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Better Beauty Through Technology: Chinese Transnational Feminism and the Cinema of Suffering

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Women's Issues Under the Polar Aesthetics of Female Suffering and Mulan-ism

Since the 1919 May Fourth New Culture movement, the idea of a Chinese feminism has been inextricably caught between a struggle for Chinese national identity and the imperialist legacy of imported Western ideas. While there were indigenous attempts at non-Western feminism before May Fourth, such as the gender egalitarianism espoused by the proto-communist Taiping Rebellion, or the female sisterhoods of the Pearl River Delta, the modernity adopted after China's 1911 Republican revolution quickly established the Western prejudices adopted by

Chinese intellectuals. Mainland feminist scholar Wang Zheng (1999, 17-18) has characterized the modern feminism that followed May Fourth as a battle between two kinds of liberal humanism. The first was a socially progressive philosophy positing women as human beings separate from but equal to men¹, and the second a masculinist philosophy in which the "human" in "humanism" was automatically thought of as the educated, modern, First World male that Chinese revolutionaries should emulate. The woman who follows the male slant of this second type of humanism should — in order to achieve equal rights — impersonate and effectively become a neutered man, something like the butch, cross-dressing Republican revolutionary played by Lin Ching-hsia in [Tsui Hark's Peking Opera Blues](#) (1986).

Wang calls this masculinized scenario the "Mulan subject position," after the traditional story of legendary heroine Hua Mulan, who dutifully impersonates a male soldier when her ailing father is unable to fight. It is ironic, though, that the Mulan legend should have become a revolutionary role model for Chinese women, considering the tale actually regurgitates filial piety and other outmoded Confucianisms, and that Mulan must forever alternate between masculine power and female (hetero-)sexuality without being able to synthesize the two.² But the Mulan subject position was only the tip of the iceberg, for revolutionary women's political problems were in fact argued by male revolutionaries, who saw in the liberation of women a universal, humanist allegory for their own liberation from Confucianism, dynasticism, and other remnants of the *ancien regime*. Analogously, in the climate of today's transnational cinema, few female-directed Mainland Chinese films are imported to the West³, and the cinematic window through which we view Chinese "women's issues" has been forever fogged by the (male) likes of Zhang Yimou.

The Mulan subject position was intensified and institutionalized under Maoism, which equalized the sexes by reducing them to a common denominator of material labor. Mayfair Yang Mei-hui's video documentary **Through Chinese Women's Eyes** (1997) characterizes Maoist gender reconstruction as a unique moment in world history, a time in which the result of state feminism was not only the negation of gender differences but the overall desexualization of both women *and* men. Yet while women may have enjoyed social power as Maoist leaders, they lacked the autonomous sexuality derived from an individuated female consciousness. Furthermore, the Maoist erasure of gender difference was never an erasure of sexual difference, and was confined mostly to economic roles. To ensure that the butchness of Mulan-ism did not deviate into sexual transgression, [homosexuality](#) was pathologized (ironically following Western ideas of sexual pathology) as never before in China's history. According to Yang's account,

unmarried women over thirty were considered social burdens or sexual abnormalities, and were often demonized as lesbians under Maoist norms of conformity.

The problem for our discussion, however, is that in Chinese film — particularly in the Fifth Generation Mainland films, which apparently ignore bourgeois Western feminism — the ideological tensions between Eastern and Western feminism have often been trumped by visual splendor and depictions of melodramatic female suffering. While representations of feudal suffering were a common tool used by Republican revolutionaries and anti-Confucian Maoists alike to critique Third World primitivism, the persistence of this aesthetic has in film submerged *any* kind of gendered politics beneath a commodifiable aesthetic of cinematographic prettiness, in which the systems under critique are paradoxically presented romantically, nostalgically, in a word, sexily. Of course, generic images of female suffering are common throughout classical East Asian cinema, as evidenced by Mizoguchi's ever-suffering heroines, whose proto-feminisms the Japanese new wave, attempting to escape the straitjacket of feudalist aesthetics, considered needlessly romantic. But while I refuse to characterize suffering as an aesthetic particularly "Asian" or feminine, I must still contend with the kind of oriental imagery promulgated by Zhang Yimou, which has fostered an internationally recognized trope of prettified female suffering, and which — ignoring both Western feminism and Chinese Mulan-ism — has been incapable of saying anything innovative about women's problems in premodern China. If feminism should critique the tyranny of the physical appearances that preserve male and female as biologically exclusive and unequal terms, might it not be ironic for a film — such as Zhang's **Raise the Red Lantern** — to purportedly critique patriarchy while burying its themes beneath the similarly exclusive physical appearances of high-class cinematography?

It is not a simple thing to renounce suffering: as entire cultures are founded upon aestheticizing it (Christianity), and others are founded upon shunning it (Buddhism), it remains forever the lowest — and perhaps only — common denominator of universal human experience. As such, suffering has been an indispensable impetus for artistic expression, from Sophocles to Arthur Miller, from *Rigoletto* to Bessie Smith, from Griffith's **Broken Blossoms** (1919) to the Indian classic **Pakeezah** (1971). But let us — if only for the moment — try to quit *cold turkey* the defeatist aesthetic of suffering, and instead see film as the expressly political tool it must be, and has always been. The pathos of suffering will always have its noble place as long as there is tragedy, but what political, feminist good can numbingly repetitive representations of suffering have? If the sarcastic

necrology of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* catalogs with embarrassing clarity the boringly self-flagellating masochism that had plagued pre-Stonewall cinema, why should the lushly photographed fatalisms of films as recent as **Thelma and Louise** or **Red Lantern** constitute a legitimate feminism? While we shouldn't embark on campaigns of naive, freshly scrubbed optimism, the aesthetic of (female) suffering has unfortunately beatified meekness, turning what could at best be martyrdom into self-pacifying euthanasia. People will defend the art of suffering by saying, "At least it is *realistic* — that is what life is really like!" But I will say, "What good is your mediocre realism if it offers no revelation, no original instruction, and feebly aims to make a grand statement by *concluding* with the suffering that we already accept as *a priori* universal knowledge?"

It is now seemingly impossible to comment on the image of (suffering) women in rural Chinese films without placing that commentary within a frame of orientalism and transnational consumerism. E. Ann Kaplan (1991), Rey Chow (1995), Dai Jinhua (1999), Chris Berry (1999), and legions of others have already commented on the commercial appeal of the Fifth Generation Chinese films to First World audiences.⁴ Often, these are rural narratives that romanticize a resplendent aesthetic of rural female suffering as an exportable vision of a China framing its premodern rural history as an international cinematic commodity. As Chow says: "...the Chinese films that manage to make their way to audiences in the West are usually characterized, first of all, by visual beauty. From Chen Kaige's **Yellow Earth** (1984) to Tian Zhuangzhuang's **Horse Thief**, to Zhang Yimou's **Red Sorghum** (1988[sic]), **Judou** (1989), and **Raise the Red Lantern** (1991), we see that contemporary Chinese directors are themselves so fascinated by the possibilities of cinematic experimentation that even when their subject matter is — and it usually is — oppression, contamination, rural backwardness, and the persistence of feudal values, such subject matter is presented with stunning sensuous qualities." (54)

Elsewhere, Mainland critic Dai Jinhua has argued that because Zhang Yimou has orientalized himself for a Western audience, he assumes a passively feminine position. (1999, 201) That is, just as Western viewers gaze at a mad Gong Li imprisoned within the patriarchal house of **Red Lantern**, so do we envision a flailing Zhang Yimou trapped within the Western patriarchy and economics of international film distribution. Yet if we really insist on narrowly identifying artists according to passive-aggressive or female-male binaries, we might also say that because Zhang's films are actively prestigious and economically profitable — and as far as "foreign" films go, these are more prestigiously profitable than most — Zhang's work can just as easily be coded "male" or "aggressive."⁵ We are then given to wonder that, no longer passive sheep in the post-Mao framework of

transnational exploitation, Chinese directors have become complicit in objectifying themselves to and for a Western audience, and have in fact derived elitist auteur status from this complicity. But even if there is some convenience in this commonly perceived East-West/female-male binary, it, as we will see, fails to account for the physical beauties of rural Chinese films that do *not* make their way to the West, films whose exoticisms are intended for modern Chinese audiences who in the post-Mao era might be reconsidering the values of the premodern culture overanxiously erased during the Cultural Revolution.

