao 从豪放到贞静——论文化转型后的宋代闺阁女教 [Female Teaches after the Cultural Reforming Song Dynasty Inner Chamber],” *Lanzhou Xuekan* 兰州学刊 [Lanzhou Academic Journal], no.3 (2013): 55.

³⁶⁸ Lizhong Song 宋立中, “Mingqing Jiangnan Funv ‘Yeyou’ Yu Fengjian Lunli Chongzhuang 明清江南妇女“冶游”与封建伦理冲突 [Conflict of Women's ‘Tourism’ in the South of the Yangtze during the Ming

women's homosocial activities in the public sphere has led female friendships to lack legitimacy and become difficult to see from the outside world. Furthermore, Zhang argues that the way female friendships operate, such as accompanying each other, caring, and listening to each other's stories, is too insipid to drive a story's plot effectively.³⁶⁹ Consequently, female friendships are difficult to find at the centre of a story narrative on a long-term basis.

It was not until the arrival of the May Fourth New Culture Movement in the early 20th century that the depiction of female same-sex relationships began to appear in some Chinese literary works and films. Bingru Guo suggests that the reform of women's educational rights during the May Fourth period laid the groundwork for the emergence of female friendship. She argues that girls' schools were the starting point for the emergence of the (May Fourth) new women into society: in addition to providing them with necessary knowledge transfer and skills training, the schools also gave them the chance to interact with their peers.³⁷⁰ In this context, depictions of women's homosociality began to appear in the works of a group of educated young female intellectuals of the May Fourth period, such as Yin Lu's *Haibin Guren* (海滨故人, 1923), Shuhua Ling's *Shuoyou Zheme Yihui Shi* (说有这么一回事, 1928), Ling Ding's *Weihu* (韦护, 1929) and Pingmei Shi's *Taoyu* (涛语, 1931). Fran Martin's book *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female* is one of the few studies to examine the media portrayal of same-sex relationships between women in 20th-century China. The first chapter of the book examines the depiction of romantic friendships in the aforementioned novels, or what Martin refers to as "same-sex love or *Tongxing Ai* (同性爱)" as a form of "temporary homosexuality" between two female subjects who do not need to self-identify as lesbians.³⁷¹ While her work was also unable to address the on-

and the Qing with Traditional Ethics]," *Funv Yanjiu Luncong* 妇女研究论丛 [*Collection of Women's Studies*], no.1 (2010): 42.

³⁶⁹ Zhang, "Desire to Bond," 126.

³⁷⁰ Bingru Guo 郭冰茹, "Jiemei Qingyi Yu Xinnvxing De Ziwo Rentong 姐妹情谊与新女性的自我认同 [Sisterhood and the New Women's Self-identity]," *Zhida Xuebao* 职大学报 [*Journal of the Stagg and Worker's University*], no.2 (2020): 2.

³⁷¹ Fran Martin, *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

screen development of same-sex relationships between women outside of 20th-century fictional texts in Mainland China, she did locate some debatable examples that involved girl's romantic friendships in late 20th-century Hong Kong and Taiwanese films, such as *Intimate Confessions of a Chinese Courtesan* (爱奴, dir. Yuan Chu, 1972), *Twin Bracelets* (双镯, dir. Yushan Huang, 1991), *The Silent Thrush* (失声画眉, *Shisheng Huamei*, dir. Lang Jiang, 1992) and *Lady in Heat* (女欢, dir. Yanping Zhu & Wencheng Xie, 1998). However, it is important to note that, in contrast to Martin's emphasis on the media representation of homoeroticism among women, this study concentrates solely on the depiction of girls' homosociality, or more precisely, female friendship, within the context of Mainland China.

Given the gap in typology exploration of the theme of female friendship in the Chinese film history, I have referred to and reconfigured Karen Hollinger's framework in her study of female friendship films in Hollywood. Hollinger began by focusing on the work of literary critics who have delved into fictional depictions of women's same-sex relationships. She borrows Janet Todd's analysis of five types of female friendship represented in literature and then applies them in analysing female friendship films – the five types are: sentimental, manipulative, political, erotic, and social friendships.³⁷² According to Hollinger, sentimental friendships are characterized by their emotional closeness and passionate expression of feelings, and typically involve deep, same-sex unions between two girls.³⁷³ Conversely, the depiction of erotic female friendship highlights the separation between women's homosociality and homosexuality. This is frequently conveyed through narratives of lesbian romance and coming-out stories, in which the heroine embarks on a journey to self-discovery and realizes her lesbian identity.³⁷⁴ Hollinger interprets manipulative female friendship as anti-female friendship films. In this category, the rhetoric and actions associated with sentimental female friendship are utilized to exploit the friend for her own selfish and perverse intentions.³⁷⁵ The portrayal of political female friendships revolves around a partnership aimed at

³⁷² Janet M. Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 3-4.

³⁷³ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 7.

³⁷⁴ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 7.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

taking action against the prevailing social system, or patriarchal conventions,³⁷⁶ while the intense emotional bond between individual women is not the primary emphasis in this category. The representation of social female friendships is marked by a nurturing bond that helps girlfriends reintegrate smoothly into the gendered social expectations for women rather than challenge them. In this category, women assist and uphold each other through the sharing of each other's wisdom or offering a compassionate ear, which may involve encouraging a friend's heterosexual romance or providing comfort when she experiences the loss of a male partner.³⁷⁷

Beyond the five categories mentioned above, Hollinger also brings three additional categories of female friendship films into the discussion. The first is called group friendship films, drawn from her retrospective of women's films in America during the 1930s and 1940s. Films depicting group friendships usually centre on a group of three or more friends, each representing distinct choices in women's life paths. However, films in this category place more emphasis "on women's relationships with men than on their friendships with each other."³⁷⁸ The second category is borrowed from Paulina Palmer's discussion of two common paradigms of female friendship in novels written by female authors: the political and the psychoanalytic.³⁷⁹ The political female friendship here shares an identical structure and implication with the political friendship (from Janet Todd's work) discussed in the previous paragraph and thus is not reiterated here. In contrast to the political one, "the psychoanalytic approach pays little attention to the collective, political aspects of relations between women."³⁸⁰ Instead, it centres on the non-political impact of female friendship bonding on an individual woman's maturation and psychological development.³⁸¹ Finally, Hollinger shifts her focus to the cinematic representation of female friendship from minority racial and ethnic groups. There are two subsets within this category, one is intraracial or intraethnic female friendship films,

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

³⁷⁹ Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 130-131.

³⁸⁰ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 9.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

which explore friendships among women of colour within the same racial or ethnic group.³⁸² The second subset encompasses interracial or interethnic female friendship films, which depict female friendships between individuals from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.³⁸³

After reviewing Hollinger's framework of Hollywood female friendship films, attention now turns towards its application and evolution on the Chinese film screen, spanning the 1920s to the 2000s. The first main category is political female friendship. Different from Hollinger's definition, which emphasises women in political alliance against the patriarchal social system, I use this term to indicate that women's friendship embodies China's sociopolitical dynamics. Due to the left-wing film movement of the 1930s and the strict political ideology control during the Mao era, the portrayal of female friendship in films was frequently a vehicle for political metaphors for a considerable period in the 20th century. Political female friendships are usually represented in a two women mode, and as a mentor-mentee relationship. Several illustrations can be found in Chinese film history from different periods, for instance, Shuzhen Zhou and Yu Yu in *Three Modern Ladies* (三个摩登女性, dir. Wancang Bu, 1933), Xiaohui Li and Lihua Du in *Qingchun de Yuandi* (青春的园地, dir. Weiyi Wang, 1955), Yuzhen Zhou and Jinfang Xie in *Xiangyang Huakai* (向阳花开, dir. Yuping Wei, 1960), Yan Jin and Ling Jin in *Shancun Jiemei* (山村姐妹, dir. Zheng Zhang, 1965) or Qiangyun Yang and Mali Hu in *Qingchun Wansui* (青春万岁, dir. Shuqin Huang, 1983). In these films, there are two contrasting types of female character. One kind is the girls who always adopt progressive socialist revolutionary ideology, willing to sacrifice for the sake of the collective and actively participate in the building of the socialist state. These girls are greatly praised and play a dominant role in the films' storylines. The second group of girls typically embodies conservative gender values, backward thinking, capitalist ideals, or individualistic ideologies, all of which are strongly criticised within the film. In these films, same-sex relationships between girls are presented in a pattern that one type of girls routinely dominates the film narrative. The dominant female type continuously disciplines or transforms the other kind type to help her achieve political correctness. Their interactions were often used to signify the social and political contradictions at that

³⁸² Ibid., 180.

³⁸³ Ibid., 181.

time, to criticise feudalism, capitalist or individualist ideologies, and to mobilise women to join the state revolution or nation building instead of exploring women's vivid homosocial experiences.

The second main category is group female friendship. A group of girlfriends usually consists of three to five people in these films. Like Hollinger's observation of 1930s and 1940s American female friendship films, the representation of group female friendships in 20th-century Chinese films did not prioritize the emotional connections among women. Instead, these films often used the reunion of girlfriends as a backdrop or context. In this instance, each girlfriend in attendance tells a unique story based on their own class, marriage, and other circumstances, but the girlfriends do not engage with each other's narratives. Hence, Hollinger also uses the term "life choices films"³⁸⁴ to describe this type of film where individuals share their varied life experiences within the context of a reunion among a group of girlfriends. This occurs intermittently in Chinese films from various time periods, such as *The Classic for Girls* (女儿经, dir. Shichuan Zhang, 1934),³⁸⁵ *Girl Students' Dormitory* (女大学生宿舍, dir. Shujun Shi, 1983), *On the Island* (小岛, dir. Lun Zhang, 1985), and *Tongling Nvyou* (同龄女友, dir. Zongan Dai and Ruzhuo Deng, 1987). In these films, the gathering of girlfriends is only a site for the expression of the metaphors that each individual represents. Through the sharing of their individual experiences or dreams, the films focus more on the challenges they encounter in their relationships with men or in response to significant societal changes, rather than highlighting their bonds with fellow girlfriends.

The third main category is social female friendship. The earliest documented depiction of social female friendship, to my knowledge, appears in the film *Three Girls in Shanghai* (上海三女子, dir. Jinping Ren, 1926). Since the original copy of the film has been lost, we can only explore its content from an article published on *Guowen Zhoubao* (国闻周报) in 1926. The film concerns three girls, Xinlan, Liyun and Yunyu, who were once close friends. Weinian, the fiancé of Liyun, betrays her and falls in love with Xinlan, but later abandons Xinlan as well. Xinlan is left alone to give birth to a child, and after all the trials and tribulations, she marries Weinian with Yunyu's encouragement

³⁸⁴ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 30.

³⁸⁵ This film is co-produced by nine directors: Shichuan Zhang, Pingqian Li, Bugao Cheng, Xiling Shen, Sufeng Yao, Zhengqiu Zheng, Xinfu Xu, Kengran Chen, and Cun Wu.

and assistance.³⁸⁶ It is no longer possible to ascertain whether these three girls interact on a deeper emotional level in the film. But based merely on the film's narrative, the pattern between Xinlan and Yunyu fits exactly into the manifestation of social female friendship, that is, girls “aid and sustain each other... by promoting a friend’s heterosexual romance or by easing her pain at the loss of their male lover.”³⁸⁷ This type of female friendship was prevalent but unremarkable in Chinese films throughout the 20th century. Female friendship in this category is either portrayed as a subplot of the story or follows the heroine's journey to finding the ideal partner. The key role of being a good girlfriend is to assist the other girlfriend in securing and maintaining their heterosexual relationship. These marginalized depictions of female friendships continue to be a common presence in Chinese films after the turn of the new century. For example, in *Sophie's Revenge*, Xiaoxi Lu and Li Li's friendship with protagonist Sophie is only used to help the frustrated heroine regain her confidence and move on to pursue her true love. A similar example can be seen in the friendship between Lala and Helen in the film *Go LaLa Go* (杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010). Their private discussions serve only to convey tangential details, such as office gossip that is unrelated to the main storyline. Alternatively, these girls' talk is used to expose Helen's failure in securing a partner, and subsequently caution the protagonist, Lala, to make the right choices to maintain her heterosexual romantic relationship. The representation of social female friendship in these films further reflects the lack of legitimacy of female homosociality, since it is only seen as a small part of a woman's life before finding a husband and establishing a family.

When investigating the representation of female friendship in Chinese films under Karen Hollinger's framework, it is not surprising that the categories of erotic friendship are basically absent from mainstream Chinese films. Fran Martin indicates that, in China, “strict government censorship directed mainly at political but also at ‘moral’ content rendered the onscreen representation of sexual love between women an impossibility from the mid-century until relatively recently.”³⁸⁸ According to her research, the first feature film in Mainland China that involved a female homoerotic relationship was *Fish*

³⁸⁶ Leng Xin 心冷, “Ping Shanghai Sannvzi 评上海三女子 [Review of Three Girls in Shanghai],” *Guowen Zhoubao* 国闻周报 [*Guowen Weekly*] 3, no.23 (1926): 35-36.

³⁸⁷ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 8.

³⁸⁸ Martin, *Backward Glances*, 149.

and *Elephant* (今年夏天, dir. Yu Li, 2001).³⁸⁹ However, due to the particular focus of this study being on mainstream films from Mainland China, the work of independent filmmakers is beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, as we observe in the following section regarding the depiction of female friendship in 2010s Chinese mainstream films, these films commonly situate girl's friendships within a compulsory heteronormative context by involving them in romantic partnerships with men. This is undertaken to prevent any homosexual connotations in the passionate sentimental bonds between girls, and thus to ensure the films can meet China's censorship standards.

Another rarely seen type is the depiction of manipulative female friendship. According to Hollinger's definition, girlfriends in this type of films use, control and directly compete with each other. Their friendships are seen to be "plagued by jealousy, envy, and competition for men, and they teach women to beware of and fear one another."³⁹⁰ Only three examples of female friendship in this mode have been located. One is the *Olive Green Roof* (橄榄绿屋顶, dir. Sha Sun, 1987), a film set in China during the reform era, which tells the story of five girls who begin as best friends and open a bookstore together before competing for a position as a hotel waitress. Another example can be found in the film *Sange Nvren Yige Meng* (三个女人一个梦, dir. Jiang Haiyang, 1993), which explores the themes of emotional manipulation and extortion under the guise of friendship among three girls: Ningmeng, Linbai, and Lanniao. A more contemporary instance can be found in the historical *Gongdou* film (宫斗, meaning struggle in an imperial court) titled *The Palace* (宫锁沉香, *Gongsuo Chenxiang*, dir. Anzi Pan, 2013), set during the Qing dynasty. This film depicts the conflict and betrayal between two close friends, Chenxiang and Liuli, as they vie against each other to gain the prince's affection and secure their chance to be a princess. All these films illustrate the storyline that Hollinger describes as being against female friendships. In these portrayals, bonds between girls appear fragile, easily forsaken for the sake of men or other benefits. Additionally, these films typically do not conclude with scenarios where the female friends rediscover their affection for one another and reunite.