Rey Chow has defended Zhang Yimou against Chinese intellectuals, such as Dai Jinhua, who accuse him of selling out to the orientalist gaze by arguing that his emphases on comely, over-composed surfaces are not tricky diversions from "real" meanings that don't exist, but are meaningful as a sort of "genuine" superficiality, as a semi-deliberate parody of the Western gaze, an "oriental's orientalism" that tries to juggle self-identity and national identity in a post-imperialist, poker-faced struggle to go beyond the two. While such a self-conscious parody would complicate an attempt to reduce Zhang's position to "passive" or "feminine," and while a sense of self-consciousness is indeed probably present in Zhang's later films, such as **Red Lantern** and **The Story of Qui Ju** (1992), it seems unlikely that this argument can explain the excessive prettiness of **Red Sorghum**, for in 1987 the value of the Fifth Generation's "stunning sensuous qualities" had not yet been fully established as an international commodity ripe for parody. But even if we tentatively accept Zhang's films as self-parodies, I am not convinced that such non-confrontational parodies are actually effective, for they are so deeply encoded within the oriental aesthetic they allegedly rebel against that they can be mistaken for authenticity — even Chow admits that urban Chinese probably wouldn't know exactly how accurate are the rural rituals that Zhang "parodies." I would say that parody, hardly a salvation in itself, is rather the obligatory curse of transnational consumerism, a mundane curse that dumbly points out the circuitry of the cross-cultural gaze without being able to disrupt it.

The end result of this orientalist's orientalism is that whatever films such as Zhang's have to say about women's issues is overshadowed by what they say about their own international distribution, and by what both Eastern and Western critics must say to rationalize the orientalist spectacle of even watching such films. Moreover, films such as **Red Lantern** continue in the practice of framing women's issues within a nonthreatening, non-oppositional aesthetic of static suffering and martyrdom. Indeed, within the triangulation of capitalist distribution, orientalist ogling, and a technologically prettified aesthetic of suffering, what room is really left for an analysis of women's issues?

Furthermore, if we consider the decidedly *unintentional* orientalist's orientalism of Joan Chen's Mainland melodrama **Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl** (1998), we see that female filmmakers can be equally guilty of perpetuating the aesthetic of female suffering advanced by male directors. Though banned in Mainland China⁶ and directed by a Westernized Chinese filmmaker propagating pro-democracy ideas Zhang Yimou would not, Chen's Anglicized feminism falls flat under the weight of its oriental prettiness, its seven Taiwanese Golden Horse Awards notwithstanding. Its narrative is cardboard determinist fatalism: an overly pretty Young Communist with an ironically red kerchief is raped by a Chairman Mao look-alike, and dies a silent, maddened martyr at the hands of a Cultural Revolution more interested in lining its pockets and paying deference to privileged families than Marxist ideals. Painted over with lovely countryside visuals, **Xiu Xiu's** feminism is drawn only in witless caricature: the only "good" male character is impotent, the camera consciously demonizes the male gaze (when the heroine is bathing), and the heroine, under the guise of the tearfully banal demands of historical realism, must suffer an overdetermined fate as a victim *cum* martyr. Therefore, this "art film" — aimed at Westerners with capitalist preconceptions of art, such as expensive-looking cinematography — becomes more textually simplistic than, for example, the lower-budget "category 3" feminist films we will consider later, films that do not use nativist or nationalist aesthetics as a pretext to avoid discussing women's issues more straightforwardly.

Disconcertingly, Joan Chen herself has said she was not attempting to "romanticize" the Cultural Revolution, but rather "poeticize" it — at best a dubious distinction. Referring to her own grandparents' suffering during the Cultural Revolution, Chen says, "I believe when your experience is more crystallized through distance and time, you're more able to poeticize something...but I don't believe beauty exists without suffering...that's just a tourist picture in a travel agency."⁷ Yet the overdetermination of the heroine's suffering combined with stereotypically "poetic" cinematography conspires to reinforce exactly these ideas of transnational political tourism. In fact, the "distance" of Chen's expensively aestheticized, capitalist images of Communist violence ironically fulfills nothing less than the damning prophesy that concludes Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: "[Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."⁸ (1935, 681)

PART 2

What is the Meaning of Orientalism in Non-Transnational Chinese Feministic Films?

Rather than continue rehearsing the issue of Zhang Yimou-ism, I would like to discuss several types of female-centered Chinese films whose feminisms and images of female suffering are *not* primarily aimed at Westerners. First, we will consider a concurrence of Chinese films that take as their subject "combed women" (or "comb sisters"), an indigenous tradition of deviant, late Qing marriage resistance practices particular to the region of the Pearl River Delta, a female homosocial tradition often perceived as having homosexual undertones. The three "rural" films I discuss⁹ — the Mainland Chinese **Women Flowers**, the Taiwanese **The Twin Bracelets**, and the Hong Kong **Intimates** — have not been widely distributed in the West¹⁰, and present feminisms seemingly motivated by premodern, collectivized identities rather than Western individualism and egalitarianism. However, as we will see, these nativist films, in spite of their deviant subject matter, persist under the influence of retrogressive romanticism (**Women Flowers**), obligatory female suffering and martyrdom (**Twin Bracelets**), and imperialistic Western feminism (**Intimates**), demonstrating that Chinese films that do not make their way to the West can be equally guilty of the failings and clichés perpetrated by the ones that do. On the other hand, because their rural romanticisms are intended for domestic and not international audiences, these films produce an oriental's orientalism which cannot be the sly parody Rey Chow suggests, but a sincere — if naïvely nostalgic and arguably self-defeating — desire to reassert a disappearing nationalist aesthetic.

Secondly, while each of these three films reaches a different thesis, the grouping together of these differently Chinese films — which do not merely deal with the same subject matter but actually recycle storylines, images, and even identical camera perspectives and lighting effects¹¹ — may suggest a common recognition of premodern homosociality across the "three Chinas" as an overarching topos of *non*-Western feminism. Indeed, while the feminisms of these films — with the possible exception of **Intimates** — are not in the tradition of Western egalitarian feminism, their intense preoccupations with individuating women's bodily rights and erotic desires from both male and female authoritarian social groups can certainly be called a kind of feminism, even if that feminism is ultimately entrapped within a somewhat less fancy version of the rural aesthetic.

It is also tempting to read the same-sex undertones of these films as politically transgressive, especially since their non-Western female homosexualities lie outside the frequent male bias of Western gay identity politics. However, both

Women Flowers and **Twin Bracelets** make clear that the homosocial eros shared by marriage-resisting women is merely a defense mechanism against patriarchal violences rather than a proactive sexual choice, implying that gentle heterosexuality would be the utopian ideal. Meanwhile, while **Intimates** grandly romanticizes lesbian love, the film will uneasily conflate contemporary Western feminism and individualized gay-rights politics with the collectivized, indigenous same-sex culture it takes as its inspiration. Nor are these films compatible with the sexual boundlessness, gender transformations, and biological anarchy promoted by the jargon of Western queer theory. While the butchness of some of the films' comb sisters may suggest performativity, gender role-playing here is but a one-way street, with females continually sliding toward and from the pole of anchored masculine power.

In her influential article "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," Margaret Topley (1975) described the regional practice of young women in the Canton Delta refusing or postponing the Confucian oppressions of marriage, swearing to become virginal "combed sisters" (i.e., spinsters), and earning economic independence through local sericulture industries.¹² While Topley's essay, a product of second-wave Western feminism, tends to read regionally constructed political resistance in terms of personal freedom, Janice Stockard (1989) has since specified different marriage resistance practices whose varying local customs within the Canton Delta inhibit an attempt at a monolithically "feminist" interpretation. Nevertheless, because the comb sisters' economic independence and traditions of marriage resistance are inherently deviances from Confucian norms, they do promote a kind of radical nativist feminism that predates the May Fourth movement.

However, **Women Flowers** and **Intimates** ultimately deemphasize the economic — or "masculine" — aspects of the comb sisters' lives, and center instead on their individual erotic desires, thus attempting to rewrite a collectivized reaction against patriarchy in terms of individualistic (i.e., modern) desires. While any individualistic, Western feminism in China may raise the specter of imperialism, it should be noted that these Chinese directors are framing their nativist feminisms in the inherently modern, inherently transnational terms of the cinema anyway, just as they may semiconsciously orientalize themselves by indulging in romantically rural subject matter. So while Dai Jinhua suggests that, "Chinese intellectuals put themselves in a difficult position, since they themselves are deeply attached and rooted in the cultural tradition they came to objectify and reject," (192) it is also true that Chinese filmmakers are under no urgent obligation to make films about these rural subjects at all. More importantly, apologies of "deeply rooted" nationalism should not be mobilized to excuse the sentimental unwillingness of artists — or politicians — to fight against their own destructive histories.

Women Flowers

Mainland director Wang Jin's episodic **Women Flowers** (1994) tells the *fin de siècle* story of Guangzhou's comb sisters, a community of women who protested arranged marriages, formed ritualized sisterhood communities, and wore their hair defiantly bundled in a comb — a traditional marker of the unwed. Initiates in the comb sisters' society must perform sisterhood ceremonies, where the exchanges of vows and offerings of devotion before the altar parody the heterosexual wedding. However, the bitter matriarch of the comb sisters, the wealthy, vaguely lesbian Miss Sheng, will, for the right price, hypocritically pimp her girls into arranged marriages. While **Flowers** contains no explicit reference to lesbianism, rosily lit scenes in which Miss Sheng sits on a bed maternally stroking the face of her most prized girl are most likely intended to be coded as such. On the other hand, considering the heterosexual revelation of the film's finale, Miss Sheng cannot be lesbian in the modern, Western sense of autonomous self-identity.¹³ It would seem that the identification of Miss Sheng as a lesbian contributes to the generic confusion created by the sexual ambiguity of these homosocial sisterhoods, where lesbianism is more a suspicion than a fact. This confusion is further abetted by the very cautious language of scholars. For example, Topley coyly notes that "several sources refer to lesbian practices in connection with sisterhoods" (76) and that "several [of her] informants expressed a distaste for heterosexual relations," (79) and Bret Hinsch (1990) offers "heterosexual chastity" and "economic and social independence" (177-178) as reasons for rural Chinese lesbianism even as he admits that "the related hairdressing ritual of the Guangzhou region seems to have been *primarily* nonsexual." (202n, my emphasis).

One of Miss Sheng's girls, Ah Di, is bonded in sisterhood to another comb sister, but is soon kidnapped by the husband her deceased parents had arranged for her. Coming to her rescue, Miss Sheng leads a phalanx of comb sisters to confront the husband's family. As they threaten collective suicide by raising scissors to their willing throats, female suicide becomes equated with the scissors' implication of castration, for in either instance the husband would be robbed of the chance of producing children and continuing his kinship ties. Intimidated equally by the sisters' bravado and Sheng's economic power, the groom's father instead suggests a scenario Stockard has historically identified as a "compensation marriage," in which the economically independent comb sister appeases the husband by buying him a second wife (or concubine) on the condition that she needn't cohabit with him. After these arrangements are made, however, Ah Di is surprised to discover the secret fondness she harbors for the unexpectedly decent groom, who even offers to voluntarily castrate himself should he misbehave (though he admittedly fails to follow through when it eventually happens).

This shifting emphasis on the comb sister's individual eros — as opposed to the economic independence afforded by her collectivized comb sister identity — is crystallized when the camera acquires an overly conspicuous female gaze. Ah Di's eye-line match peeks at the groom bare-chested and in close-up at a local dragonboat festival, at which point she discovers being a sex-starved, crypto-lesbian comb sister is not all it's cracked up to be. But while a traditional Western feminist reading might applaud the camera privileging female desire, these heteronormative eye-line matches not only refute the homosocial eros of the sisterhoods but stereotypically feminize Ah Di to such a degree that she loses the (relative) independence comb sister economics imbued her with. Indeed, in the film's finale, a passive Ah Di must be rescued by the decent groom, as she sacrifices any agency she has for a damsel-in-distress role — in both homosocial and heterosexual scenarios, she still needs rescuing, either via Miss Sheng or the groom. While **Women Flowers** does demonstrate that homosocial comb sister conventions can be just as stifling as those of Confucianism, the contrived inclusion of the saintly husband will leave Ah Di little choice but to retreat into heteronormative submissiveness.

Wanting to violate the nonsexual terms of her compensation marriage and break with the barren comb sisterhood, Ah Di faces the threat of drowning by masculinized Miss Sheng, just as the rebellious women of Wang Jin's earlier **Village of Widows** (1989) face drowning at the hands of patriarchy for engaging in premarital sex. Deceiving the comb sisters, the husband impersonates Ah Di's executioner, and they manage to flee the village before their romantic transgression can be punished. But after the lovers disappear, the plot tellingly fixes on Miss Sheng, who must now confront the former flame who jilted her and who now returns asking her to supply him with a concubine. The climactic centering of Miss Sheng allows us to see that the problem is not resolving the symptomatic tension between Ah Di's individual desires and her collective identity, but eliminating the gender binaries that manufacture such tensions, for Miss Sheng still performs as an exploiter of women and thus reproduces male economies of power. Indeed, the gender "performativity" generated by Sheng's lesbianism is really more economic than sexual — to put it more ridiculously, she is a "lesbian" in the eyes of the film only insofar as she is a profiteer. Enraged by the old lover's insolence and realizing she has remained a reactionary pawn with delusions of female power, Sheng climactically immolates the comb sisters' altar and roams the country as a madwoman.

While Wang Jin's confused melodrama is still more multilayered than Zhang Yimou's "parodic" **Red Lantern**, the film is as ultimately as impotent as its heroine to advance beyond the either/or fallacy of the neurotic Mulan woman,

whose agency exists in inverse proportion to her heterosexual passivity. In a sense, Ah Di and Miss Sheng represent complementary halves of the Mulan subject position: Miss Sheng is the neurotically masculinized half, denying her "inner" heterosexuality so long that when its repressed specter (i.e. the former flame) finally returns she has little choice but to go mad; while Ah Di stands for the inner "real" woman — whose "reality" is equated with passivity — struggling to assert an individuality which here becomes coded as and subsumed by heterosexual love. However, this unofficial incarnation of Mulan-ism is not the burgeoning, though awkward, modernity of May Fourth's urban intellectual elite, but a rural dead-end. As Ah Di's rediscovers her heterosexuality, she regresses into premodern helplessness, while the deviant socioeconomic powers of Miss Sheng's "economic lesbianism," having no rightful place within rural Confucianism, become identified with outright insanity.

Although championing individualist and subjective desire over group desire, **Women Flowers** must — on the dull pretext of historical realism — present the collectivity of the comb sisters not as a forward-thinking solidarity or as an emancipation from gendered oppressions, but merely as a neurotic symptom of patriarchy and the masculinism that underpins it. Further, the film refutes the idea of the sisters' economic independence even before the issue is raised, as moralizing opening titles explain that "...the maintenance of [the comb sisters'] unmarried status had never brought to them the happiness or freedom they expected." Even in its very first scenes, the film portrays the women's industrial working conditions as an institutional barbarity equal to arranged marriages, once again overdetermining the aesthetic of suffering under the aegis of an aesthetic of historical realism. The downplaying of the sisters' economic independence also has the effect of scrubbing from them the pathological stench of Mulan-ism or "unnatural" maleness, as the impossible burden of masculinity is placed entirely on the shoulders of Miss Sheng.

While transnational **Xiu Xiu** or **Raise the Red Lantern** may peddle postcards of China to the West, it is also true that the subdued lyricisms and moderately pretty cinematographies of middle-budget films such as **Women Flowers** romanticize and exoticize a premodern Chinese past for a *domestic* Chinese audience still recovering from the Cultural Revolution and hopefully climbing towards First World transnational capitalism. Because the film tackles the issue of the Mulan woman in a premodern context, before she came to be standardized by Maoism, its deconstruction of Mulan-ism can undo the "damage" done to women during the Cultural Revolution, returning to them the essential (hetero)sexuality they exchanged for modernity, while taking back the economic power that was not theirs to begin with. At the same time, the film can romanticize the innocent, premodern context to which these gender contentions have been relocated. Therefore, the

film's feminism — whether one wishes to define it as regressive or not — is intractably caught between transnationalist progress and nationalist nostalgia, as rural premodernity becomes the site of both feminist critique and anti-Mao romance, as nativism becomes a reflexive tool with which nativism itself must be fruitlessly attacked.