The third category that is relatively less explored concerns films that specifically focus on portraying female friendships within minority ethnic communities. As a multi-

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 207.

ethnic country, China has prioritized the qualified assimilation and proper treatment of diverse ethnic communities since its inception in 1949, and films that showcase stories of ethnic minorities are also used as a cultural strategy to align with this national integration policy.³⁹¹ Nonetheless, notable disparities in economic and educational aspects continue to exist between the predominant Han ethnic group and other ethnic minorities. As a result, portrayals of female relationships in this type of film unavoidably tend to conform to a stereotypical pattern. Typically, the film starts with a young Han Chinese girl from an urban background travelling to a rural village where she encounters a young and innocent girl from a minority ethnic group. Subsequently, the urban girl becomes fascinated by the unique culture and customs of the minority group, leading to a strong friendship between them. Examples of such films include the female intellectual Chun Li and the Dai girl Yibo in *Sacrifice of Youth* (青春祭, dir. Nuanxin Zhang, 1985), or *A Tao* (阿桃, dir. Dasheng Zheng, 2000), which revolves around the city girl Yilan and the Tu girl Atao. In such instances, urban Han Chinese girls always serve as symbols of modernization, contrasting with young girls from ethnic minority backgrounds who are often depicted as exotic and perceived as economically and culturally underdeveloped.

In addition to the six typologies previously examined, Hollinger's framework also encompasses two additional categories not yet discussed: sentimental female friendship and psychoanalytic female friendship. Hollinger dissects these two categories individually, particularly highlighting how the latter focuses on the impact of female friendship on a woman's personal self-development and psychological maturation. However, it is common in Chinese films for these two categories to blend and overlap. At the beginning, girls' friendships in these films are described as what Hollinger called "close, emotionally, effusive, ... same-sex unions" which are "conventionally presented as nurturing and psychologically enriching partnerships that also exhibit a fervent passion that is reminiscent of heterosexual romantic love."³⁹² For example, in the film *In Their Teens* (豆蔻年华, dir. Zhongyi Qiu & Geng Xu, 1989), the rural girl Xiaohe waits at the train station for her urban friend Mimi to arrive and pick her up. Upon their reunion, Mimi rushes towards Xiaohe, enveloping her in a warm embrace and planting a

³⁹¹ Paul Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films: Cinema and the Exotic," *East – West* 1, no.2 (1987): 19.

³⁹² Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 7.

heartfelt kiss on her cheeks. The emotional expression and intimate physical contact between the two girls continue throughout the film. Moreover, the strong emotional connection that binds the two young women can sometimes be interrupted by moments of neglect. For instance, when Xiaohe becomes too engrossed in her studies to meet with Mimi, the latter is left feeling adrift. Until Xiaohe rushes to visit the ailing Mimi, and within the hospital's confines, the two girlfriends finally find the opportunity to share their feelings with one another. Tears flow freely as they embrace, reaffirming their profound bond. However, the story of the two girls does not conclude at this point. As the plot unfolds, Xiaohe and Mimi experience yet another phase of distancing from each other as they compete for a place in a mathematics competition. Eventually, they manage to overcome their misconceptions and come to understand that the values of genuine friendship and ethical competition outweigh the significance of victory. By recounting the tale of Xiaohe and Mimi's friendship, both individuals achieve personal growth and psychological development.

Contemporary Female Friendship Films and Post-Feminist Girlfriendship

Thanks to the rise of girlhood films as a lucrative film genre for production during the 2010s, the depiction of bonding between girls also caught the film industry's interests. These recently emerged films centre around friendships that no longer rigidly conform to the previously mentioned categorization, as they frequently incorporate a blend of different types. For instance, the depiction of sentimental friendships is no longer confined to just a dyad girlfriend, and groups of female friends can also form deep emotional connections, instead of merely using a girlfriends' gathering as a platform to display their individual life choices or vent about the issues caused by their male partner. Moreover, the portrayal of sentimental friendships can also intertwine with elements of social and psychoanalytic friendships. This encompasses both emotional support and companionship, conflicts and betrayals between girlfriends, followed by friction and eventual reconciliation, which lead to the mutual psychological growth of both friends.

Therefore, I recategorize contemporary films centred on female friendships into two primary groups based on their narrative structure. A large proportion of Chinese female friendship films features pre-existing friendships between girls. The focus of this type of film is on the girl's ongoing homosocial experiences, which takes place at the present

time and develops as their relationship evolves. Notable examples in this regard include the *Yangguang Chuchuang* (阳光橱窗, dir. Yiqi Lian, 2013) which tells the story of three college friends who start a business together in Guangzhou; the *Tiny Times* film series (小时代, dir. Jingming Guo, 2013-2015) which follows four close girlfriends through their college years and beyond; *Girls* (闺蜜, dir. Chun Chun Wong, 2014) and *Girls 2* (闺蜜 2, dir. Chun Chun Wong, 2018), which depict the friendship of three young women after they graduate from university and begin working; and *Bride Wars* (新娘大作战, dir. Guohui Chen, 2015), which follows two girls preparing for marriage during their mid-20s. Another type of female friendship film involves the retrospective narrative framework, where the adult heroines look back on their girlhood and reminisce about how they were brought together, bonded with each other, and became best friends (whereas the former type usually does not depict the process of budding friendships). Films in this category include *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (雪花秘扇, dir. Ying Wang, 2011), *Soul Mate* (七月与安生, dir. Derek Tsang, 2016) and *Sunny Sisters* (阳光姐妹淘, dir. Bei'er Bao, 2021).

More notably, the depiction of female friendships in these contemporary Chinese girlhood films highlights a paradoxical girlfriend culture that is closely linked to both post-feminist and neoliberal cultures. Alison Winch's study of post-feminist girlfriend culture is crucial in understanding the interwoven girlfriend culture in China. She uses the term 'girlfriendship' to refer to a strategic neoliberal relationship between girlfriends in the post-feminist media culture.³⁹³ Initially, according to Diane Negra, "post-feminism codifies and essentializes femininity, relentlessly insisting that all women are bound together by a common set of innate desires, fears and concerns," and thus generates a set of shared feminine normativity throughout the mediated images, that is, as Negra puts it, "representability" for girls to pursue in the post-feminist landscape.³⁹⁴ Hence, Winch considers "girlfriendship" to be "an investment in the individual" since girls' friendships enact an intimate network of "girlfriend gaze," which enables girlfriends to achieve post-feminist normativity through a form of mutual monitoring and regulation between girlfriends.³⁹⁵ Moreover, this strategic girlfriendship in films also reveals a

³⁹³ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 2.

³⁹⁴ Negra, *What A Girl Wants?*, 12.

³⁹⁵ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 2.

commodification of girls' friendship based on a neoliberal logic, that is "anything intended for exchange."³⁹⁶ In this logic, affective bonding between girlfriends is transformed into a contractual relationship: girlfriend gaze is used to maintain girlfriends' self-brands; supportive and disciplinary peer control are both described as an exchange of capital through which girlfriends cooperate in order to reach normative femininities and become the normative post-feminist subjects.

Then again, in the era of neoliberalism that emphasises individual achievement, just being normative is not enough for girls, since their desire to become the ideal post-feminist subject and to achieve hypervisibility is exclusive.³⁹⁷ That is to say, the success of post-feminist subjects is also determined by their normative distinctiveness within the girlfriend group. In this regard, the rhetoric of post-feminism, such as "self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline," resonates with neoliberalism, which has been "increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating."³⁹⁸ The desire of girls to be unique and perfect can lead to what McRobbie calls a "constant self-beratement" in which girls always feel "I should be doing better than I am."³⁹⁹ Therefore, girls are encouraged to convert themselves into entrepreneurial self-projects, which requires them to constantly put themselves into the process of self-scrutiny and self-refinement, not only to consolidate their success in acquiring post-feminist representability, but also to make themselves stand out from their peers. In the process of gaining individual distinctiveness and post-feminist normativity, the solidarity between girlfriends has been replaced with continuous mutual surveillance. Meanwhile, this simultaneous demand for normative sameness and distinctiveness inevitably leads intimate female friendships to become entangled with surveillance, regulation, comparison and competition, among girlfriends, which in turn contributes to the ambivalent representation of female friendship within post-feminist

³⁹⁶ Arjun Appadurai, "Definitions: Commodity and Commodification," in *Rethinking Commodification: Cases and Readings in Law and Culture*, eds. Martha M. Ertman and Joan C. Williams (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 35.

³⁹⁷ Arjun Appadurai, "Definitions: Commodity and Commodification," 35.

³⁹⁸ Rosalind Gill, "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Post-feminist Times," *Subjectivity* 25 (2008): 443.

³⁹⁹ McRobbie, "Note on the Perfect," 15.

girlfriend culture. The endless mutual comparisons, monitoring and self-management are interspersed with the female interactions in films. These factors complicate the depiction of female friendships in contemporary Chinese girlhood films, which on the one hand, reflect a kind of logic of neoliberal individualism; on the other hand, they echo the concept of post-feminist representability. This intertwined girlfriend culture in the cinematic space is particularly true of *Girls* and *Soul Mate*, to which I now turn.

Pre-existing and Commodified Friendship in *Girls*

Girls is a film series that includes two features, the first released in 2014, that focus on the story of three best friends: Kimmy, Xiwen, and Xiaomei. This film does not describe how the girls met and what made them become best friends, but rather it shows a pre-determined friendship between these girls through a dramatic scene at the beginning of the film, where Kimmy is about to jump off a building during her university graduation ceremony (so that she can avoid going to study overseas) – Xiwen and Xiaomei run over to stop her but end up accidentally jumping with her. These female protagonists are played by actresses from three different regions of China: Kimmy is played by Fiona Sit, Hong Kong native; Xiwen is played by Ivy Chen, a Taiwanese actress; and Xiaomei is played by Zishan Yang, from Mainland China. Typically, in co-productions involving Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, dubbing is commonly employed for non-local actors to maintain uniformity in their spoken accents during performances. However, this film deliberately preserves the genuine voices of its three principal actresses, each characterized by distinct accents. This choice serves to obscure the specific location in which the story unfolds. From the film narrative, the audience has no way of knowing which city they live in, nor are they told about their family relationships or which social class they come from. This film only sweepingly introduces that these girls all live together in a luxurious apartment, they wear fashionable clothes and delicate makeup every day; most of their activities involve high-end locations, sharing their fashion advice with each other and their experiences of dating men, which constitutes the typical image of post-feminist subjects in wide Western scholarships, that is, urban, middle class, well-educated, heterosexual, professional young women who are associated with a consumer lifestyle.

This film also largely blurs these girls' other social relations, and by doing so, highlights the intimacy of their pre-existing friendship. The girls' parents are never present, except for Kimmy's father, who only appears in their conversations once, with the function of drawing out Kimmy's wealthy status. They do not all have fixed heterosexual partners: Xiwen is the only one who has had a boyfriend, but he quickly dumps her at the beginning of the film. These girls seem to be isolated in this obscure social environment and have no other people to rely on when they get into trouble, which reveals the relationship between these girls to be exclusionary and closed off from the outside world. Female friendship is the only social relationship that is privileged in the film. Girlfriends become their only source of support in conquering difficulties and achieving success; they are each other's new families. Film critic Xiaolei Liu in his review of this film points out that, such a strongly bound, quasi-family relationship goes beyond the conventional definition of girlfriends but shows a feature of legally binding, contractual relationship.⁴⁰⁰ By developing Liu's perspective, I consider this contractual pre-existing female friendship embodies an echo of branded commodity culture in *Girls* where the intimate relationship between girlfriends has been commodified. Here, I am not saying that girls' friendship has become a commodity, but rather that these girls' desire to bond with their friends has been transformed into a contractual business activity. Within this contractual relationship, solidarity between girlfriends becomes a de facto capital exchange, aimed at promoting each other's self-brand and maintaining the representability and hypervisibility of the group as a whole. The intimacy between girlfriends is achieved through their loyalty to this girlfriend group, in which these girls are even willing to sacrifice and devote themselves to maintain this friendship contract.

To begin with, the commodification of female friendship in *Girls* is expressed through its participation of public commercial space. Different from what I argued in the previous section, where female sociality has historically been confined to the domestic space, in *Girls*, the interaction between girlfriends happens more often in commercial public locations. One example is in the scenes at the beginning of the film, a few years after they graduate from university, Kimmy, Xiwen and Xiaomei sit together in a

⁴⁰⁰ Xiaolei Liu 刘小磊, "Guimi: Jiading De Guimi Qiyue Yu Jiadingxing Qinggan 《闺蜜》: 假定的“闺蜜契约”与假定性情感[*Girls: The Hypothetical 'Girlfriend Contract' and Hypothetical Affect*]," *Dianying Piping* 电影批评 [*Film Criticism*], no.5 (2014): 49.

beautifully decorated restaurant, which is also the set of the film studio where Xiaomei works. The three of them were invited by Xiaomei's boss to attend a documentary shoot with the purpose of sharing the story of their friendship. During the shooting of the documentary, they are taking interviews and talking happily in front of the camera about the frequency at which Xiwen and her boyfriend have sex each month. This conversation, which is supposed to be extremely private between girlfriends, is now situated in a commercial space and disclosed in the presence of dozens of strangers in the shooting crew. In subsequent scenes, these girls are often seen in restaurants, shopping malls, clubs or offices, talking unabashedly about their private affective experiences or disclosing their deep feelings for each other. This type of scene extends the depiction of female intimacy from the private sphere to the commercial public space, and in doing so, legitimizes as well as commodifies the girls' homosociality. As their friendships become the key to their hyper-visibility in the outside world, the intimate friendship of the girls is reconfigured into a strategic neoliberal relation through girlfriends' participation in urban commercial spaces. Winch uses the term girlfriendship to refer to this commodified relationship of girlfriends, and argues that, "girlfriendship are constructed as social capital, and the feminine self is produced as a self-brand."⁴⁰¹ Girls are not only the managers of their own self-brands, but also provide mutual supervision for their girlfriends' self-brands. By cooperating in this way, girlfriends can achieve representative status and become the perfect post-feminist subjects.