The Twin Bracelets

While female Taiwanese director Huang Yu-shan's rural melodrama **The Twin Bracelets** (1992) does not pathologize lesbianism in the way that **Women Flowers** does, its thesis is needlessly schematic, once again romanticizing an aesthetic of female suffering. While there are substantive differences between **Bracelets** and the "official" comb sister films **Women Flowers** and **Intimates** — **Bracelets** is a modern-day Taiwanese film existing apart from the premodern Pearl River Delta narratives and their sericulture economics — a consideration of the plot reveals that its themes of female marriage resistance and rural homosociality warrant grouping the three films together. The film's heroines, Hsiu and Hui-hua, are two teenage girls living in a modern-day fishing village whose customs are so sexist and anachronistic that tourists pass to gape at a lifestyle that seems a portal into the late nineteenth century. Local customs mandate that girls must marry in their teens and may visit their arranged husbands only three times per year to procreate (while men are apparently free to whore). Should these visitation rules be violated, as we see later in the film, the man must beat his wife in public, while he suffers only social humiliation (not bodily pain). Hsui and Hui-hua, well aware of the fate their biology entails, swear a pact as blood sisters to avoid the abusive marriages they see in their futures. They live in a modern-day version of the world of **Women Flowers**, suffering its patriarchy but without being able to fall back on its homosocial women's societies and economic independence.

As pubescent girls, they defensively enact a homosexual parody of the marriage rite: "We vow as sisters to be man and wife." Four years later, Hsui must join the stranger to whom she has been betrothed, but as the two girls share a bath, a threatened Hui-hua reiterates their earlier vow: "Which is the closer relationship? That between man and wife or that between sisters?" The internal irony of this exchange lies in the pragmatic realization that, unlike the conflation of heterosexual marriage and sisterhood implied by their original vow, now "man and wife" and "sisters" emerge as two separate categories. But as their close proximity in the steamy tub brings the obvious lesbian undertones of their feminism to the fore, they finally exchange the titular bracelets that will bond their hearts.

In a rebuff of the man-hating scenario we are led to expect, Hsui's arranged husband turns out to be a handsome saint — exactly as in **Women Flowers** — and the two fall in love; Hui-hua's parents, however, pawn her off to a local bully in exchange for his sizeable dowry. The film ends with a pregnant and thus futuristic Hsui boarding a modern bus — a shockingly incongruous sight in a film that otherwise does not seemingly occur in our "modern" times — and returning to Hui-hua her bracelet for eternal keeping. Understanding that a better life lies ahead for Hsui, Hui-hua knowingly accepts the bracelet, denies her meek mother's wishes to "take care of" her rapist husband, and stoically descends into the suicidal depths of the sea as the sun drops behind her. While it is indeed true that suicide was a well-documented type of rural marriage resistance¹⁴, a pretext of unimaginative historical realism does not excuse the film — a voluntary fiction — from perpetuating the self-flagellating aesthetic of suffering. Though an endearing film¹⁵, **Bracelets** nevertheless recapitulates the overly familiar trope of compulsory martyrdom (Hui-hua's suicide), and, while not homophobic like **Women Flowers**, its brand of feminist lesbianism, like that of Deepa Mehta's **Fire** (1996), presents same-sex bonding not as an active choice but as a reactive mechanism whose immediate struggle is not for a better lesbianism, but a better heterosexuality.¹⁶

Intimates

As a Hong Kong film, director Jacob Cheung and writer Anita Tong's **Intimates** (1997) offers a more liberal, cosmopolitan version of these marriage rebellion scenarios.¹⁷ Flashing back and forth between modern-day HK (where the values of Western feminism are still underappreciated) and 1930's rural China (where combed marriage resistance becomes a catalyst to explicit lesbian romance), this HK film, whose rural-premodern sequences take place after the early Revolutionary period, is able to introduce into the mix explicitly Western elements that a pre-Revolutionary film such as **Women Flowers** cannot. The film also fits within a pattern of intergenerational LGBT films made in HK immediately prior to the 1997 reversion — films such as Shu Kei's **Hu-du-Men** (1996) and **A Queer Story** (1997), and Yim Ho's **Kitchen** (1997) — whose sudden championing of queer identities seemed poised to challenge the anticipated [homophobia](#) of the Mainland.¹⁸ The film begins in the present-day, where bilingual, Westernized Wai is firm when dealing with male underlings on the job but is incapable of accepting the fact that her boyfriend is leaving her for another woman (once again, economic competence is binarily opposed to (hetero)sexual competence). She masochistically clings to and pleads with him, and seems unable to grasp the easy feminist confidence enjoyed by her father's elderly maid, whom she is obliged to escort back to her Cantonese hometown. When the maid, Foon, nostalgically caresses a

comb in her mirror, we flashback to the 1930s, where we see her living in an attractively lit comb sisterhood. Unlike **Bracelets** and **Flowers**, however, **Intimates** will frame female homosocial relationships in terms of modern homosexual identity politics — one flashback is even cued when a modern-day Foon glimpses two openly gay men sharing lunch on a train.

In a flashback, when combed Foon is to be pawned off by her father to an arranged husband, her masculinized, cross-dressed comb sisters are unable to protect her, rather unlike Miss Sheng's overprotective scissor brigade in **Flowers**. But generous Wan, the eighth wife of the owner of the silk factory where Foon works, reimburses the husband his dowry and frees Foon, lest she become like Hui-hua in **Twin Bracelets**. Alienated by the other seven, jealous wives, Westernized Wan, herself a former prostitute, quickly develops a lesbian attachment to Foon, assuming that she, as a homosocial comb sister, would logically be open to such advances. While Foon cuts Wan's hair — an ironic version of combing — Wan ceremonially offers earrings to Foon, *similar to the exchanging of fetishistic jewelry in **Twin Bracelets***. But unlike **Women Flowers**, the exchanging of bonds in **Intimates** occurs outside the traditional space of an actual comb sisterhood, as if the film were attempting to relocate premodern feminist bonding within the individualized spaces of modernity.

At a dragonboat festival, still-combed Foon catches the eye of a handsome fisherman and, precisely as in **Women Flowers**' dragonboat scene, the camera adopts a female gaze as Foon's eye-line match peeks at his bare-chested athleticism. The two rendezvous on a romantic bridge while a jealous Wan looks up from a passing boat below. Foon, shamed by Wan's gaze, is reminded of her combed virginity — which the film implicitly conflates with female love — and breaks her date with the fisherman. In a thematically subtle (or simply ambiguous) scene, Foon accompanies Wan to the house of a wealthy warlord, where impoverished Foon enviously watches Wan and her silk merchant husband waltz in Western dress to European classical music. When the men have left the room, Wan playfully encourages Foon to dance with her, Wan adopting the male role in the dance and Foon the female. Yet each only adopts these roles after the other partner has defined them: intuitively finishing each other's sentences, Wan says, "I'll be the..." and Foon finishes her sentence with "man," while Wan finished Foon's complementary sentence with the word "woman." While it is possible to over-interpret this exchange, it is nevertheless true that only in the Western dance scene is gender role-playing complicit, loving, and voluntary, unlike the seemingly tender but in fact asexual nativist masculinism of Foon's comb sisters.¹⁹ Later, a flashback scene in which Foon massages wounds Wan suffered during abusive heterosexual intercourse is intercut with a contemporary scene of an older Foon

rubbing Wai's back after the latter has overindulged in drink. So while wealthy Wan attempted to coax a lesbian romance from poor Foon by extrapolating a Western-framed lesbianism from her comb sister homosociality, a now empowered Foon transfers this extrapolation in the present day — through film cuts — to a poor Wai as unemancipated from her callous boyfriend as Foon was from the sexual futility of the comb sisters. In a simpler sense, because the flashback structure codes the past as Chinese and the present as Western, and because what Westernized and very heterosexual Wai needs is a good dose of *non*-lesbian feminism, temporal *cum* social progress is orchestrated in Western terms that effectively dismiss the idea of combed sisterhoods, even as their homosociality allegedly inspires the film's modern feminism.