Self-Branding and Post-Feminist Representability in *Girls*

Before turning to analysing how girlfriends strategically support and regulate each other, I first examine how these girls go through self-fashioning in the film. In *Girls*, the self-fashioning of these girls is accomplished through their occupation of different components of post-feminist representability. Representability is an important concept in the post-feminist culture, as suggested by Diane Negra (2009) in her study of the post-feminist lifecycle. My understanding of Negra's concept of representability is that post-feminist culture has shaped a set of representative femininities and identities for females to pursue in different life stages, which simultaneously creates a gendered time anxiety

⁴⁰¹ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 63.

for young women. Women have to achieve these normative femininities and transform into new feminine identities in corresponding life stages to be considered as an empowered post-feminist subject or a winner who has acquired personal fulfilment; those who fail to achieve it by a certain age will appear as victims.⁴⁰² In Negra's discussion, post-feminist representability could be attained through "the discovery of personal destiny, the securing of a romantic partner and motherhood, and the negotiation of the problem of paid work (seldom its rewards)."⁴⁰³

Winch further elaborates this concept in her study of Hollywood girlfriend flicks in the 2000s, and summarises the post-feminist representability for girls in their 20s to 30s as encompassing attributes such as "a successful career in the corporate world," "a flawless body image," "imminent marriage," and "motherhood."⁴⁰⁴ Significantly, when Negra discusses this term, she underlines the time urgency caused by post-feminist temporality, whereas Winch considers girlfriends' representability with an emphasis "on acquisition, on having," since a girlfriend's representability is her "public demonstration that she is successful in having it all."⁴⁰⁵ Therefore, in analysing this concept, I build principally on Winch's approach, and I argue that girlfriends in *Girls* establish their distinct self-brands by seizing on different components of post-feminist representability. Because the female protagonists in Chinese girlhood films range from adolescence to late 20s when they remain unmarried, so motherhood is not the primary concern in our discussion. Hence, taking this specificity into account, I consider the three girls' self-brand in *Girls* to denote the acquisition of three different components of post-feminist representability (although sometimes there appears a partial overlap between girlfriends' self-brands): having a successful career, a flawless body image, and having secured a heterosexual partner.

Xiwen's self-brand in this film is linked to a girl's success in domesticity due to her forthcoming wedding with her boyfriend Linjie. She embodies a conservative femininity, as she attaches importance to family values and her biggest wish is to become a good wife and take care of her boyfriend in every way. This is reflected in her consumption

⁴⁰² Negra, *What A Girl Wants?*, 47.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ Alison Winch, "We Can Have It All: The Girlfriend Flick," *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no.1 (2012): 71.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

behaviour in a scene where she is asked to send a suitcase to her boyfriend to the airport. In the airport, Xiwen worries her boyfriend would be too busy to have lunch, so she insists on buying some food for him after her boyfriend refuses her several times. When she gets to the café, she lists eight specific requirements to the waiter to order a sandwich that perfectly fits her boyfriend's taste. Although this romantic relationship ends quickly after Xiwen discovers her boyfriend is cheating on her, the second half of the film is all about how she finds a new boyfriend with the help of her girlfriends, so that she can recover her brand reputation.

If Xiwen represents a girl's success in domesticity, then Kimmy represents a girl's success in maintaining sexual attractiveness or "erotic capital."⁴⁰⁶ Kimmy's self-brand is associated with her sophisticated appearance and liberated sexual behaviour. She is an open-minded girl who does not want a fixed romantic relationship but is keen to keep dating different good-looking guys. She is very confident with her body image as well as her sexual attractiveness. Kimmy shows a kind of objectification of men by referring to the pictures of her dates as a "menu" and asking Xiaomei to pick out a "dish" for her according to those men's "massive chest" or "lips". This conversation is interrupted by Xiwen's request to pick up a wedding dress for her, and Kimmy's dates in this context are also commodified since they have been treated equally with Xiwen's wedding dress.

Furthermore, Xiaomei's self-brand is expressed through her willing to pursue a successful career. Although Xiwen and Kimmy have their own jobs as well, the reason Xiaomei is the only representative in this aspect is that she treats her job as a dream and demonstrates a great passion for it. Her biggest wish is to get the opportunity to make a film of her own and become the first female director to win an Oscar. She prioritises her work over men, hence she is also the only one of the three girls who has never been in a romantic relationship. Moreover, Xiaomei also shows no interests in maintaining a 'feminine' appearance. However, this is not to say that her body image is unruly, rather, she presents a kind of exquisite cool girl image since she wears a black leather jacket and uses black sooty makeup all the time. Her less 'feminine' appearance distinguishes her from Kimmy's hyper-feminine designer clothes, which forms a typical brain versus beauty dichotomy. The distinctive identities of each girl in the film ensure they can both achieve their representative status as well as keep their normative distinctiveness within

⁴⁰⁶ Catherine Hakim, "Erotic Capital," *European Sociological Review* 26, no.5 (2010): 499.

this girlfriend group. Their uniqueness in this relationship does not cause any competition between them in the first half of the film; instead, it resolves the anxieties of these girls “around being a fragmented and incoherent feminine self.”⁴⁰⁷ Being in this intimate group, the differences between girlfriends can be “reduced into pleasing commonalities and complementary variations.”⁴⁰⁸ Girls can obtain a complete perfect image of the self by having close girlfriends who have things they do not have and who can complement them. Within this group, they can have it all by having girlfriends.

Girlfriend Gaze and Supportive Mutual Regulation in *Girls*

As argued earlier in this chapter, within a commodified female friendship, girls are both the manager and product of their self-brands. They are not only responsible for sustaining their own identities/brands, but also the main custodians of their girlfriend’s brand reputation. They rely on each other’s support as well as regulation to achieve brand success through a girlfriend gaze mechanism. According to Winch, “girlfriend gaze” or “gynaeopticon” refers to a “gendered neoliberal variation on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon – where the many women watch the many women.”⁴⁰⁹ This term, on the one hand, is used by Winch to discuss peer surveillance in the images of celebrities and their female audiences in the digital culture, where “the panopticon, the synopticon and the paradigm of the many watching the many, work in harmony.”⁴¹⁰ On the other hand, she also applies this mechanism of homosocial surveillance to discuss the representation of female friendship in various girlfriend films, and argues that girlfriends are bound together “as they all turn their eyes on each other.”⁴¹¹ She further states this relational mutual surveillance between girlfriends has been promoted as solidarity, entitlement and

⁴⁰⁷ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 69.

⁴⁰⁸ Akane Kanai, “Girlfriendship and Sameness: Affective Belonging in a Digital Intimate Public,” *Journal of Gender Studies* (2017): 300.

⁴⁰⁹ Alison Winch, “Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks,” *New Formations* 84/85 (215): 228.

⁴¹⁰ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 21.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

strength.⁴¹² Since girls' intimate friendships serve as a platform for comparison, feedback and motivation by which they constantly monitor and regulate each other in accordance with the post-feminist normative paradigm, so that they can "support each other in striving for 'representability' and the perfect self."⁴¹³

In *Girls*, the primary objects to be monitored and regulated by girlfriends' gaze are their bodies and emotions. According to Winch, "in the hyper-visible landscape of popular culture, the body is recognized as the object of a woman's labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy."⁴¹⁴ Similarly, Gill also emphasizes that, in the post-feminist media culture, body is represented as a "key source of identity", "women's source of power,"⁴¹⁵ and "a defining feature of womanhood."⁴¹⁶ Girls' bodies, therefore, require constant surveillance and careful maintenance to uphold a representative status. In addition, in the 2010s, many scholars turned their focus to how the post-feminist media culture promotes the positive psychological state of women. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff point out that there is a "distinctive affective tone of post-feminism, particularly its emphasis upon the upbeat and the positive, with the repudiation of pain, in jury, in security and anger."⁴¹⁷ Laura Favaro, in her research about British women's magazines, also suggests how female-oriented media promotes self-confidence and use it as "the site for expanded, heightened and more insidious modes of regulation."⁴¹⁸ For an ideal post-feminist subject, if confidence is a new sexy, then negativity and sadness are the toxic emotions of victims, which will undermine the possession of representability for an empowered post-feminist girl. Therefore, how to help girlfriends maintain a sophisticated

⁴¹² Ibid., 5.

⁴¹³ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 2.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹⁵ Rosalind Gill, "Post-feminist Media Culture," 151.

⁴¹⁶ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism," 616.

⁴¹⁷ Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism," in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 25.

⁴¹⁸ Favaro, "'Just Be Confident Girls!'," 283.

appearance and a positive mentality becomes the main role of the girlfriend gaze in this film.



Figure 32: Xiwen loses all her energy and positivity, and has to be assisted by her girlfriends to take a bath in Girls

At the beginning of the film, Xiwen's appearance is the same as Kimmy's, a type of hyper-feminine urban beauty. They both wear one-piece dresses, high heels and adhere to all the contemporary fashion standards for young women – until Xiwen discovers her boyfriend is cheating on her. She runs home in tears and sleeps all night on the rooftop floor. The next day, Xiwen wakes up on the rooftop, instantly transformed from a self-empowered post-feminist urban beauty into a lifeless woman who has lost all her happiness, energy and positivity. Kimmy and Xiaomei try to comfort her and protest against her lack of grooming, Xiaomei observing that, “you didn’t even wash your face, you stink!” Kimmy interjects, “It’s true, you stink. You can’t just lie here forever, it’s time to get up.” But Xiwen refuses to talk to anyone. Finally, Kimmy and Xiaomei have to drag her to the bathroom and help her through the whole bathing process (Figure 32). For a post-feminist subject, her body is at the heart of her self-brand. A refined appearance and positive psychological state signal the success of a girl’s self-brand, and conversely, when she loses possession of her post-feminist representability, body and emotions – the essential parts of her self-brand – both start to show signs of unruliness. The above scene shows Xiwen giving up her flawless body image as well as her cheerful and optimistic attitude due to her loss of representability in terms of marriage – she becomes a victim of a failed romantic relationship.



Figure 33: Xiwen is pushed by her girlfriends in a wheelchair when shopping to ease the pain of her breakup in *Girls*

Here, the mutual surveillance and supportive regulation between girlfriends starts to be represented, as Xiaomei and Kimmy help Xiwen take a shower which maintains the basic dignity of her body. They also actively contribute to the restoration of Xiwen's body image by continuously sharing ideas to uphold her body image. While blow-drying Xiwen's hair after her shower, Kimmy suggests, "I will get you a facial later, let's get you a new haircut tomorrow, okay?" Later, as Xiaomei finds the joint credit card of Xiwen's ex-boyfriend Linjie, a revenge shopping sequence orchestrated by the girlfriends begins (Figure 33). The shopping sequence in *Girls* echoes yet functions differently from the shopping plots that frequently occur in Hollywood chick flicks. As Charlotte Brunsdon's research into Hollywood shopping films from the 1980s demonstrates, shopping and trying on clothes are frequently employed as a means to reclaim one's identity or remake femininity.⁴¹⁹ In a similar vein, in Hilary Radner's study of "girly film," the pursuit of individual fulfilment by female protagonists, is often achieved through "a shopping sequence and a make-over for the heroine."⁴²⁰ In *Girls*, Xiaomei and Kimmy also try to use shopping as a makeover tool to help Xiwen to regain her representative femininity. But the consumption behaviours in *Girls* do not make Xiwen reclaim her agency and positivity. Rather, during the whole process of shopping, Xiwen sits in her wheelchair emotionless, while her girlfriends enthusiastically try to choose new clothes

⁴¹⁹ Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 191.

⁴²⁰ Hilary Radner, *The New Woman's Film: Femme-Centric Movies from Smart Chicks* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 18.

for her. As for Kimmy and Xiaomei, shopping is not a fetishistic pleasure for them either, but merely a means of getting revenge on Xiwen's ex-boyfriend. Their crazy shopping attitude is simply because "it is not coming out of our own pocket anyway." In the end, the effort to help Xiwen regain her representative status through consumption behaviours is a failure. After the shopping sequence, Xiwen remains in a state of decadence: she no longer dresses well, wearing pyjamas all day, does not talk to anyone and cries a lot; all the things she needs to do are done in her wheelchair with the assistance of her girlfriends. She remains a fully incapacitated victim who has lost all her erotic capital as a result of an unsuccessful romantic relationship. Xiwen's unsolvable depression underscores the concept within post-feminism that portrays a single girl on screen as a problematic identity that requires continuous adjustment and assistance. In this way, the film reconsolidates heteronormative hegemony even within the intimate spaces of female solidarity.



Figure 34: To cheer Xiwen up, Xiaomei forces herself to swallow the beef she never eats in Girls

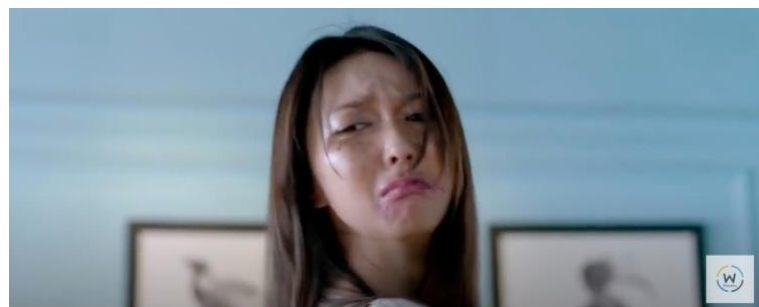


Figure 35: To cheer Xiwen up, Kimmy removes her makeup in public in Girls

What really makes Xiwen motivated to change is the supportive regulation of her girlfriends, which is shown through her girlfriends' sacrifice of their self-brands. It is seen

in the scene where Kimmy and Xiaomei disclose how exhausted they are due to taking care of Xiwen. Xiaomei suggests to Kimmy, “perhaps we can do something deeply moving, to snap her out of it?” Then in a restaurant scene, Xiaomei says to Xiwen, “we underestimated how self-destructive you are, so we are each going to do the impossible for you, hoping you will snap back to your old self.” As a person who never eats beef, Xiaomei is seen eating a whole plate of steak in tears, to prove her love to Xiwen (Figure 34). Xiwen looks at her, showing a shocked expression for the first time since her breakup. Immediately afterwards, Kimmy also says to Xiwen, “since high school, I’ve been wearing makeup every day, but for you, in this public place, I’m going to remove all my makeup.” Kimmy puts cleansing oil on her eyes, as she begins to rub her face, and her delicate makeup instantly turns into a dark stain on her face (Figure 35).

This self-sacrifice setting in *Girls* is different from Winch’s research on Hollywood female friendship films where the discipline of the girlfriend gaze is portrayed through a “normative cruelty” or a “loving meanness” of other girl’s body and sexuality.⁴²¹ In this sequence, the regulation brought by the girlfriend gaze is supportive and is not imposed directly on Xiwen’s body, but rather by deconstructing Kimmy’s flawless representative body to arouse Xiwen’s desire to reclaim her normativity. Xiaomei and Kimmy’s sacrifices make Xiwen realise that she can still win someone’s love, thus she still has the chance to “have it all”. From this point, the connotation to “have it all” changes. As Anthea Taylor states, “the trope of ‘having it all’, signaling career and men and the family their attainment signifies, equates with ‘having’ more than just oneself – it means, most emphatically, not being single.”⁴²² The love from girlfriends evokes a new sense of belonging and security for Xiaomei, and the anxiety of being abandoned that comes with being single is relieved. Moreover, Kimmy and Xiaomei show this kind of supportive regulation from the girlfriend network does not evoke any unpleasant feeling such as shame or humiliation – by proving to Xiwen how much they care about her, to let Xiwen regain the recognition, confidence, and a positive psychological state to get Xiwen to want to be normative again. However, it is also important to note that this kind of self-sacrifice by the girlfriends also embodies a process of capital exchange: Kimmy sacrifices

⁴²¹ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 28.

⁴²² Anthea Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Post-feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.

her erotic capital and becomes less glamorous in exchange for Xiwen's confidence in regaining her representative identity. The purpose of this exchange is to maintain the representability of the girlfriend group as a whole brand. The next paragraphs discuss another type of capital exchange that occurs in this film, which takes place between Kimmy and Xiaomei.

As mentioned in the previous section, Xiaomei's self-brand in this film is constructed through her willingness to pursue a successful career. Her love for the art of film and her knowledge of the film industry can also be seen as a form of cultural capital. As friends, Xiwen and Kimmy have always known that Xiaomei's dream is to meet director Ang Lee. Thus, Kimmy organises a party to help Xiaomei build up a chance to meet Ang Lee. However, at this party, Kimmy and Xiaomei successively meet a man, Jiutian who is a rock singer. Jiutian first flirts with Kimmy and later is attracted to Xiaomei who has just arrived at the party. Then, Jiutian takes Xiaomei out of the party and they spend a romantic night on a yacht. But as a result, Xiaomei misses the opportunity to encounter Ang Lee, an opportunity which Kimmy implores numerous people to arrange on Xiaomei's behalf. It is already evident in this plot that Kimmy has traded her social capital for Xiaomei's career advancement, though Xiaomei does not take Kimmy's effort seriously. The next morning, when Xiaomei returns to the home where her girlfriends live together, Kimmy is angry at Xiaomei for leaving her alone at the party, and Xiaomei mistakes Kimmy's anger as being because she took Jiutian away from her. A heated argument erupts between the two. Kimmy can see that Jiutian is not a very good partner, and she tries to be persuasive towards Xiaomei. But Xiaomei shoots back, "you think you understand all men?" Kimmy gets angry, replying, "yes, I do. I've been with more men than you. have you ever dated? No! Then shup up if you have no experience. Listen carefully, you can't afford to play around with a man like Jiutian." But this comment stirs up the uneasy feeling that Xiaomei has for being "a fragmented and incoherent feminine self,"⁴²³ due to her lack of erotic capital. This feeling of loss is hidden by being with her girlfriends, because in this group of girlfriends, they delight in being different from each other. Yet as Xiaomei drifts away from her friends, her incoherent self resurfaces.

⁴²³ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 69.



Figure 36: Kimmy fights with Xiaomei after she discovers she is leaving for Europe in *Girls*

After this big fight, the two part ways and begin to ignore each other – until one day, Kimmy finds out that Xiaomei is going to Europe with Jiutian to accompany him on his concert tour. Kimmy wants to stop Xiaomei because it would mean that Xiaomei would be giving up her career and her dreams. In other words, Xiaomei would lose her unique identity in the girlfriend network, her self-brand and this could lead to Xiaomei losing her visibility. To preserve the integrity of this girlfriend group, Kimmy’s immediate choice is that she runs off to Jiutian’s yacht and has sex with him. She does not really like Jiutian but aims to purposely seduce him. Just before Xiaomei hands in her resignation letter, Kimmy finds her and tells Xiaomei that she had sex with Jiutian and that he is not to be trusted. Here again, Kimmy chooses to sacrifice her erotic capital in exchange for Xiaomei’s return to the pursuit of her career. Moreover, this plot also reflects that the control between the girlfriends is exemplified to help the girlfriend maintain a ‘good’ heterosexual relationship (stable and leading to marriage), rather than this tumultuous, dangerous relationship with a man. Kimmy’s use of regulation to Xiaomei partly echoes what Winch calls “loving meanness.”⁴²⁴ At the end of the film, the three girlfriends return to the interview set for the documentary. In separate conversations with the hosts, both Kimmy and Xiaomei express their disapproval of this approach but understand that it was “for your benefit”. While the intention is supportive regulation, the process can bring shame and traumatic experiences, as well as possible emotional harm, even though the method of regulating Xiaomei occurs through Kimmy’s self-sacrificing approach, and under the guise of “I made that decision for you because I loved you”.

⁴²⁴ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 29.

This section discussed how the commodified female friendship is transformed into a strategic relationship, in which girlfriends help each other sustain the image of their self-brands. But what about those friendships depicted in the domestic sphere, friendships that show no explicit connection to commodity culture? How do they echo the post-feminist and neoliberal culture in the West? How do they embody the localized ethos of girls' friendship differently from the Anglo-American female friendship films? In the next section, I answer these questions through an analysis of *Soul Mate*.

Red Rose & White Rose, Well-Educated Working Girl & Phallic Girl in *Soul Mate*

Soul Mate tells the story of two girls, Qiyue and Ansheng. The film starts with a movie company wanting to buy the copyright of a novel written by Qiyue but they cannot reach her. Instead, they find her friend, Ansheng, though she denies she knows Qiyue. After Qiyue goes back home, she starts to read her novel. Through the voiceover narrating the novel, the film flashes back to the time when they were both 13-year-olds and depicts how these two girls became best friends and experienced an intimate girlhood together. After several years growing up together, their intimate friendship starts to change when Qiyue meets her boyfriend, Jiaming. The emergence of Jiaming leads to the separation of the two girls, since Ansheng discovers that Jiaming also has romantic feelings for her. To protect Qiyue's romantic relationship with Jiaming, Ansheng chooses to leave her hometown and wanders between different cities for several years. At the end of the film, Qiyue and Ansheng meet each other again after Jiaming runs away from her wedding, while Qiyue gets pregnant. The two girls finally confess the regrets and longing they felt for one another. They once again become best friends but Qiyue dies in childbirth. Ansheng raises Qiyue's daughter and writes the novel to memorialize their friendship under Qiyue's name.

This film is directed by Hong Kong's Derek Tsang and involves a production crew made up of four female screenwriters, Yongchen Lin, Yuan Li, Yimeng Xu and Nan Wu. The story is adapted from the novel of the same name by Chinese author Anni Baobei, although the plot was substantially rewritten, resulting in a different conclusion from the novel. The original novel tells a story of two best friends with very different personalities who grow up together, but later find themselves falling in love with the same man, Jiaming, embarking on a complex competition to win his love. However, the film

adaptation introduces complexity into the dynamics between the two heroines, placing greater emphasis on illustrating how the girlfriends' interactions contribute to shaping each other's identities, without directly having the two girls fight over Jiaming's love. Instead, the film involves plot points showing their sentimental bonding, and how they come to adopt each other's characteristics during the process of growing up. Meanwhile, in the novel, it is Ansheng, the rebellious one, who ends up having Jiaming's baby and eventually dies due to a difficult birth. This can be seen as a typical ending where a rebellious girl gets disciplinary punishment. But the film shifts this action to Qiyue, the traditional compliant girl, who dies in childbirth, and Ansheng is the one who adopts Qiyue's child and leads a peaceful life. It is also worth noting that *Soul Mate* holds the highest rating among all the other female friendship-themed films that appeared in the 2010s, scoring 7.5 out of 10 on Douban.com. The two leading actress in the film, Dongyu Zhou and Sichun Ma, are also known for their deep friendship that developed from film shoots. They both won the Best Actress Award at the 53rd Golden Horse Awards – the first this happened for the same film.⁴²⁵ These off-screen stories form an intertext with the film itself.



Figure 37: 13-year-old Qi Yue in *Soul Mate*

⁴²⁵ Xiaowan Zhouhui 周慧晓婉 and Ying An 安莹, “Jinma Quanshi Jingxi, Nvzhujue Shouci Xia ‘Shuanghuandan’ 金马全是惊喜, 女主角首次下‘双黄蛋’” [The Golden Horse is Full of Surprises, the Leading Actress Awarded Double Heroine for the First Time], *Xinjingbao* 新京报 [The Beijing New], last modified 27th October 2016, http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2016-11/27/content_661782.htm?div=0 (accessed 16th September 2020).



Figure 38: 13-year-old Ansheng in *Soul Mate*

Soul Mate sets up a dual heroine narrative structure. At the beginning of the film, it quickly showcases the two female protagonists with competing femininities through the dynamic of their bodies and behaviours. Qiyue and Ansheng meet each other when they take part in military training at school. They are punished with extra training for playing with squirrels; Ansheng's reaction to extra training directly shows her image as a rebellious girl. She picks up a stone and runs into the school building, trying to smash the fire alarm to avoid the training. In contrast, Qiyue represents the good girl image who is too scared to do bad things, so she just stands next to Ansheng, raises her hands to cover her ears, and lets Ansheng smash the fire alarm. When the fire alarm rings, Qiyue and Ansheng hold hands and run out of the school building. A set of short reverse shots captures the two girls running while looking at each other, sunlight shining behind them, the two girls' hair flying in the air as the soft background music fades in, suggesting the joy of girlfriends' company. The contrasting femininities of the two girls are established in each other's eyes through the back and forth of their point-of-view shots. According to Rosalind Gill, in the post-feminist media culture, "femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural, or psychological one."⁴²⁶ The female body is represented as "a defining feature of womanhood,"⁴²⁷ and "women's key source of identity."⁴²⁸ Hair, as one of the most visible gender characteristics of the female body, plays an important role in reflecting Qiyue and Ansheng's unique selfhood and their

⁴²⁶ Rosalind Gill, "Post-feminist Media Culture," 149.

⁴²⁷ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism," 616.

⁴²⁸ Gill, "Post-feminist Media Culture," 149.

oppositional femininities. In the above scenes, Ansheng is a daring girl who smashes the fire alarm. Her hair in this shot is not tied up, but untethered and unfettered, flying in the air (Figure 38), which suggests she represents a kind of mischievous, unruly and rebellious femininity. Qiyue signifies a conservative, obedient and timorous good girl image. The shape of her hair shows her good girl personality: a fringe with a long ponytail that is carefully tied and stays behind her head in a controlled manner as she runs (Figure 37).

Another point to show the two girls' oppositional femininities is the discussion of their breasts maturing. Here, the contrast of two girls is not directly shown through the display of their female body but presented through their verbal communication. In scenes where Qiyue and Ansheng take a bath together for the first time, Ansheng discovers that Qiyue's breasts have begun to develop and she starts to wear a bra, while Ansheng's have also begun to develop but she chooses to be free rather than bound by a bra. When Ansheng asks Qiyue: "Does wearing a bra feel uncomfortable?" Qiyue replies: "It's okay if you get used to it, my mom said girls have to get used to a lot of uncomfortable things in their lives." Their difference in choice of wearing a bra can be interpreted as a contrast between conservative and rebellious femininity. Qiyue's words shows her obedience to conventional patriarchal value that wearing a bra is used to shape the female body for male desire.⁴²⁹ Ansheng's choice of not wearing a bra presents a liberal feminist ideology wherein being braless "de-objectifies the breasts"⁴³⁰ and is in the pursuit of freedom. Scenes that portray the girls' discussion of bras and breasts frequently reoccur throughout the rest of the film. Their different choice of bra wearing also symbolizes their different attitude towards sexuality, which presents a typical dichotomy of virgin versus vamp. Qiyue wears a white cotton bra, which is a symbol of girl's chastity and traditional values. This symbol corresponds with Qiyue's subsequent behaviour, as the only man she has interactions with is her boyfriend Jiaming, and they do not have sex until the night before her wedding. Ansheng's rejection of the bra shows her quest for freedom, and even when she chooses to wear a bra when she grows up, she wears a sexy black lace bra which also suggests her open-minded sexuality. Her vamp image is also represented through her

⁴²⁹ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

behaviour, such as constantly changing boyfriends, living with them, and even dating a married man.

Through establishing two female subjects with confrontational femininities in *Soul Mate*, the film shows a narrative pattern that emphasises the huge contrast between two feminine subjects without letting any one of them dominate the film narrative. This narrative pattern has been conceptualized by Xiaoyun Chen as the “geminate flower” (双生花, *Shuangshenghua*) narrative mode.⁴³¹ This mode can be used to depict the story of two souls in one girl’s body (for example, in *Suddenly Seventeen*, discussed in Chapter 4, 17-year-old Liangxia and 28-year-old Liangxia are two consciousnesses using the same biological body) or to portray the intimate friendship between two girls with contrasting personalities. The ‘geminate flower’ name derives from Eileen Chang’s novel *Red Rose and White Rose* (红玫瑰与白玫瑰, 1944) and refers to two rough divisions that men make of women: the chaste wife (white rose) and the sexy mistress (red rose).⁴³² However, in *Soul Mate*, the pattern of red rose and white rose is no longer expressed as a man’s what if (I married with the other one) fantasy but represents the different attribution of a girl’s capacity: to strive for post-feminist representability.

The depictions of Qiyue and Ansheng in *Soul Mate* correspond to two of Angela McRobbie’s four types of post-feminist girls in the Anglo-American context: the well-educated working girl and the phallic girl. In this film, Qiyue squares with the image of a well-educated working girl. For this type, girls through education and employment gain financial independence and “celebrate their own individualistic success,” but “refrain from challenging existing gender hierarchies.”⁴³³ Since the capacity of these girls is not

⁴³¹ Xiaoyun Chen 陈晓云, “Shuangshenghua: Shuangchong Shenti, Shuangchong Shenfen, Shuangchong Shengming: Dui Dangdai Zhongguo Dianyingzhong Yizhong Shijue Zhuti Yu Xueshi Moshi De Yantan 双生花: 双重身体·双重身份·双重生命 — 对当代中国电影一种视觉主题与叙事模式的研讨 [Double Body, Double Identity, Double Life: Discussions on Visual Theme and Narrative Pattern of ‘Geminate Flower’],” *Wenhua Yishu Ynjiu* 文化艺术研究 [Studies in Culture & Art] 2, no.2 (2009): 140.

⁴³² Xiaoyun Chen 陈晓云 and Xiaoying Wu 吴筱颖, “Shuangshenghua: Yizhong Dianying Xushi Moshi 双生花: 一种电影叙事模式 [Shuangshenghua: A Narrating Mode in Movies],” *Hunan Dazhong Chuanmei Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan Xuebao* 湖南大众传媒职业技术学院学报 [Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational Technical College] 7, no.2 (2007): 50.

⁴³³ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 78.

measured merely in their achievements in the workplace, they need to succeed both “in work and in love.”⁴³⁴ Thus, girls of this type have to manifest some conservative femininities in order to remain attractive to men.⁴³⁵ As Qiyue received a good education and successfully attained an enviable job, she is financially independent and does not show exuberant materialistic desires, nor does she need her boyfriend to support her. But she is still an incomplete post-feminist subject as she needs to achieve post-feminist representability through heterosexual marriage. Therefore, all her desires in the film are focused on when her boyfriend Jiaming can marry her so that she can finally live a have-it-all life. However, Qiyue, as the representation of conservative femininity, does not have the same strong sexual attractiveness as Ansheng. Especially when she finds her boyfriend Jiaming is also attracted to Ansheng; the potential of losing Jiaming, which means the failure of achieving representability, induces the transformation of Qiyue and Ansheng’s friendship from intimate to distanced.