Foon, less lesbian than Wan presumes her to be, finally sleeps with the fisherman in a taboo, impregnating night of passion. Wan, meanwhile, leaves her cruelly capitalist husband, and, finally prepared to act upon her lesbian desires, Wan passionately kisses Foon in a rare burst of honest emotion. But after the kiss, Foon responds, "We're women...it's impossible," a statement intending to explain to Wan the difference between combed homosociality and outright homosexuality. But just as Foon rejects Wan, so does the fisherman reject Foon, as the plot seems intent on bringing the two women together despite Foon's protests. And just as the temporal cross-cutting between the previous back-rubbing scenes subsumed Wan's premodern same-sex desire within Foon's modern-day lesbian feminism, so is the blood that empties into the water of Foon's dramatically lit bathtub abortion scene used as a visual cue to cut to the blood of the present-day suicide attempt of unemancipated Wai, who still cannot live without her callous boyfriend. Once again, the flashback structure inevitably frames its premodern impulses in modern feminist terms. This reframing is even expressed by the difference between the film's English and Chinese titles: while the original Chinese title **Self-Combed (Chi Soh)** simply expresses the film's premodern subject matter, the English **Intimates** obviously positions this subject matter within the Westernized gay-rights politics advocated by many middlebrow [HK films](#) of the mid-1990s. After Wan rescues Foon from her gruesome abortion, she reveals the depths of her devotion: finally, Foon's defenses break down and the two women, now financially destitute, make love. But Wan's silk merchant husband returns, imploring her to accompany him by steamship to the U.S. to escape the invading Japanese, as news of the Nanking Massacre spreads. In the sentimental finale, Wan leaps from the boat, opting to take her lesbian chances with Foon.²⁰ We then make our final return to the present, where an elderly Foon nervously awaits to reunite with long-lost Wan, due to arrive on a boat capsized at sea. But in a genuinely surprising, bizarre twist, young Wai learns that the woman she — and we — thought had been Foon is actually Wan! "I started asking for Foon so often, people started to call me

'Foon'," Wan says, thus totally reversing the identifications we had made all along, complicating to an impossible degree our attempt to extricate the film's premodern homosociality from its "bi-curious" modern feminism.

In the climactic reunion scene, however, we are not allowed to see (the real) Foon's elderly face: when the camera glances down, we instead magically, nostalgically see Foon as the young woman we know from the flashbacks, and Wan is transformed likewise. While previously the film merely framed comb sister themes within the modern flashback format, it now reinscribes those premodern identities into that modernity, as if the women's lesbian reunion were now being declared openly and honestly in modern, democratic, "out" Hong Kong. In effect, director Cheung performs a kind of ideological cosmetic surgery on Foon and Wan: we see the present-tense framing of premodern China in terms of the democratic present. On another level, because young Wai has shown no lesbian tendencies, the film offers solidarity in gender, and not in sexuality, as Foon and Wan's Chinese lesbianism simply becomes transnational shorthand for overarching modern feminism. Because Wai's revelation about Foon's true identity is also the viewer's, Wai is our moral center, our subject position, and her object lesson is therefore intended to be ours. Thus, Foon and Wan's lesbian odyssey only amounts to a narrative intended to raise the heterosexual feminist consciousness of Wai, the film's subjective center. More simply, if the film did *not* intend to bury its lesbianism in modern heterosexual feminism, it would not bother with its flashback structure in the first place.

We have put to the test **Women Flowers**, **Twin Bracelets**, and **Intimates** to see if they offer real alternatives to Zhang Yimou-ism, as examples of moderately prestigious yet barely exported films that perpetuate rural romanticisms while offering a Chinese feminism removed from the standards of both heteronormative and transnational gazes. But, even though presenting a non-Westernized concern for female bodily autonomy and individual desire — and thus at first glance seeming to offer such alternatives — these films demonstrate that the failure of many generically rural films to adequately address women's issues is *not* reducible to the transnational and/or orientalist gazes that Zhang Yimou-ism fosters. **Women Flowers** is clearly homophobic, as it confusedly tries to navigate between a nostalgia for the premodern past and a refusal of that past's homosociality; **Twin Bracelets**, though directed by a woman, continues in the regressive "male" aesthetic of compulsory female suffering and suicide; and while we may be tempted to champion **Intimates'** tender depiction of lesbian desire, by rewriting its premodern subject matter in terms of modern feminism, the film actually makes its "Chinese" lesbianism merely a footnote to the contemporary Westernized feminism in which the narrative is framed. So now that we have seen that the clichés and political shortcomings of rural "women's films" exist *with or without* the

transnational gaze, and with or without the direction of male filmmakers, we should now test a brief set of urban Chinese feminist films, by both male and female filmmakers, whose feminisms turn on the *universal* criterion of *class* and not on the particular criterion of nationality or nativism.

PART 3

Feminism Empowered From the Margins: The Category 3 Paradox

While spectacles of rural female suffering have been the primary window through which the West has been permitted to see Chinese "women's films," some female-directed Hong Kong films²¹ have also engaged middle-class American feminism.²² Ann Hui's **Starry Is the Night** (1988) and the omnibus **The New Age of Living Together** (1994), co-directed by Sylvia Chang, are both empowering younger-man/older-woman romances; Clara Law's anti-Mao **Reincarnation of Golden Lotus** (1989) links female subjugation to the failures of the Cultural Revolution as it feministically rewrites the literally ghostly Chinese past; and Sylvia Chang's **Mary from Beijing** (1992) critiques the sexual commodification of women common among China's wealthy businessmen.²³ But although directors such as Sylvia Chang and Ann Hui have taken consistently feminist positions, theirs is largely middle-class feminism, and not the class- and race-conscious "womanism" that Western academies fostered as a panacea for feminism's bourgeois bias.²⁴

Perhaps the closest Chinese equivalent to the second-wave American feminism exemplified by Scorsese's **Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore** (1974) or Mazursky's **An Unmarried Woman** (1978) is the Taiwanese **The Game They Called Sex** (1988), a tripartite film produced by famed actress Hsu Fen, co-directed by the female Taiwanese directors Sylvia Chang, Wang Shau-di, and Jing Kuao-jao, and starring a naïve Maggie Cheung as the oppressed heroine whose consciousness must be raised. In the film's first episode, Cheung is the depressed teenage victim of an arranged marriage; in the second, we see her years later unhappily wedded to a man obsessed with masturbatory video games instead of her pleasure; in the third, we see her searching for meaning after her divorce with or without a man. In the first two episodes, Cheung supplements her oppression with fantasies about being raped by impossibly handsome criminals, while in the final episode she has presumably been cured of these "criminal" rape-and-rescue romance fantasies by dint of her salubrious, liberating divorce. But in addition to a narrative that (for some reason) turns Cheung's sexual desires into neurotic rape fantasies, the film's crude sexual symbolism — a storefront crowded with ticking

(biological) clocks, a curious Cheung gawking at a phallic knife in close-up — sabotages whatever goals of liberation the film may have had.²⁵ In the end, after deciding against a relationship with a "good" man, Cheung settles on being an elementary school teacher, thus sociologically creating children without biologically producing them. The unfortunate product of this "sociological" liberation is that Cheung must ultimately choose between monogamy and asexuality, with no opportunity to enjoy the promiscuous and fleetingly human pleasures enjoyed by the male. This closed either/or binary ironically reinforces the bourgeois sexual stasis that is the problem to begin with, as an asexuality coded as modern independence (a la Mulan) substitutes for what would be suicide or self-deprivation in the premodern marriage resistance films.

The Mistress

Because most of HK's urban feministic films do not only usually deal with bourgeois characters, but are films by (female) directors who enjoy an elitist auteur status, one must consider **The Mistress** (1999), whose director, American-born Crystal Kwok, did not begin as a "serious artist" as did Ann Hui or Clara Law, but worked her way up from being a beauty pageant winner and supporting actress known mainly for her physical charms²⁶ — precisely the sexism from which **The Mistress**'s heroines suffer. What makes **The Mistress** more notable is its "category 3" rating, a censorship marker that generally indicates either sex-and-violence exploitation²⁷ or, more rarely, a film of politically sensitive subject matter.²⁸ Kwok herself has expressed some surprise at the censorship certificate she garnered. "It was classified category 3. However, there is no nudity... It explores female sexuality from a psychological point of view. It is a subject that is taboo in HK."²⁹ Kwok continues, "If I had known they were going to give me a category 3...maybe I would have been tempted to make the film genuinely outrageous."³⁰ Five years in the making and obviously a labor of love, **The Mistress** attempts to redress the bourgeois bias of much of HK's cinematic feminism by satirizing the classism, runaway capitalism, and sexual commodification often glamorized in HK cinema.