Ansheng represents the figure of a phallic girl in the post-feminist media masquerade. According to McRobbie, phallic girls display “the impression of having won equality” through adopting “the habits of masculinity including heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts in public [...] and so on.”⁴³⁶ This type of girl uses these unfeminine behaviours to prove that they enjoy a kind of “seeming freedom”⁴³⁷ in the public sphere. In *Soul Mate*, Ansheng is a girl who smokes, swears and constantly gets into fights. She smashes her boyfriend’s guitar when she finds out that her boyfriend is cheating on her. She also drives the car away by herself during a trip with her boyfriend, because she suddenly finds that she does not love this man anymore. Ansheng drinks a lot, since heavy drinking is not only for her own pleasure, but also a means of making a living. Ansheng can be seen as having obtained a kind of seeming freedom from society, since all her unruly behaviours in the public sphere go unpunished. Meanwhile, since phallic girls “perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men,”⁴³⁸ the unrestrained personality of

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁴³⁶ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminist*, 83.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 84.

Ansheng gives her a distinct sexual attractiveness to men. In the latter half of the film, Ansheng sells ten bottles of wine to a group of male customers, by drinking a whole bottle of wine within one minute, so that she can get the tips to pay for dinner with Qiyue. As a representation of a phallic girl, Ansheng does not acquire any moral anxiety for transferring her sexual appeal towards men to her capital, whereas Qiyue considers this relying on men for food and drink to be cheap behaviour.

Moreover, as a phallic girl, Ansheng also bids for post-feminist representability through valuing family. Unlike Qiyue, Ansheng does not have a complete original family and her mother does not care about her. She constantly changes boyfriends and lives with them, so on the one hand, she shows her disdain for conservative morality; on the other hand, she wants to find someone in the world who really loves her, so that she can build her own family through a heterosexual relationship and to show her success in domesticity. However, what really matter to Ansheng in the film is Qiyue – her chosen family. Thus, when Ansheng and Qiyue’s romantic partners turn out to be the same – Jiaming – Ansheng chooses to surrender this romantic relationship, being a good friend, that to preserve her family-like relationship with Qiyue.

Here, I wish to specifically address the significance of having a complete original family as a Chinese characteristic of post-feminist normativity in girlhood films. Many Chinese sociologists have tried to prove the long-term effects on children’s life caused by single-parent original families. Due to lacking sufficient attention and guidance from both parents, children from single-parent family are more likely to end their schooling earlier, have sex experiences earlier, and most importantly, receive negative effects on their mental health.⁴³⁹ This is a stereotype, but one which Chinese girlhood films often reproduce in their narratives. For example, in *So Young* (致我们终将逝去的青春, dir. Wei Zhao, 2013), when introducing the male protagonist Xiaozheng Chen, he is described as “the weird person in our dormitory” by his roommate. Later in this film, through voiceover, his weirdness is explained as because he is the only child from a single family, and his mother has a violent temperament throughout his childhood. Therefore,

⁴³⁹ Chunni Zhang 张春泥, “Zhongguo Jiating Hunyin Polie Dui Zhongguo Zinv Chengjiu De Changqi Yingxiang 中国家庭婚姻破裂对中国子女成就的长期影响 [The Long-term Influence of Marital Breakdown in Divorced Families upon their Children’s Socioeconomic Achievements in China],” *Beijing Daxue Xuebao* 北京大学学报 [*Journal of Peking University*] 57, no.3 (2020): 129.

Xiaozheng Chen is portrayed as a grumpy, cold and selfish person, while his girlfriend, Wei Zheng, who is from a happy and contented family, is portrayed as, positive, optimistic and full of energy.

Returning to *Soul Mate*, Ansheng comes from a single parent family and has a really bad relationship with her mother. Every time her mother comes to see her, they fight and gets angry for the whole day. Before establishing a deep sentimental friendship with Qiyue, Ansheng is shown to be sensitive, savage, and socially inept. If we consider the victorious posture that post-feminism celebrates, and the fear of being portrayed as a victim, girlhood films often reproduce this sense of inadequacy caused by the lack of complete love and attention that comes from a single parent family. This insecurity can be seen as a psychological flaw and, as such, is unrepresentative. In the film, after becoming close friends with Qiyue, Ansheng actively integrates herself into Qiyue's happy family. She comes to eat Qiyue mother's cooking very often. She even steals a hairpin from a shop to give to Qiyue's mum to cheer her up. On the other hand, Qiyue, who is fully loved by her own family, disdains Ansheng's deliberate ingratiating behaviour. Therefore, when Ansheng realises that Jiaming likes her, her first choice is to run away from the city and let Jiaming go to Qiyue. This kind of voluntary self-sacrifice for girlfriends occurs because, for Ansheng, to lose Qiyue would be the same as losing her family, her most coveted representability. Also, because of Qiyue's willingness to sacrifice and run away, the friendship between the two girls continues.

Girls' Friendship as Bodily Bonding in *Soul Mate*



Figure 39: Ansheng hiding behind Qiyue's back in the bathroom in *Soul Mate*



Figure 40: Ansheng turns around and finds Qiyue is already wearing a bra in *Soul Mate*

Qiyue and Ansheng's friendship at the beginning of the film is similar to Hollinger's discussion of sentimental friendship. According to Hollinger, girlfriends' deep attachment in a sentimental friendship is "expressed through frequent physical displays of affection, intimate confiding, and the exchange of longing looks suffused with deep significance."⁴⁴⁰ Hollinger's words highlight the importance of the female body in constructing an intimate female friendship. The girlfriend's body is not only the implementer of their interaction, but also the bearer of girlfriends' longing looks. Such emphasis of the female body is also presented in *Soul Mate*, where Qiyue and Ansheng's intimacy grows by giving each other permission to approach, touch and even gaze upon each other's body.

This is seen in the scene where Qiyue and Ansheng share a bath together for the first time in their friendship's early stages. After the fire alarm accident at school, Ansheng and Qiyue run back to Qiyue's home. Since they are both soaked from the heavy rain, Qiyue's mother lets them take a bath together. When Qiyue's mother is still in the bathroom, Ansheng is very guarded with her body, and hides behind Qiyue's body, with only her head showing (Figure 39). When Qiyue's mother leaves the bathroom, the two girls finally start taking off their clothes. This contrast illustrates that the female body, as "a window to the individual's interior life,"⁴⁴¹ is only open to selected girlfriends, not to any others of the same sex. Though Qiyue and Ansheng are still shy with each other at

⁴⁴⁰ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 43.

⁴⁴¹ Gill, "Post-feminist Media Culture," 150.

the beginning, they face away from each other to undress. This situation changes when Ansheng first turns around and notices that Qiyue has started wearing a bra (Figure 40). Ansheng asks, “you are wearing this [bra], are you physically maturing?” This question starts a conversation and gives the girls a chance to share their girlhood secret – body maturing.



Figure 41: Ansheng in the bath ask Qiyue to show her breasts in Soul Mate



Figure 42: Qiyue ask Ansheng to show her breasts too in Soul Mate

Qiyue and Ansheng’s bodily interaction gradually intensifies as their intimate relationship is established. This can be seen in the scenes where the two girls are willing to further give each other permission to touch as well as gaze upon each other’s body. Following the scenes discussed in the previous paragraph, after some discussion about the feeling of wearing a bra, Ansheng says, “Qiyue, I want to see your breasts” (Figure 41). The camera pans back to Qiyue, who curls her lips slightly but quickly smiles again, before boldly standing up and showing her body to Ansheng. Then Qiyue sits back in the bath and says to Ansheng, “I want to see yours, too” (Figure 42). So, Ansheng stands up

and shows her body to Qiyue as well. In this scene, two girls show their naked bodies to each other without any resistance or awkwardness. In adolescence, the girl's body is always the source of their anxiety. However, this back-and-forth display of and gazing at their bodies provides the chance for the two girls to share their secrets and form an intimate friendship. During this process, Qiyue and Ansheng start to gain trust with each other and build an exclusive intimate network that is only open to the two of them. The pleasure of intimacy and belonging helps girls temporarily overcome the fear of being gazed at. Moreover, it is worth noting here that this mutual gaze does not represent an internalized male gaze, but an active gaze between girlfriends, a gaze of curiosity. In female friendship films, the shift from active gaze to judgemental gaze requires the presence of men as interference. In the rest of the film, their body interactions gradually intensify. When they appear together, their bodies are often pressed together. They are either hugging or holding each other's arms, or sleeping on the same bed while Qiyue lies in Ansheng's arms. Through their frequent body interaction, an intimate and exclusive relationship is formed between Qiyue and Ansheng. In this intimate and exclusive space, they share the girlhood secrets of body maturing, as well as offering each other the pleasure of belonging to a 'we'.

Moreover, this empowerment of approaching each other's body also changes when the girlfriend's intimate relationship is intensified or weakened. This can be seen in the contrast shown in the following scenes. After many years of separation, Ansheng returns to her hometown to meet Qiyue again. At that time, Qiyue already knows that her boyfriend, Jiaming, has secretly been in love with Ansheng for many years. In this context, when the same bathing scenario occurs again, Ansheng takes a bath alone, and Qiyue only brings her a bath robe with a cold expression. In this relationship, Ansheng is the one who is more eager for friendship. Hence, in this scene, it is also Ansheng sending the request again of taking a bath together, to check whether she is still privileged in this relationship. Ansheng pressingly says, "come over, take off your clothes, let us take a bath together." Qiyue expresses her refusal, and replies, "when we were thirteen, we took a bath together, now we are already twenty-three." Ansheng then adds, "it is okay if you do not want to take a bath, just take off your clothes, I want to see your breasts." Asking to see her breasts represents the pair's girlhood code that made Qiyue and Ansheng start laughing. But Qiyue eventually refuses Ansheng's request. This contrast between the former and later scenes suggests that the eligibility of approach to girlfriends' body is a

privilege in girls' friendship. This permission can be expanded when the relationship is deepened, and can be withdrawn when the relationship breaks down. Hence, the interaction of female bodies is not the only vehicle to form girls' physical intimacy but is also the symbol that indicates the changed emotional states of their friendship in the film. Furthermore, this change in the way female friends perceive their closeness serves as an illustration of the male's role as a destabilizing element, and his presence as a disruption to the bond between women. I delve deeper into this aspect in the upcoming section.

Interference Factor, Self-Regulation and Judgemental Gazing in *Soul Mate*

Before Jiaming's arrival in this film, the two girls and their contrasting femininity existed at peace with each other. The vast differences in Qiyue and Ansheng's physicality and femininity do not give rise to any form of mutual judgement or regulation between them. In the film, Qiyue has fuller breasts than Ansheng, but the two girls are not jealous of each other – they frequently undress to watch each other's bodies and lie down together laughing. They delight in the fact that they are distinct from one another. The distinctive image they hold ensures they can both achieve their representable status as well as keep their normative distinctiveness within this girlfriend group. However, the presence of the male character Jiaming becomes an interference factor as he brings about the unease that both Qiyue and Ansheng might lose their representative status. For Qiyue, the representability she holds is her upcoming marriage with Jiaming. For Ansheng, the representative status she wants to secure is to have a complete family and to have someone truly love her, and that is only achievable by being Qiyue's good friend. The desire to achieve representability and the fear of losing it enacts the monitoring, comparison and competition between girlfriends. As Qiyue says, after she discovers that Jiaming may secretly be in love with Ansheng, she suddenly realises that she cannot love Ansheng as much as she loves herself. It is also at this point that Qiyue and Ansheng begin a constant self-monitoring that is, however, expressed through the way they interact with each other. After Ansheng leaves her hometown (to protect Qiyue's stable heterosexual relationship), she follows her singer boyfriend and starts drifting around different cities. The two girls keep in touch with each other by writing letters, two of which read as follows:

Qiyue: Where are you now? Still nothing new on my side. Both my parent and Jiaming's are pressing to discuss our future plans. Jiaming and I plan to get married at 26 years old. And then maybe have a child at 27 and buy a house at 30.

Ansheng: Guess where I am? On a luxury cruise ship! I am helping you to see the sea you love the most. Inside this cruise is much like being in a pub, with passers-by coming and going. I woke up today and remembered that I am already 720 kilometres from Zhenjiang. Suddenly I fell a bit sad. Say hi to Jiaming.

In the above sequence, the film employs Qiyue and Ansheng's voiceovers to narrate their own letters. The film intentionally adopts a peaceful yet gloomy tone to discuss their individual life experiences. However, the content of their letters are ostentatious, serving to accentuate their distinctiveness that they are aware the other envies. Ansheng symbolizes the allure of the external world, while Qiyue embodies the stability of a homebound life. Both acknowledge that their respective lives are coveted by the other but remain unattainable. Furthermore, the act of reading these letters serves as a means to show the girlfriends' self-reflexivity. This is because while they write to each other, they refrain from commenting on shared experiences. This absence of direct communication renders the interaction more akin to self-dialogue. According to Winch, "incoherency and rage are indicators of victimhood, and serenity is an essential component of the ideal post-feminist woman."⁴⁴² Hence, through this process of self-reflection, both girls momentarily regulated their emotions by emphasising their normative distinctiveness. In these letters, Qiyue underscores her envisioned blissful future alongside Jiaming, although this hopeful illusion is quickly shattered by his departure. This self-persuasive reflection prevents Qiyue from succumbing to negative emotions such as jealousy and insecurity. Conversely, Ansheng's letter highlights her yearning for an adventurous life, even though her innermost desire is to reunite with Qiyue. This emphasis is to show Qiyue that she would never purposefully endanger her happiness. By doing this, Ansheng actively subjects herself to self-discipline to preserve the integrity of their friendship.

⁴⁴² Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 66.



Figure 43: Qiyue gets a call from Jiaming when she is travelling with Ansheng in Soul Mate



Figure 44: Ansheng gets a free bottle of wine from the male guests at the bar in Soul Mate

Nevertheless, the self-regulation of emotions between girlfriends can also fail. Punitive shaming between girlfriends is possible when ugly emotions such as jealousy arise. In the above sequence, after several years of wandering, Ansheng returns to her hometown to find Qiyue; they temporarily reconcile. On a trip together, Qiyue and Ansheng are happily talking to each other until Qiyue suddenly receives a call from Jiaming (Figure 43). Qiyue's expression immediately darkens at the sight of her phone, and she refuses to answer it in front of Ansheng. Meanwhile, Ansheng, standing behind her, awkwardly excuses herself to go to the toilet. Jiaming's presence here induces Qiyue's insecurity about losing 'representability' again, which makes the relationship between Qiyue and Ansheng begin to change from this point. The girlfriend gaze starts to show its regulatory feature and the girlfriends' non-normative behaviour is slut-shamed by this girlfriend gaze.⁴⁴³ In Winch's model, slut-shaming is a governing weapon that

⁴⁴³ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 12.

originates from feelings of envy and competition.⁴⁴⁴ This point is also confirmed in the following sequence. In the restaurant scene where Qiyue and Ansheng are preparing to eat, due to lack of money to pay the bill, Ansheng helps the owner sell wine to male customers to get a free complimentary bottle. When these male costumers come to their table and want to keep flirting with Ansheng, Qiyue criticizes Ansheng's behaviour and says, "Don't you think it is too cheap to depend on men for food and drink?" This scene echoes Winch's point about "girls mutual controlling through shame and humiliation around the body and sexuality."⁴⁴⁵ It is because, "when jealousy and competition emerge, they are legitimately allowed to discipline other girl's sexual subjectivity."⁴⁴⁶ Here, Ansheng's behaviour, as the extension of her female body, can be seen as the expression of her sexual subjectivity since she actively uses her attractiveness towards men to get what she wants. But at the same time, Ansheng's behaviour also induces Qiyue's feeling of envy and competition, since for Qiyue, Ansheng's behaviour is kind of a flaunting of her attractiveness for men, which will again bring Qiyue the unease of losing her 'representability'. So, she uses slut-shaming to evoke Ansheng's "feelings of inferiority, diminishment and worthlessness,"⁴⁴⁷ restablising Ansheng's submission to the peer control of this girlfriend group.

In this section, the discussion revolves around the framework of retroactive friendship in films, with a particular focus on how the female body is depicted as the central element in the narrative of *Soul Mate*. The girlfriend's body initially highlights the unique femininity of Qiyue and Ansheng, which echoes the distinct well-educated girl and phallic girl images found in Anglophone post-feminist culture. Subsequently, girls' bodies also form the foundational basis for the intimacy upon which their relationship is constructed. Ultimately, girlfriends' non-normative bodies serve as the primary arena for administering punishment when elements like rivalry and jealousy emerge within the girlfriends' relationship.

⁴⁴⁴ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 12-14.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Jessica Ringrose, *Post-feminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 95.

⁴⁴⁷ Winch, *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*, 5.

To summarise, this chapter examined the resurgence of the female friendship theme in Chinese girlhood films of the 2010s. During this period, female friendship became the primary narrative thread of some films, as opposed to being relegated to a subplot, as it was in the previous century. Simultaneously, the popularity of female friendship films during this period reflected an attempt by mainstream culture to incorporate feminist concepts, such as female autonomy and sisterhood, into mainstream culture. It is important to note, however, that beneath the films' depictions of sisterhood lies a deeply rooted heteronormative hegemony. Although the importance of male characters is significantly diminished in these films, they are still needed in portraying intimate female friendships, which serve as an interference factor to prohibit potential homosexual desires between girlfriends, thereby maintaining girlfriends' representable post-feminist identity that is "often presumed heterosexual."⁴⁴⁸ Plots involving girlfriends replacing male characters and becoming the girls' complete dependents, or girls prioritising their same-sex friendship over relationships with men, standing together to overcome difficulties, or just having fun together appear repeatedly in these female friendship films. Girls in such a framework of friendship only inspire and encourage each other to become a more mature version of themselves in order to better integrate into society in a way that does not challenge patriarchal power and privilege. And such preservation of patriarchal power is the source of the ambivalent manifestations of female friendship.

⁴⁴⁸ Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism," 614.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Researching Contemporary Chinese Girlhood Films

This thesis' investigation of Girlhood films and post-feminism in mainstream Chinese films creates new knowledge in the fields of feminist film studies and Chinese cinema by arguing for girlhood films as a genre that maps onto the changing status and political focus of Chinese feminism, from state-feminism to post-feminism. This study focuses on the Chinese girl-centred youth films produced from 2008 to 2018. It determined how girls have been represented on the contemporary Chinese film screen and what this representation tells us about the various phenomena that constitute contemporary girlhood. I proposed a new concept of *Shaonv Qingchunpian* (少女青春片) in Chinese and girlhood films in English to describe a group of Chinese mainstream films that not only prominently feature girls as central characters and concentrate on issues relevant to girls, but also strongly appeal to young female audiences. This terminology approaches the study of girl-centred films as a subgenre within the existing *Qingchunpian* genre in contemporary Chinese cinema, emphasizing girlhood experiences. It critiques the fact that since the 1990s, Chinese *Qingchunpian* studies have been predominantly associated with boyhood experiences. Additionally, I use the term *Shaonv Qingchunpian* to differentiate girl-centred films from *Xiaoniu Dianying*, or Chinese chick flicks, highlighting the limitations of these terms when researching girl-centred films in historical and local contexts.

In chapter 2, I provided a comprehensive review of the literature on girlhood, through which to show that scholars in the west have defined it both by legal age and by social status, drawing most on the approaches that view girl as a socially constructed identity that can and does include young women in their early 20s. This supports the thesis' argument that girlhood in China has its own specificities in relation to adult womanhood which is almost exclusively defined by marriage and motherhood. In the process of data collection, I employ definition of *Qingnian* (青年, youth), which states that youth is the period between the ages of 15 or 16 and approximately 30. However, upon analyzing the data, I found that many girlhood films feature girls over 18 and young women in their

20s. This shift in age distribution reveals the censorship of puppy love plots in the Chinese film market. While the depiction of puppy love is permitted, it is portrayed negatively and is only allowed to fail. Alternatively, directors often have to move the romance plot to the point when the hero and heroine graduate from high school and enter college to avoid potential censorship issues. More importantly, I implement Sue Harper's methodology, which involves examining her concept of the British women's picture from three perspectives: "films made *by* women, *for* women *or* about women."⁴⁴⁹ In doing so, I contend that the definition of girlhood films in the Chinese context refers to those films made *about* girls (focusing on girls' growth experiences, psychological activities, and living status), and films made *for* girls (young female audiences are the main consumer group of this genre). However, it is not necessary for such films to be produced *by* girl themselves, nor is it even necessary that they are produced by a female. The discussion regarding female audiences in China, the increase in films targeting women, their success at the box office, and the emergence of girlhood films as a prominent genre for female filmmakers provides a comprehensive understanding of the industry and market dynamics. This knowledge highlights the rise of girlhood films in conjunction with the she-economy during the post-reform period.

Chapter 3's discussion of girls before 2000 in China traces the history of feminist thought and activism, highlighting the evolution of gender equality laws from the Mao era through the market reform era. The chapter effectively weaves in textual analysis of films from the 1920s, showcasing the 'new girl' influenced by Western modernity and early feminism, and films from the 1950s and 1960s that feature socialist women as either proletarian revolutionaries or leaders of women's liberation. This analysis demonstrates how cinema reflects the evolving roles of women and feminism. The chapter's exploration of gender representation and the dual role of femininity—first as a form of resistance in the early period and later as a constraint to overcome during the socialist period—is particularly insightful. It highlights one of the central themes of girlhood films, the embodiment of agency and subjectivity, which resurfaces in the 21st century.

In Chapter 4, I turn the attention to individual girls on the screen. I have chosen young women in the urban setting as the research sample for discussion. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's concept of post-feminism, through the examination on *Go Lala Go!*

⁴⁴⁹ Harper, "The British Women's Picture: Methodology, Agency and Performance In The 1970s," 124.

(杜拉拉升职记, dir. Jinglei Xu, 2010) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年, dir. Mo Zhang, 2016), I argue that these two examples show a transformation from post-feminist masquerade to the regime of complete perfection, which reveals a more comprehensive and intensified discipline on girls and young women on the contemporary Chinese film screen, albeit in a way that celebrates the girls' achievement by constant self-monitoring and self-improvement as well as their desire to be perfect. In this chapter's discussion, I successfully connected the concept of post-feminism, originating from the West to China's open market economy and neoliberalism. I explored how it is employed to analyze contemporary Chinese girlhood cinema, highlighting its ongoing relevance amidst evolving gender politics and feminism's role in society. My argument revolves around the ambivalence of post-feminism in media and culture, which both embraces traditional femininity and assumes gender equality—a stance influenced by both China's socialist past and its current free market economy. To emphasize its local context, I coined the term Post(state)-feminism, which not only aligns with a widely recognized Western concept but also underscores its specific applicability to China.

In Chapter 5, I draw on Winch's work on "girlfriendship" which refers to a strategic neoliberal relationship between girlfriends in post-feminist media culture, to analyse the portrayal of girlfriendship under both pre-existing and retrospective frameworks. The textual analysis use Negra and Winch's theories and approaches to postfeminist tropes and representation and applies them to the chosen Chinese films – female friendship, commodification, self-branding, self-surveillance, the working/phallic girl, the girlfriend gaze, the postfeminist masquerade, retreatism. In this way, can helps a western reader see clearly how postfeminist cinema presents young women, femininity and feminism in China. Simultaneously, examining the girl's physical presence in the analyses within this chapter can serves as a gateway to linking contemporary girlhood films with their historical antecedents.

Objectives and Contributions

Attempting to generate an interdisciplinary approach that can serve as a crossroads for Chinese film studies, girlhood studies, and feminist media studies, this project seeks to achieve the following objectives. First, I understand post-feminism in the Chinese context by framing it as the penetration of neoliberalism into contemporary gender

discourse, which demonstrates a nature of “double entanglement”⁴⁵⁰ that occurs in the theory of Western post-feminism. This term comes from Angela McRobbie and refers to the co-existence of neo-conservative values regarding gender, sexuality, and marriage, with liberalisation regarding choice and diversity in terms of domestic, sexual and kinship relations in the UK social context.⁴⁵¹ I borrow this term from McRobbie and reconceptualize it in the Chinese context by seeing this entanglement as an ambivalent combination of “(state)feminist and anti-(state)feminist ideas,”⁴⁵² stemming from the legacy of socialist state feminism⁴⁵³ as well as the (re)emergence of conservative Confucian patriarchal values and individualism, spurred by the influence of Chinese neoliberalism during the post-Mao era. Throughout this process, I investigate how this national-specific post-feminist sensibility is mediated in contemporary Chinese films through the cinematic representations of girls, thereby introducing a new theoretical framework for the study of contemporary Chinese cinema. Second, employing post-feminism as a critical analytical tool, I consider girlhood films as a distinct film category, through which to investigate what it means to be a girl and the changing ideals of femininity in this neoliberal, individualistic era. More importantly, the research explores how the evolving social context and gender discourse is reflected in the ambivalent combination of celebration and regulation of girls and how post-feminist subjectivities are expressed on the contemporary screen. The goal is to integrate the cinematic representation of girls within the Chinese context as a significant component within the growing realm of girlhood studies.

⁴⁵⁰ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC: SAGE, 2009), 12.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Rosalind Gill, “Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.2 (2007): 149. Gill’s original idea is to explore the Anglophone setting where post-feminist media culture frequently presents a paradoxical “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas.” To differentiate Gill’s theory, which is grounded in the framework of Western liberal feminism, I have enclosed the word “state” in parentheses to underscore that my discussion is rooted in the realm of post-(state)feminism within the Chinese context.

⁴⁵³ See more discussion on state feminism and the development of Chinese feminism in Chapter 3.

Third, as Diane Negra argues, “in a synergistic media environment, analysis of a single medium holds less explanatory power for any account that seeks to explain the complex relations between social life and media representation.”⁴⁵⁴ Prior research in the realm of Chinese media utilizing post-feminist theory has predominantly concentrated on areas such as literatures, television programmes, advertisements, fashion magazines, and social media.⁴⁵⁵ There is a limited amount of research that delves into contemporary Chinese films through a post-feminist framework.⁴⁵⁶ Most existing studies tend to concentrate on a specific film, while there is a clear lack of in-depth discussion about such a growing girl trend in the contemporary Chinese film industry. Therefore, I aspire to offer a comprehensive examination of girlhood films, aiming to enrich the existing body of Chinese feminist media studies, which can potentially resonate with one another. Finally, this project is also a practice in re-writing the history of girls in Chinese cinema. By tracing girls’ images throughout the 20th century to the present, this thesis aims to produce an intersection between the history of Chinese feminism/women’s liberation movement and Chinese film studies. It examines how girls as a distinct female identity have been repeatedly appropriated in the cinematic space in conjunction with various women’s liberation movements and shifts in gender discourse and social ideology during various historical periods. Such reflections can lead us to pay attention to the overlooked

⁴⁵⁴ Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Post-feminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

⁴⁵⁵ Kelly Yin Nga Tse, “Post/Feminist Impulses: Neoliberal Ideology and Class Politics in Annie Wang’s *The People’s Republic of Desire* (2006),” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 18, no.3 (2017): 66-79; Min Xu and Shiyu Zheng, “Against Masculinised Hypercorrection? Renegotiating the Everydayness and Ordinarity of Post-feminism on Chinese TV,” *Media, Culture & Society* 45, no.2 (2023): 435-446; Jingyi Guo et al., “Femvertising and Post-feminist Discourse: Advertising to Break Menstrual Taboos in China,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 45, no.3 (2022): 378-398; Sara Liao, “Wang Hong Fashion Culture and the Post-feminist Time in China,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 25, no.5 (2021): 663-685.

⁴⁵⁶ Elaine Chung, “Chick Flick Fantasy and Post-feminism in Chinese Cinema: *20 Once Again* as a Transnational Remake,” in *Sino-Enchantment: The Fantastic in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, eds. Kenneth Chan and Andrew Stuckey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 149-165.

images of girls on screen in different period, the imperceptible subjectivity they express, as well as the kind of history that is being written through the narratives of girlhood lives.

Feel-Bad Girlhood: A Turn to Realism Since 2018

This thesis has explored the dynamics of the contemporary cinematic portrayal of girls and young women in neoliberal China. I consider post-feminism as the infiltration of neoliberalism into the Chinese local gender discourse and employ it as a critical analytic tool to examine contemporary Chinese girlhood films. The post-feminist rhetoric of individual choice and empowerment combined with the PRC's ideology of positive energy resulted in a proliferation of positive images of teenage girls in films between 2008 and 2018, embodying dual control over their bodies and psyches. However, the screen depiction of girls' freedom of choice is almost synonymous with the freedom to choose a romantic partner. This emphasis on romantic love is extremely patriarchal, as girls' active self-transformation only facilitates their integration into patriarchal society.

In 2018, however, this trend began to reverse itself. On the Chinese mainstream film market, several girlhood films made by young female filmmakers with an explicit feminist stance began to emerge. Examples include *The Old Town Girls* (兔子暴力, dir. Yu Shen, 2020), *Angels Wear White* (嘉年华, dir. Yan Wen, 2017) and *The Crossing* (过春天, dir. Xue Bai, 2018). Each of these films explores topics that were previously of little interest to the mainstream film industry. *The Old Town Girls*, for instance, is about Shuiqing, a girl left behind in a small town in the post-industrial era, whose mother, Quting, left her in infancy for the modern metropolis of Shenzhen – 17 years later, her fingers are chopped off due to an unpaid debt, so she flees to the small town to hide, but ultimately cannot avoid being violently pursued by hoodlums. To help her mother pay off the debt, Shuiqing eventually kidnaps her best friend and accidentally killed her. The narrative of this story clearly runs counter to the cosmopolitan landscapes of middle-class, well-educated heterosexual girls and other pictures that mainstream screens were promoting before 2018. Such films depicting China's backwardness were primarily only found in the independent filmmaking sector. As Chris Berry notes, “films set in the

present with negative endings are generally unacceptable to censorship authorities.”⁴⁵⁷ This film depicts just such a miserable girlhood, highlighting the hopelessness of life in small cities during the post-industrial era and the impotence of an individual's agency when there is an extreme imbalance in the social structure.