In the credit sequence, we see heroine Alex's dreams: a fantastic vision of sylvan fairies having costumed sex in a Rousseauian forest, it is an image of (sexual) Nature as pure, uncorrupted, and sentimental, as contrasted to modern HK's exploitation, capitalism, and sexual heartlessness. The film proper opens with a sequence in the streets of HK, showing cosmopolitan citizens confronted by ads for Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, and other signs of classist consumption, images that are themselves a manufactured fantasy whose price tags reduce society to status games. UC Berkeley graduate Alex is one such citizen, tutoring tycoon Henry's

mistress Michelle in English — the international language of capital — while Michelle tutors Alex in the universal language of mistress-ism. Though Michelle — formerly an impoverished Mainlander before taking up sexual capitalism — is primarily concerned with learning the English names of prestigious name-brand clothing, her materialism is revealed as harboring no notions of irony when she fails to understand that the name of Alex's favorite nail polish is "Urban Decay." Michelle draws Alex further into her world, first at a garish S/M party, and later when they and two other prostitutes humiliate a masochistic fat client by kicking him under a mahjong table while they gamble. "The more money they have, the more perverse they get," says Michelle, as the mahjong table comes to symbolize an HK economy seemingly controlled by common citizens (they play the game) but which is in fact in the hands of giggling, well-fed men behind — or in this case under — the scene. Alex's sexual imagination stirred, she "plays hooker" with her cash-strapped boyfriend Eric, demanding without much humor money from him for sex and becoming angry when he, thinking it only a game, demands his money back afterwards. Alex, lured by Michelle's glamour, becomes disenchanted with Eric, an economic loser who doesn't understand the "true exchange value" of money. When Henry saves Alex from being run over by a car, he further comes to symbolize security for her, while she, complementarily, becomes another one of Henry's "securities" and subsequently his second mistress.³¹ As a temporarily content Alex stands in Henry's boardroom, surveying at eye level the phallic skyscrapers that surround her beyond the corporate windows, she has broken through the glass ceiling using the only "weapon" she has: bodily materialism.³² But while in premodern **Women Flowers** and **Twin Bracelets** ascendant female desire was cued through eye-line matches directed at male sex objects, here the ascendancy of female material power becomes pessimistically equated with the *negation* of Alex's sexual desires, for the objects of her skyline gaze are not flesh and blood but entirely sterile phalluses of modernist glass and steel.

While **The Mistress** purports to examine female desire from a female perspective — or at least from a "psychological" perspective — it seems to me that because most of Alex's fantasies are masochistic and/or posit a male spectator, it is really a female internalization of male desire that is being examined. Initially, prompted by bizarre stories of sexual deviance she overhears, a sexually frustrated Alex has gloriously colorful fantasies in which businessman dine on sashimi served upon naked women, in which she herself becomes a living sex doll, in which she joins Henry and Michelle in their "French maid" sex games, in which she gropes Michelle's new brassiere as she affixes it to her bosom, and in which Henry strikes golden golf balls into her vagina on a putting green. All these scenarios posit a male spectator, including the lesbian scenario with Michelle in the fitting room (a stereotypical male fantasy which implies a male spectator) and female

objectification (quite literally in the sex doll fantasy!), mentalities she must adopt and internalize upon her entrée into a masculine capitalism where the mistress becomes just another replaceable commodity whose built-in obsolescence is hardly different from that of a car or microwave.

In the film's most telling sequence, Michelle joins Henry at a grand dinner party at which are gathered his business colleagues attended by all their mistresses. When Henry excuses himself from the table, Michelle does an expert impersonation of Henry, imitating his business rhetoric, chomping a cigar, collecting business cards, and finally making a toast. "To Hong Kong! To the economy! To our country!" she says, with the added optimism of "our country" no longer meaning Hong Kong per se after 1997. Yet, as we see, savvy Michelle does *not* labor under a false consciousness — indeed, she consciously knows all too well how to be complicit in the fatedness of her dependency; and the joke of her parody, rather than being subversive, is only an acknowledgement of the fact that she is indeed not a powerful man. In the second half of the film, the tycoon dinner-party scene is replayed, with the camera circling the scene in identically voyeuristic fashion, but now Alex attempts to duplicate Michelle's parody of Henry's machismo. Yet Anglicized Alex is unable to confidently smoke the Freudian cigar that Michelle puffed so professionally in her scene — she will come to be an incompetent mistress because she, unlike Michelle, doesn't know how to be passive.

Alex complains to Henry, who now has little time for her, that she is not like Michelle — she is not a country bumpkin but a sophisticated urbanite. In two senses, she is indeed not like Michelle: as a Westernized Chinese, she is too individualistic to be happy as a mistress, yet as someone who has not known the economic hardships of Mainlander Michelle, neither can she be motivated to be successful as a mistress. Driven to madness, she destroys her mistress-gotten apartment and languishes in the gutters of HK, where she reimagines the sylvan dream of the credits sequence, this time envisioning the dream's climax in the fantasy image of an ecstatically cleansing waterfall. But an ironic, equally fantastic coda image redresses this cathartic, unrealistic fantasy. We now see Alex and Michelle objectified on a stage, dressed as chorus girls, singing a sarcastically cheerful anthem to female passivity. In the end, the lessons of their odyssey will have little influence on the sociological condition of women at large, and the only product of their travails is a sense of irony as politically impotent as one of Zhang Yimou's oriental "parodies." So despite its pointed critique, even this most cutting-edge Chinese film unfortunately recapitulates an admittedly darker version of the aesthetic of compulsory female martyrdom.

A Fake Pretty Woman

In truth, people tend to judge films the same way they judge each other: by physical appearances. All of the films we have discussed so far are, if not "A-level" productions, at least "B+" productions aimed at audiences with preconceived notions of bourgeois cinematic respectability. Even **The Mistress**, perhaps to counteract potential criticisms of sexploitation, encodes its capitalist critique in the artiest, fanciest visual terms possible, thus unintentionally succumbing to a kind of capitalism in form, if not in content.³³ So if we are still concerned with the orientalist agenda possibly underlying the transnational commerce that decides which films do and do not receive Western distribution, we should logically turn our attentions to feminist films of such low budgets that they, though perhaps informed by Western feminism, have neither an interest in nor possibility of reaching a sizeable Western audience.

Just as Carol Clover (1992) has shown how allegedly exploitive rape-revenge potboilers can in fact be more feministic than their mainstream Hollywood counterparts³⁴, low-budget category 3 films, because they don't demand to be taken seriously, can provide disempowered audiences and embattled film directors alike with a safe space to nakedly enact political agendas that would in mainstream films be sanitized, coded with labored metaphors, shrouded in subtext, or disallowed entirely. I am, however, leery of suggesting that low budgets necessarily give rise to a more "authentic" feminism; on the contrary, too often we have been duped into thinking that a film's impoverished budget is in itself a pious stamp of democratic authenticity — a sort of Mother Theresa ideology of filmmaking — regardless of the film's thematic or political content. While there is something to be said for the desperate fury of an **I Spit on Your Grave** (1978), there is also an eagerness to overestimate the feminism of the low-budget rape-revenge genre, which replaces the overdetermined meekness and suffering of the New Testament with the equally overdetermined vengeance of the Old. The rape genre's castration fixation, certainly borne of the genre's primarily male directors and audiences, ignores the fact that castration, though seemingly a materialist, literalist act, only symbolically neuters patriarchy without actually remaking it — it is a futile gesture of destruction, not a progressive act of transformation.

While not all category 3 films mean to be politicized, and precious few of them are politically enlightened, it is nevertheless clear that the category 3 rating's censorial conflation of sex and politics has fostered a generic preoccupation with the issue of women's bodily autonomy in a male world.³⁵ Therefore, we next consider a more typically ugly category 3 film, Ivan Lai's **A Fake Pretty Woman** (1995).³⁶ Thankfully, this is not a "good film" — on the contrary, because it is entirely

unconcerned with the elitist economics of visually attractive art, it can declaim its feminist subject matter straightforwardly, without veiling it behind a bourgeois veneer of style. It is all the more remarkable for being an exploitation film that is not conventionally violent³⁷, and that vociferously espouses an anticapitalist agenda in lieu of the reductive castration anxiety symbolism that usually poses as "feminism" in the exploitation film.