Angels Wear White, on the other hand, deals with the intersection of issues including teenage sexual assault and the existential plight of lower-class girls. The film demonstrates a shift towards critical realism, in contrast to the abundance of positive girls wrapped up in the middle-class dreamscape of the cosmopolitan city in the decade preceding 2018. This film depicts a relationship between two girls who are neither classmates nor friends, but rather both suffer oppression at the bottom of a patriarchal hierarchy. They cross paths because Chairman Liu enters Xiaowen's room and sexually assaults her while Xiaomi secretly records him on video. In the film, Xiaomi finally finds the courage to show the video and assists Xiaowen in seeking justice. This plot embodies a feminist spirit of sisterhood – mutual support between individual women that arises from the realisation of common oppression. This is unprecedented among films depicting girls' friendships, as discussed in Chapter 5 (unless the oppressed girl can connect her problems to the socialist revolution or the fate of the nation).

I believe that the emergence of these films with a feminist ethos and a realist critique of patriarchal social structures around 2018 was influenced by the #MeToo movement that began in China at that time and the feminist movement that developed through social media. As I argued in Chapter 1, the visual representation of young girls can be viewed as a form of multidimensional agency, in which the depiction of girlhood experiences maps and interacts with China's dynamic sociocultural context and evolving gender discourse. Regarding this thesis, I have not yet had the opportunity to extend my investigation into these issues by looking beyond the sample after 2018.

⁴⁵⁷ Chris Berry, “Women Characters, Women's Cinema,” in *Chinese Cinemas: International Perspectives*, eds. Felicia Chan and Andy Wills (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 126.

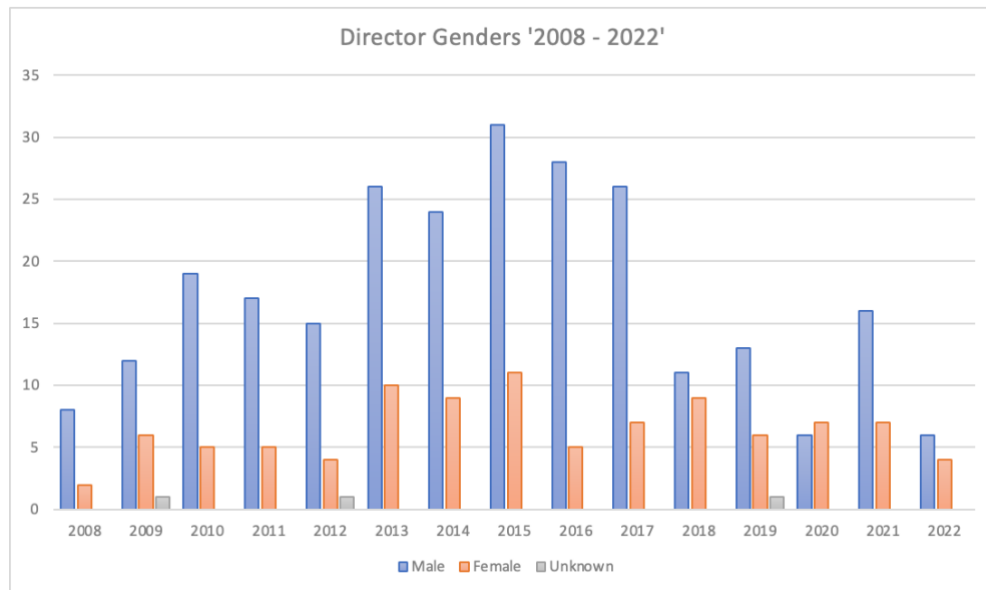


Figure 45: Gender Ratio of Male and Female Directors' Work in the Commercial Mainstream Film Market

The emergence of new female directors is another topic of interest. According to the statistics compiled for this research, the disparity between male and female directors in the commercial mainstream film market has always been substantial. When I counted the gender ratio of male and female directors in a collection of 320 girlhood films (Figure 45), the most exaggerated difference can be seen in 2016, reaching 28 male to 5 female directors. However, in 2020 the number of female directors surpassed the number of male directors of girlhood films for the first time. This relationship between female filmmakers and the mainstream market is worth further consideration.

Bibliography

- Aapola, Sinikka, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris. *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Definitions: Commodity and Commodification." In *Rethinking Commodification: Cases and Readings in Law and Culture*, eds. Martha M. Ertman and Joan C. Williams, 34-45. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005.
- Barlow, Tani E. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Benshoff, Harry M. *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to methods, Theories, and Approaches*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Berry, Chris. "China's New Women's Cinema." *Camera Obscura* 6, no.3 (1988): 8-19
- Berry, Chris. "If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or, Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency." *Boundary* 225, no.3 (1998): 129-150.
- Berry, Chris, and Laikwan Pang. "Remapping Contemporary Chinese Cinema Studies." *The China Review* 10, no.2 (2010): 89-108.
- Berry, Chris, and Mary Farquhar. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Berry, Chris. "Women Characters, Women's Cinema." In *Chinese Cinemas: International Perspectives*, eds. Felicia Chan and Andy Wills, 119-133. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Bettinson, Gary. "Yesterday Once More: Hong Kong-China Coproductions and the Myth of Mainlandization." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14, no.1 (2020): 16-31.
- Brooks, Ann. *Post-Feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.
- Browne, Nick. "Introduction." In *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, eds. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau, 1-14. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.

- Chan, Lik Sam. *The Politics of Dating Apps Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China*. Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021.
- Chen, Xiaoyun 陈晓云. "Shuangshenghua: Shuangchong Shenti, Shuangchong Shenfen, Shuangchong Shengming: Dui Dangdai Zhongguo Dianyingzhong Yizhong Shijue Zhuti Yu Xueshi Moshi De Yantan 双生花:双重身体·双重身份·双重生命 — 对当代中国电影中的一种视觉主题与叙事模式的研讨 [Double Body, Double Identity, Double Life: Discussions on Visual Theme and Narrative Pattern of 'Geminate Flower']." *Wenhua Yishu Ynjiu 文化艺术研究 [Studies in Culture & Art]* 2, no.2 (2009): 140-145.
- Chen, Xiaoyun 陈晓云 and Xiaoying Wu 吴筱颖. "Shuangshenghua: Yizhong Dianying Xushi Moshi 双生花: 一种电影叙事模式 [Shuangshenghua: A Narrating Mode in Movies]." *Hunan Dazhong Chuanmei Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan Xuebao 湖南大众传媒职业技术学院学报 [Journal of Hunan Mass Media Vocational Technical College]* 7, no.2 (2007): 46-51.
- Chen, Xihe 陈犀和. *Huayu Dianying: Lilun, Lishi he Meixue 华语电影: 理论、历史和美学 [Chinese Language Cinema: Theory, History and Aesthetics]*. Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 2011.
- Chen, Xuguang 陈旭光. "Nvxing Zizhi Shijiao, Xiaozi Qingdiao, Wuzhi Zhuyi Yu Qingnian Dianying De 'Zhulihua' Zhenghou 女性自知视角、小资情调、物质主义与青年电影的“主流化”症候 [Women's Self-Awareness, Petty Bourgeois Sensibility, Materialism and The Mainstreaming Syndrome of Youth Films]." *Dangdai Dianying 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema]*, no.1 (2012): 33-36.
- Chen, Xuguang 陈旭光. *Huayu Dianying: Xinmeijie, Xinmeixue, Xinsiwei 华语电影: 新媒介、新美学、新思维 [Chinese Language Cinema: New Media, New Aesthetics, New Perspectives]*. Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2012.
- Chen, Yanru. "From Ideal Women to Women's Ideal: Evolution of the Female Image in Chinese Feature Films, 1949-2000." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no.3 (2008): 97-129.
- Chung, Elaine. "Chick Flick Fantasy and Postfeminism in Chinese Cinema: 20 Once Again as a Transnational Remake." In *Sino-Enchantment: The Fantastic in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, eds. Kenneth Chan and Andrew Stuckey, 149-165. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

- Clark, Paul. "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films: Cinema and the Exotic" *East – West* 1, no.2 (1987): 15-31.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas, and Susan B. Kaiser. "Betwixt and Be Tween: Age Ambiguity and the Sexualization of the Female Consuming Subject." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 2 (2004): 203-227.
- Cornelius, Sheila. *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002.
- Cott, Nancy F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Croll, Elisabeth. *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-perception in Twentieth Century China*. London and New Jersey: Hong Kong University Press, 1995.
- Cui, Shuqin. *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003.
- Currie, Dawn H., Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. *'Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood*. New York, Washington DC, Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt and Main, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Dai, Jinhua 戴锦华. "Bukejian de Nvxing: Dangdai Zhongguo Dianying Zhongde Nvxing yu Nvxing de Dianying 不可见的女性—当代中国电影中的女性与女性的电影 [Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women's Film]." *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.6 (1994): 255-280.
- Dai, Zhe 戴哲. "Xinshidai Shouzhong Yu Hualaiwu Dianying Shengchan Fanshi De Zhuanyi: Yi Xinshiji Yilai De Hualaiwu Dushi Aiqing Dianying Weili 新世代受众与华莱坞电影生产范式的转移—以新世纪以来的华莱坞都市爱情电影为例 [New Generation Audience and Huallywood Film Production Pattern Transfer: A Case Study of Huallywood Urban Romance Since 2000]." *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [Contemporary Cinema], no.2 (2017): 172-175.
- De Fina, Anna, and Alexandra Georgakopoulou. "Analysing Narrative as Practice." *Qualitative Research* 8, no.3 (2008): 379-387.
- "Dianyingjie 'Yinsheng Yangshuai'? Qibu Xiaoniudianying Bannian Juanzou Shieryi Piaofang 电影界“阴盛阳衰”？7部“小妞电影”半年卷走12亿票房” [The Rise of the Feminine and the Decline of the Masculine in the Film Industry? Seven Chinese Chick Flicks Swept Away 1.2 billion RMB in Box Office in Six Months].

- Guanchazhe 观察者 [Guancha Syndicate], last modified 23rd September 2013, https://www.guancha.cn/culture/2013_09_23_174088.shtml?web. (accessed 16th September 2021).
- Dosekun, Simidele. "For Western Girls Only? Post-feminism as Transnational Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no.6 (2015): 960-975.
- Dosekun, Simidele. *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020.
- Dyhouse, Carol. *Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women*. London: Zed Books, 2014.
- Elias, Ana Sofia, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff. "Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism." In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, eds. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 3-50. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Ethel, Klein. *Gender Politics: From Consciousness to Mass Politics*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991.
- Felicity, Colman. "Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent." *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no.3 (2005): 356-371.
- Feldshuh, Hannah. "Gender, Media, and Myth-making: Constructing China's Leftover Women." *Asian Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (2018): 38-54.
- "Feichang Wanmei: Zhangziyi Xuecheng Guiguo Paiyangqi Xiju 非常完美:章子怡学成归国拍洋气喜剧 [Sophie's Revenge: Ziyi Zhang's Triumphant Comeback from Hollywood to Make a Fashion Comedy]." ifeng.com 凤凰网, last modified 13th August 2009, https://ent.ifeng.com/movie/review/200908/0813_40_1300495.shtml (accessed 16th September 2021).
- Fleming, David H., and Maria Elena Indelicato. "Introduction: On transnational Chinese Cinema(s), Hegemony and Huallywood(s)." *Transnational Screens* 10, no.3 (2019): 137-147.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1974.

- Fu, Yongchun. "From 'Parrot' to 'Butterfly': China's Hybridization of Hollywood in Distribution Systems in the 1920s and 1930s." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 8, no.1 (2014): 1-16.
- Fu, Yongchun, Maria Elena Indelicato and Zitong Qiu. "Research Note towards a Definition of Huollywood." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10, no.1 (2016): 54-60.
- Genz, Stephanie, and Benjamin A. Barbon. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Gill, Rosalind. "Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.2 (2007): 147-166.
- Gill, Rosalind. "Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Post-feminist Times." *Subjectivity* 25 (2008): 432-445.
- Gill, Rosalind. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Post-feminism: A Post-feminist Sensibility 10 Years On." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no.6 (2017): 606-626.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff. "Introduction." In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 1-20. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Gonick, Marnina, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, and Lisa Weems. "Rethinking agency and resistance: What comes after girl power?." *Girlhood Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 1-9.
- Gu, Zhun. *Screen Media and the Construction of Nostalgia in Post-socialist China*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Guo, Bingru 郭冰茹. "Jiemei Qingyi Yu Xinnvxing De Ziwo Rentong 姐妹情谊与新女性的自我认同 [Sisterhood and the New Women's Self-identity]." *Zhida Xuebao* 职大学报 [*Journal of the Stagg and Worker's University*], no.2 (2020): 1-7.
- Guo, Jingyi, Ziwei Zhang, Jinhong Song, Lu Jin, Duan Yu, and Sara Liao. "Femvertising and Postfeminist Discourse: Advertising to Break Menstrual Taboos in China." *Women's Studies in Communication* 45, no. 3 (2022): 378-398.
- Gwynne, Joel. "Japan, Postfeminism and the Consumption of Sexual(ised) Schools in Male-Authored Contemporary Manga." *Feminist Theory* 13, no.3 (2013): 325-343.
- Hall, Stuart. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In *Race and Racialization*, eds. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Chris Andersen, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Roger C.A. Maaka, 85-95. Toronto and Vancouver: Canadian Scholars, 2018.

- Hawes, Joseph M. "The Strange History of Female Adolescence in the United States." *Journal of Psychohistory* 13, no.1(1985): 51-63.
- Hesford, Wendy S. *Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of pedagogy*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Harris, Anita. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
- Hill, Sarah. *Young Women, Girls and Post-feminism in Contemporary British Film*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Hollinger, Karen. *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Hu, Jubin. *Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.
- Jeffreys, Elaine, and Haiqing Yu. *Sex in China*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2015.
- Jia, Wenshan, Yueh-Ting Lee and Haiyang Zhang. "Ethno-Political Conflicts in China: Toward Building Interethnic Harmony." In *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, eds. Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert, 177-198. New York, Dordrecht, Heidelberg, and London: Springer, 2012.
- Kanai, Akane. "Girlfriendship and Sameness: Affective Belonging in a Digital Intimate Public." *Journal of Gender Studies* (2017): 293-306.
- Karp, Marcelle, and Debbie Stoller. *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*. London: Penguin, 1999.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Girlfriends and Girl Power: Female Adolescence in Contemporary U.S. Cinem.," In *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, 125-142. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no.9 (2005): 1-28.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste. *Girls Make Media*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.
- Kett, Joseph F. *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.
- Lakoff, Robin. "Language and Woman's Place." *Language in Society* 2, no.1 (1973): 45-79.