Though more of a medical ethics melodrama than the rape thriller usually signified by the category 3 rating, **A Fake Pretty Woman**'s themes of bodily violation and autonomy are similar to those of the rape film, an ideologically overarching genre that actually encompasses everything from the horror films Clover examines to Joan Chen's **Xiu Xiu**. Heroine "May" has been conditioned by a breast-obsessed HK to believe she is ugly ("I have small eyes, flat tits, and a scar"), and undergoes plastic surgery at the hands of female Dr. Wong. She marvels at her new body in the mirror ("Am I dreaming?") and pursues a career as an actress — precisely the type of fluffy fashion model most other category 3 films promote as sexual icons. Her surgeries (represented by real surgery footage) enable her to become a successful actress and the fiancé of a billionaire's son — yet a feministic *deus ex machina* mandates that a wayward truck demolish her wedding procession, leaving her hideously scarred by poetic justice. Upon learning from surgeons and scandal sheets that May is a "Fake pretty woman!" the wealthy groom-to-be abandons her, hypocritically disgusted by her bodily capitalism. Unlike the myopic postfeminism of Garry Marshall's **Pretty Woman** (1990), in **A Fake Pretty Woman** the mobilization of a woman's bodily power is not to her advantage, for in a world of few options whoring (or self-commodification) is not an active choice but a built-in precondition. After some moralizing by the plot, May undergoes a second, restorative surgery and returns to a normal life with her former saintly boyfriend Tak, whom she had previously abandoned on the grounds that he was insufficiently capitalistic (just as Alex had abandoned economic loser Eric in **The Mistress**). More notable in **Fake**, though, is the character of Dr. Wong, a female plastic surgeon who must admit to profiteering from women's self-debasement. As with pimping Miss Sheng of **Women Flowers**, capitalist women operate as exploitatively as men, as passive-aggressive economics feed into and define gender binarism. Yet Dr. Wong's own feminist consciousness is piqued when she catches her adulterous husband fooling around with a twenty-something bimbo. Though May is the ostensible heroine, it is the middle-aged Wong's voice that curiously narrates the film in voice-over ("I feel terrible when I think of the word 'old'"), and who considers plastic surgery herself after she realizes that even though her doctor's profession renders her capitalistically "masculine," she is biologically and (hetero-)sexually still a woman in a man's world. It is only when treating a friend of May's who was severely burnt, and subsequently witnessing his girlfriend's

devotion in spite of his appearance, that she realizes her marriage and her profession are shams. In the end, we see a divorced Dr. Wong with the two happy couples she has treated, but she walks into the sunset alone — not the transcendental walk through the shadowy alleys of the pleasure quarters that closes Mizoguchi's profeminist **A Geisha** (1953), nor the noble false front of female perseverance that Takamini Hideko wears in Naruse's **When a Woman Ascends the Stairs** (1960), but a defiant march to the upbeat tune of the closing credits. Admittedly, the inclusion of happy couples (monogamy) and the single defiant woman (asexuality) only redistributes to two parties the either/or binaries that underwrite normative (or conservative) sexuality, rather than have them occur alternately within the same woman as an identity crisis, as they do in **The Game They Called Sex**. Nevertheless, the feminism of **A Fake** plainly demonstrates the interrelationship between economics and sexuality while avoiding the predictable aesthetic of mandatory martyrdom indulged by both **Xiu Xiu** and even **The Mistress**, but will be deemed beneath consideration because its themes operate within a genre that is "low" and content-based (category 3 nudity and gory surgeries) and not "high" and form-based (narrative arc of tragic suffering).

Yet the comparison between **Fake** and **Xiu Xiu** is complicated by another wrinkle. Clearly, as a low-budget, primitively filmed exploitation film, the Westernized (though not Western) **A Fake** is not merely less exportable than the Easternized (though not Eastern) **Xiu Xiu**, but it is equally disreputable in its native land, opposing not only Western hegemonic film distribution practices but the conservative nativist aesthetics of domestic Chinese art films.³⁸ But more interestingly, because **A Fake** is unpolished, noncommercial, avowedly feminist, and devoid of the hip action scenes expected of exploitation, it also opposes the current orientalist interest in Asian cult films.³⁹ A simply political film, it is totally absent of the commercial style that invites commodification and appropriation by pseudo-hip Western cult audiences, who claim to be marginalized but often indulge in the covertly and masturbatorily imperialist gaze of the underground.

Meanwhile, **Xiu Xiu** is essentially mainstream in Taiwan — it won the Taiwanese equivalent of the Oscar — but its tame, politically correct, liberal-humanist content is rendered through the Western politics of film distribution into something falsely, undeservedly oppositional, simply because *any* imported film can seem oppositional when weighed against Hollywood xenophobia. In fact, the oppressions of surgical beauty that **A Fake Pretty Woman** decries are analogous to the oppressions of cinematographic beauty that **Xiu Xiu** advances: both oppressions are products of First World technology designed to exploit the sensibilities of the gazer for profit. Simply, both plastic surgery and expensive cinematography are in the business of selling an economic definition of beauty to reinforce classist

sensibilities of appearance-based value — it is merely a puritanical hypocrisy that disparages the capitalism of plastic surgery as deceptive and praises the capitalism of prettified cinematography as aesthetically genuine.

Notes

1. By the current standards of Western theory, the socially "progressive" humanism for which Wang argues — in which women are considered equal to but distinct from men — is clearly insufficient, for it presumes a heterosexual bias. Indeed, while Wang forcefully argues for an emphasis on women's political issues, she ignores not only the homosexuality her Mulan scenario potentially suggests but any hint of Chinese lesbianism. Of course, as a Mainlander, this might be a case of self-censorship.
2. This alternation is clear in one of the best-known Chinese film versions of the Mulan story, Feng Yuek's **Lady General Hua Mulan** (1964), starring famed female transvestite performer Ivy Ling Po. Here, Mulan's power is signaled only by her cross-dressing; in the end, when she returns to traditional feminine vestments, she also surrenders to female passivity.
3. For example, even as well-regarded a film as Huang Shuqin's **Woman-Demon-Human** (1987) remains currently unavailable on U.S. home video.
4. I agree with Chow's critique of Kaplan, who emphasizes the "dangers" of cross-cultural analysis to an unnecessary degree. Still, Kaplan, as well as Berry, cautions against reducing all Western appreciation of Chinese cinema to an overly convenient common denominator of orientalism.
5. The North American success of Ang Lee's **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** (2000) certainly apotheosizes this idea, as the film's self-parodic imagery both caters to the orientalist gaze and exploits that gaze for prestige and profits that cannot be easily dismissed as "passive." The recent Hollywood trend of gracelessly plagiarizing [Hong Kong martial arts choreography](#) (c.f. **Romeo Must Die** [2000], **The Musketeer** [2001], etc.) further conspires to economically "masculinize" orientalism.
6. Mainland Chinese censors unconvincingly claimed they banned the film not for its political content, but because it was filmed in Tibet without a permit. Meanwhile, the cover of the U.S. DVD of **Xiu Xiu**, using the ban as part of its ad campaign, features the titillating banner "Banned in China for Sexual and Political Content," even though the film's sexual content is tame, and its political content is far less scathing than, for example, Tian Zhuangzhuang's **The Blue Kite** (1993), and far less imaginative than the political satires of Huang Jianxin.
7. From an untitled "Indiewire" interview with Joan Chen, conducted by Augusta Palmer. See http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int_Chen_Joan_990506.html. Downloaded March 31, 2001.

8. To stretch the point, the same argument could be used against Chen Kaige's **Farewell My Concubine** (1993), Spielberg's **Schindler's List** (1993), and a host of films that attempt to come to terms with historical realities through the use of deliberately aestheticized, elitist ("of the first order") imageries. On the other hand, we have grown so alienatedly inured to enjoying our own destruction that Benjamin's point has long since become both blatant and moot.

9. These three films actually fall into a small subgenre of late 1980's/early 1990's rural films about premodern female marriage resistance. This subgenre also includes Mainlander Wang Jin's **Village of Widows** (1989) and **The Girls to Be Married** (1990), and Taiwanese director's Yeh Hung-wei's slightly better-known **Five Girls and a Rope** (1991), the latter two films both adaptations of Ye Weilin's group-suicide tale *Wuge Nuzi he Yigen Shengzi* ("Five Girls and a Rope").

10. While each of these films has received limited exposure at Western festivals or university screenings, none of them has received significant U.S. theatrical or video distribution, as of this writing.

11. In all three of these "homosocial" films, sequences of same-sex ritual bonding are unfailingly presented with romantic orange-hued filters and sexily yellowed lighting effects, thus cinematically "lesbianizing" same-sex ritual bonding, even though actual homosexual intercourse in **Twin Bracelets** and **Women Flowers** is left ambiguous.

12. For an analysis of the sericulture industries that granted combed women (some) economic independence, also see Janice Stockard's *Daughters of the Canton Delta*.

13. Nevertheless, the few English-language plot synopses of **Women Flowers** I have read emphasize the fact that Miss Sheng is a "lesbian." For example, see a University of Waterloo Chinese film festival guide at www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/FINE/juhde/fsoprog7.htm. Downloaded March 31, 2001.

14. For an account of suicide as a form of rural marriage resistance, see Margery Wolf's "Women and Suicide in China," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Wolf and Roxane Witke. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975.

15. In fact, **Twin Bracelets** is so endearing that it won the Audience Award for Best Feature at the 1992 [San Francisco Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival](#), even though the film (ironically) does not ultimately endorse lesbian identity.

16. Director Huang's recent **Spring Cactus** (1999) has placed themes similar to those of **Twin Bracelets** within a contemporary urban context, as two girls of disparate class backgrounds suffer through teenage rebellion, drug abuse, and prostitution in cutting-edge Taipei. Yet the upper-class girl is "rescued" by her overprotective parents early on, and we thereafter see only the lower-class girl's story; unlike Hui-hua in **Bracelets**, she is not allowed to mercifully euthanize herself but must spectacularly wither away for another ninety minutes. Though (or perhaps because) its story was culled from the real case file of a Taiwanese social worker, and though highlighting the class issues often submerged in feminism, the film's belated climactic martyrdom imparts neither revelation nor enlightenment. Therefore, merely relocating the same feminist clichés to a

contemporary urban context does not redress the aesthetic of suffering endorsed by the rural films — it merely places those clichés above particular socio-historical contexts.

[17.](#) **Intimates** exists in two versions: the 117-minute domestic HK version, and a 158-minute "director's cut" very briefly shown at international festivals. My comments pertain only to the commonly available HK cut.

[18.](#) For a discussion of these intergenerational queer films, see Grossman, "The Rise of Queer Identity and the Dawn of Communism in HK Film" in *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade*, ed. Grossman. Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2001.

[19.](#) The masculinism of **Intimates'** comb sisters is represented in a scene in which one sister, sporting a male pigtail, prepares for an arranged marriage similar to what Janice Stockard has identified as a "delayed transfer" marriage, where the groom must wait up to three years before being allowed to cohabit with his bride. Donning intricately threaded undergarments over her masculinized attire to withstand the groom's anticipated penile assault, she further dances with a castrating scissor to the delight of the other comb sisters.

[20.](#) The mawkish, Spielbergian sentimentalism of the last twenty minutes of **Intimates** severely compromises what until that point had been — as one can tell from this plot synopsis — a complex film. That said, such populism is the standard failing of nearly all films produced by HK's bourgeois-humanist "U.F.O." production company.

[21.](#) Chris Berry reports that the editors of the Asian film magazine *Cinemaya* found that there were "almost no notable" mainstream female filmmakers in Hong Kong that could be spotlighted for their special issue on women directors in Asia. This seems quite perplexing considering the fame of Ann Hui, Clara Law, Sylvia Chang, and Mabel Cheung. See Berry's article "Representing Chinese Women: Researching Women in the Chinese Cinema" in *Dress, Sex, and Text in Chinese Culture*. Ed. Antonia Finnane and Anne McLaren. Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1999. Page 207.

[22.](#) Because too few urban feminist (as opposed to merely "female-centered") Mainland films have been exported to the West, I am forced to mainly consider urban Hong Kong films.

[23.](#) With respect to male directors, Stanley Kwan's Mikio Naruse-esque **Full Moon in New York** (1990) can be added to this list.

[24.](#) Admittedly, there are some rare exceptions: Sylvia Chang's feminist immigrant narrative **Siao Yu** (1995) and Ann Hui's **Ah Kam** (1996), which stars Michelle Yeoh as a working-class stuntwoman, do not center on bourgeois characters. However, I can think of no films from a homogeneous Hong Kong — feminist or otherwise — that deal seriously with race issues beyond East/West binaries.

[25.](#) The subtlety of the film is surprising because, although Wang Shau-di's more accomplished **Yours and Mine** (1997) was still years away, Sylvia Chang had already directed the sophisticated **Passion** (1986). It is worth noting that at an August 2000 screening of **The Game They Called Sex** at Manhattan's Taipei Theater, the almost entirely Taiwanese audience tittered in uncomfortable embarrassment at the film's clumsy dream sequence and rape fantasies.

[26.](#) Kwok's most notable early roles were as window dressing in Sammo Hung's **Dragons Forever** (1988) and Jackie Chan's **Police Story 2** (1988). Later, she apprenticed as assistant director on Sylvia Chang's **Mary from Beijing** (1992).

[27.](#) Non-narrative porn is also classified "3." Unlike the U.S., which uses NC-17 and X ratings to effectively distinguish between narrative (i.e. high-budget) and non-narrative (i.e. low-budget) forms of pornography, the HK "3" lumps everything together solely on the basis of content, regardless of the quality of production values.

[28.](#) Well-known films rated category 3 for political reasons include Jacob Cheung's class-conscious **Cageman** (1992) and Wang Tung's anti-Mao **If I Were for Real** (1981). Films dealing with the inner workings of the triads — and which often come across as pro-triad propaganda — can also receive 3's, such as Wong Tai-Loi's **Triads, the Inside Story** (1989).

[29.](#) From an untitled interview with Crystal Kwok at <http://www.ifrance.com/hkcinemagic/siteanglais/atsuihark/acrystal.htm>. Downloaded March 31, 2001.

[30.](#) "Interview with Crystal Kwok," at www.mediaasia.com. Downloaded March 31, 2001. Though touted in publicity materials as the first female-directed category 3, the film was preceded by Clara Law's arty **Temptation of a Monk** (1993) and Julie Lee's **Trilogy of Lust** (1995), discussed below in footnote 38.

[31.](#) The character of Henry is played by Ray Liu, an actor best known for playing violent gangster capitalists in Poon Man-kit's **To Be Number One** (1991) and **Lord of the East China Sea Pts. 1-2** (1993); thus, Liu's star discourse intertextually turns Henry into yet another gangster.

[32.](#) The woman's deployment of her own bodily materialism is, of course, also a staple of sexploitation genres; ads for Doris Wishman's **Deadly Weapons** (1973), for instance, proclaimed that star Chesty Morgan confronted the mafia "using the only two weapons she has!"

[33.](#) That **The Mistress** captured the People's Choice Award at France's Deauville Film Festival may be further evidence of its "respectability."

[34.](#) I am particularly thinking of Clover's comparison of Meir Zarchi's **I Spit on Your Grave** (1978) and Jonathan Kaplan's **The Accused** (1988). See Chapter 3 of Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992).

[35.](#) For example, **Raped by Angel** (1993), **Passionate Killing in the Dream** (1992), **Love to Kill** (1993), **The Wrath of Silence** (1994), **Red to Kill** (1994), **Peeping Tom** (1997), and countless others all evince an intense (bordering on neurotic) obsession with women's basic bodily rights, played out in terms of violent, perverse sexploitation of sometimes surprising textual intricacy. Others, such as **Brother of Darkness** (1994) and the risibly homophobic **Sweet Smell of Death** (1994), are obsessed with men's bodily autonomy. However, while lesbianism is commonplace in category 3 (c.f. **The Love That Is Wrong** [1993]), in my survey of about 200 category 3 films I have found no lesbian-feminist films among them, with the possible exception of (gay director) Clarence Ford's **Naked Killer** (1992), whose feminism is still but a castrating caricature. In fact, these films' feminisms are often balanced by a defensive amount of

conservatism and homophobia; for instance, **Raped by an Angel** sensationalizes the plight of a character with AIDS, while **Passionate Killing in the Dream** decenters its main lesbian character while pretending to bourgeois ideals of tolerance. Julian Stringer has outlined some of the economic and post-Tiananmen Square political concerns of category 3 in "Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong," in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

[36](#). Director Ivan Lai's rape-revenge horrors **Daughter of Darkness** (1993) and **Daughter of Darkness 2** (1994) are more generic, more commercial category 3 films. In each, the abused heroine must castrate and destroy not a gang of primitive id-males, as in the American rape-revenge film, but a cruelly Confucian family.

[37](#). While containing no action scenes or murders, the film does exploit its plastic surgery sequences, whose documentary operation footage adds a "mondo" quality to the film. On the one hand, these scenes are the film's exploitive *raison d'être*. On the other, they are superfluous to the narrative and come across as "inserts," unlike the rape scenes of the rape-revenge film, which are not merely decorative but intrinsic to the plot.

[38](#). Also compare **Xiu Xiu** to Julie Lee's category 3 hardcore porn film **Trilogy of Lust** (1995), which concerns a Mainland prostitute, ravaged by the Cultural Revolution, who journeys to Hong Kong only to be ravaged by the exploitations of capitalism. Though unfortunately concluding with suicide and martyrdom, the film ambitiously attempts to equate the Cultural Revolution's "rape" of China with capitalism's "rape" of the commodified female body, a formulation that, however clumsy, is more astute than **Xiu Xiu**'s simplistic pro-democracy agenda.

[39](#). Indeed, I have never seen a review of **A Fake Pretty Woman** anywhere in the glut of gleefully orientalist Asian cult fanzines.

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