- Lazar, Michelle M. "Discover the Power of Femininity! Analyzing Global 'Power Femininity' in Local Advertising." *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no.4 (2006): 505-517.
- Lazar, Michelle M. "The Right to Be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising." In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, 37-15. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Lei, Yanping 雷艳平. "Cong Haofang Dao Zhenjing — Lun Wenhua Zhuanxing Houde Songdai Guigevnjiao 从豪放到贞静—论文化转型后的宋代闺阁女教 [Female Teaches after the Cultural Reforming Song Dynasty Inner Chamber]." *Lanzhou Xuekan* 兰州学刊 [*Lanzhou Academic Journal*], no.3 (2013): 52-56.
- Li, Mengya 李梦雅. "Guochan Xiaoyuan Qingchun Dianying Fazhan Kunjing Tanxi 国产校园青春电影发展困境探析 [An Exploration of The Dilemma of The Development of Chinese School Youth Films]." *Dianying Pingjie* 电影评介 [Movie Review], no.3 (2019): 29-52.
- Liao, Sara. "Wang Hong Fashion Culture and the Postfeminist Time in China." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 25, no.5 (2021): 663-685.
- Liebler, Carol M., Wei Jiang and Li Chen. "Beauty, Binaries, and the Big Screen in China: Character Gender in Feature Films." *Asian Journal of Communication* 25, no.6 (2015): 584-599.
- Lin, Shaoxiong 林少雄. *Jingzhong Hongyan: Huayu Dianying de Xingbie Tiren* 镜中红颜：华语电影的性别体认 [*Cinematic Beauty: Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Language Cinema*]. Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2013.
- Lim, Song Hwee. *Celluloid Comrades: The Representation of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006.
- Liu, Jing 刘静. "Shichang Jingji Gaige Jincheng Zhongde Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Rongzi Jizhi Fazhan Yanjiu 市场经济改革进程中的中国电影产业融资机制发展研究 [The Financing Mechanisms of the Chinese Film Industry in the Process of Market Economy Reform]." *Xinan Zhengfa Daxue Xuebao* 西南政法大学学报 [*Journal of Southwest University of Political Science & Law*], no.6 (2019): 89-102.
- Liu, Xiaolei 刘小磊. "Guimi: Jiading De Guimi Qiyue Yu Jiadingxing Qinggan 《闺蜜》：假定的“闺蜜契约”与假定性情感[Girls: The Hypothetical 'Girlfriend Contract' and Hypothetical Affect]." *Dianying Piping* 电影批评 [Film Criticism], no.5 (2014): 48-50.

- Lu, Sheldon H. "Historical Introduction." In *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon H. Lu, 1-34. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.
- Lu, Sheldon H. "Review of Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific," *MCLC Resource Center Publication*, last modified January 2008, <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/visuality-and-identity/> (accessed 10th June 2021).
- Lu, Sheldon H. "Dialect and modernity in 21st century Sinophone cinema." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 49 (2007): 1-15.
- Lu, Sheldon H. "Notes on Four Major Paradigms in Chinese-language Film Studies." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no.1 (2012): 15-26.
- Lu, Sheldon H., and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. "Introduction: Mapping the field of Chinese-language cinema." In *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, eds. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, 1–24. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005.
- Lu, Jiehua 陆杰华 and Xiaofei Wang 王笑非. "Ershi Shiji Jiushi Niandai Yilai Woguo Hunyin Zhuangkuang Bianhua Fenxi 20 世纪 90 年代以来我国婚姻状况变化分析 [Change of the Marital Status in Mainland China since 1990s]." *Beijing Shehui Kexue* 北京社会科学 [*Beijing Social Science*], no.3 (2013): 62-72.
- Luo, Le 罗乐. "'Nalai Zhiyi' Zhishang: Zhongguo Xiaoni Dianyng De Suyuan – Bolai Yu Fuhao Kunjing '拿来主义'之殇 :中国小姐电影的溯源 — 舶来与符号困境 [The Tragedy of 'Takenism': Trace Chinese Chick Flicks and Semiotic Dilemma]." *Dianyng Pingjie* 电影评介 [*Movie Review*], no.3 (2019): 73.
- Luo, Yunjuan, and Xiaoming Hao. "Media Portrayal of Women and Social Change." *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no.3 (2007): 281-298.
- Marchetti, Gina. "Introduction: Plural and Transnational." *Jump Cut*, no.42 (1998): 68-72.
- Martin, Fran. *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- McNeil, Maureen. "Dancing with Foucault." In *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu, 147-179. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

- McRobbie, Angela 安吉拉 麦克罗比. *Nvxing Zhuyi Yu Qingnian Wenhua* 女性主义与青年文化 [*Feminism and Youth Culture*]. Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2000.
- McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC: SAGE, 2009.
- McRobbie, Angela. "Notes on The Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times." *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no.83 (2015): 3-20.
- Min, Dongchao. "Duihua (Dialogue) In-Between: A Process of Translating the Term 'Feminism' in China." *Interventions* 9, no.2 (2008): 174-193.
- Negra, Diane. *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Post-feminism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Palmer, Paulina. *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
- Pang, Laikwan. "The Institutionalization of 'Chinese' Cinema as an Academic Discipline." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, no.1 (2006): 55-61.
- Projansky, Sarah. "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters." In *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 40-72. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Projansky, Sarah. *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Radner, Hilar. *The New Woman's Film: Femme-Centric Movies from Smart Chicks*. New York and London: Routledge, 2017.
- Ringrose, Jessica. *Post-feminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Ringrose, Jessica, and Emma Renold. "Normative Cruelties and Gender Deviants: The Performative Effects of Bully Discourses for Girls and Boys in School." *British Educational Research Journal* 36, no.4 (2010): 573-596.
- Robinson, Lillian S. "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no.2 (1991): 273-285.
- Shao, Peiren 邵培仁. "Hualaiwu de Xiangxiang yu Qidai 华莱坞的想象与期待 [Imagination and Expectation of Hullywood]." *Zhongguo Chuanmei Baogao* 中国传媒报告 [*China Media Report*], no.4 (2013): 1.

- Shao, Peiren. *Hualaiwu Dianying Gailun* 华莱坞电影概论 [An Introduction to Hualaywood Cinema]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2014.
- Shih, Shu-mei. "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 199, no.1 (2004): 16-30.
- Shih, Shu-mei. *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Shih, Shu-mei. "Theory, Asia and the Sinophone." *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no.4 (2010): 465-484.
- Silbergeld, Jerome. *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999.
- Soland, Brigitte. *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Song, Lizhong 宋立中. "Mingqing Jiangnan Funv 'Yeyou' Yu Fengjian Lunli Chongzhuang 明清江南妇女“冶游”与封建伦理冲突 [Conflict of Women's 'Tourism' in the South of the Yangtze during the Ming and the Qing with Traditional Ethics]." *Funv Yanjiu Luncong* 妇女研究论丛 [Collection of Women's Studies], no.1 (2010): 39-48.
- Song, Xiaoping 宋晓萍. "Nvxing Qingyi: Kongque Huo Xushi Yizhi 女性情谊：空缺或叙事抑制 [Female Friendship: The Gaps or Narrative Suppression]." *Wenyi Pinglun* 文艺评论 [Literature and Art Criticism], no.3 (1996): 60-66.
- Stuart, Andrea. "Feminism: Dead or Alive?." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, 28-42. London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1990.
- Su, Wendy. "Cultural Policy and Film Industry as Negotiation of Power: The Chinese State's Role and Strategies in its Engagement with Global Hollywood 1994–2012." *Pacific Affairs* 87, no.1 (2014): 93-114.
- Taylor, Anthea. *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Tse, Kelly Yin Nga. "Post/Feminist Impulses: Neoliberal Ideology and Class Politics in Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire* (2006)." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 18, no.3 (2017): 66-79.
- Thornham, Sue. *Women, Feminism and Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

- Thornham, Sue, and Pengpeng Feng. "'Just a Slogan': Individualism, Postfeminism, and Female Subjectivity in Consumerist China." *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no.2 (2010): 195-211.
- Todd, Janet M. *Women's Friendship in Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Wallis, Cara. "Chinese Women in the Official Chinese Press: Discursive Constructions of Gender in Service to the State." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3, no.1 (2006): 94-108.
- Wang, Fengxian. "The 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' as a Social Discourse of Gender." *Chinese Studies in History* 45, no.4 (2012): 58-70.
- Wang, Changsong 王昌松 and Yiming Chen 陈一鸣. *Huayu Qingchun Dianying Leixingxue Yanjiu 华语青春电影类型学研究 [Genre Analysis: Chinese Youth on Screen]*. Guangzhou: Jinan Daxue Chubanshe, 2020.
- Wang, Jianzhong 王建中. "Guanyu Ertong Dianying De Jidian Sikao: Lishi, Xianzhuang He Wenti Suozai 关于儿童电影的几点思考: 历史、现状和问题所在 [Some Reflections on Children's Films: History, Present and Problems]." *Liaoning Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao 辽宁教育学院学报 [Journal of Liaoning Educational Institute]*, no.3 (1992): 115.
- Wang, Lingzhen (ed.). *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- Wang, Lingzhen. *Revisiting Women's Cinema: Feminism, Socialism, and Mainstream Culture in Modern China*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Wang, Yiman. "Alter-Centring Sinophone Cinema." In *Sinophone Cinemas*, eds. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, 26-44. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Weinbaum, Alys Eve, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Y. Dong, and Tani E. Barlow. "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device." In *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity and Globalization*, eds. Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Y. Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, 1-24. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Winch, Alison. "We Can Have It All: The Girlfriend Flick." *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no.1 (2012): 69-82.
- Winch, Alison. "Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks." *New Formations* 84/85 (2015): 228-245.

- Winch, Alison. *Girlfriends and Post-feminist Sisterhood*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Wu, Jingsi Christina. *Entertainment and Politics in Contemporary China*. London, New York and Shanghai. 2020.
- Xu, Min, and Shiyu Zheng. "Against Masculinised Hypercorrection? Renegotiating the Everydayness and Ordinarity of Postfeminism on Chinese TV." *Media, Culture & Society* 45, no.2 (2023): 435-446.
- Xin, Leng 心冷, "Ping Shanghai Sannvzi 评上海三女子 [Review of Three Girls in Shanghai]." *Guowen Zhoubao* 国闻周报 [*Guowen Weekly*] 3, no.23 (1926): 35-36.
- Yang, Fan. "Post-feminism and Chick Flicks in China: Subjects, Discursive Origin and New Gender Norms." *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no.3 (2023): 1059-1074
- Yang, Linyu 杨林玉. *Dangdai Huayu Qingchun Dianying Yanjiu 1978-2018 当代华语青春电影研究 1978-2018* [A Study of Contemporary Chinese Youth Films 1978-2018]. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2021.
- Yang, Liu 杨柳 and Yingjuan Gao 高樱娟. "2010-2014 Nian Shuqidang Dianying Shichang Diaocha Yanjiu 2010-2014 年暑期档电影市场调查研究 [2010-2014 Film Market Research for Summer Movie Season]." In 2015 *Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Yanjiu Baogao* 2015 中国电影产业研究报告 [*The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry 2015*], ed. China Film Association and China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, Film Art Centre, Industry Research Department, 177-207. Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Xi'an: World Publishing Corporation, 2015.
- Yang, Yanling "Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 14, no.1 (2016): 71-91.
- Yeh, Emilie Yueh-yu. "Defining 'Chinese'." *Jump Cut*, no.42 (1998), 73-76.
- Yin, Hong 尹鸿. "Shiji Zhijiao: 90 Niandai Zhongguo Dianying Beiwang 世纪之交: 90年代中国电影备忘 [Turn of the Century: China's Film Memo in the 1990s]." *Dangdai Dianying* 当代电影 [*Contemporary Cinema*], no.1 (2001): 23-32.
- Yin, Hong 尹鸿 and Liu Liu 刘浏. "Zhongguo Dianying Chanye Fazhan Gaikuang 中国电影产业发展概况 [The Overview of China's Film Industry Development]." In *Zhongguo Chuanmei Chanye Fazhan Baogao 2007-2008* 中国传媒产业发展报告 2007-2008 [*Report on Development of China's Media Industry 2007-2008*], ed. Baoguo Cui 崔保国, 191-195. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2008.

- Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Zhang, Chunni 张春泥. "Zhongguo Jiating Hunyin Polie Dui Zhongguo Zinv Chengjiu De Changqi Yingxiang 中国家庭婚姻破裂对中国子女成就的长期影响 [The Long-term Influence of Marital Breakdown in Divorced Families upon their Children's Socioeconomic Achievements in China]." *Beijing Daxue Xuebao* 北京大学学报 [*Journal of Peking University*] 57, no.3 (2020): 128-139.
- Zhang, Yingjin. *Chinese National Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.
- Zhang, Yingjin. *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.
- Zhang, Yiwei 张怡微. "Ningju De Kewang — Cong Nvxing Youyi De Shuxie Tanqi 凝聚的渴望——从女性友谊的书写谈起 [Desire to Bond: Discussion from the Writing of Female Friendship]." *Shanghai Wenxue* 上海文学 [*Shanghai Literature*], (2019): 125-132.
- Zheng, Huan Zhao 郑焕钊. "Congdianying Shanguang Shaonv Kan Singchunpian Zhuliuhua De Tuwei Yu Kunjing 从电影《闪光少女》看——青春片主流化的突围与困境 [From Our Shining Days to See The Breakout and Dilemma of Mainstreaming Youth Films]." *Wenyi Bao* 文艺报 [*Culture & Art Daily*], no.4 (2017): 1-2.
- Zhou, Hailong 周海龙. "Feichang Wanmei: Wanmei Xijin Fengbao 非常完美 完美吸金风暴 [Sophie's Revenge: The Ideal Storm of Financial Drain]." *Jingyingzhe* 经营者 [*Business Man*], no. Z8 (2009): 59-61.
- Zhou, Jing 周婧. *Ershi Shiji Jiushi Niandai Hou Huayu Qingchun Dianying Yanjiu 二十世纪九十年代后华语青春电影研究 [A Study on Chinese Youth Movies After the 1990s]*. Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 2018.
- Zhou, Nanyan 周南焱. "Huanqiu Yingye Chengli Zhongguo Banshichu: Haolaiwu 'Liuda' Jun Neidi Luohu 环球影业成立中国办事处: 好莱坞"六大"均内地落户 [Universal Pictures Opens China Office, Hollywood's Six Big Film Studios All Set Up in Mainland China]." *Renminwang* 人民网 [people.cn], last modified 18th November 2014, <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/1118/c40606-26043401.html> (accessed 16th September 2021).
- Zhou, Xuelin. *Young Rebels in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.

- Zhou, Xuelin. *Youth Culture in Chinese Language Film*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Zhouhui, Xiaowan 周慧晓婉 and Ying An 安莹. “Jinma Quanshi Jingxi, Nvzhujue Shouci Xia ‘Shuanghuandan’ 金马全是惊喜，女主角首次下‘双黄蛋’” [The Golden Horse is Full of Surprises, the Leading Actress Awarded Double Heroine for the First Time]. *Xinjingbao 新京报* [The Beijing New], last modified 27th October 2016, http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2016-11/27/content_661782.htm?div=0 (accessed 16th September 2020).
- Zhu, Ying. “Chinese Cinema’s Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the Mid- 1990s.” *Journal of Communication* 52, no.4 (2002): 905-921.
- Zhu, Ying. *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System*. Westport and London: Praeger, 2003.
- 2008 *Zhongguo Dianyǐng Chányè Yánjiú Bào gào* 2008 中国电影产业研究报告 [The Research Report on Chinese Film Industry 2008]. Beijing: China Film Press, 2008.