China redux: The central frontiers of the modern nation in Chinese cinema

Zhang, J.

Chapter 2

En/Gendering the Nation:

Womanhood, Femininity, and Nationalism

> The focus on "woman" is thus a way of foregrounding the politics of so-called structural, systemic differences, by foregrounding the oppressed existence of those who occupy the low side of the male/female opposition. As a means of formal analysis, "woman" deals not only with gender but also with the power-invested processes of *hierarchization* and *marginalization* that are involved in readings of culture.
>
> —Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*

In the previous chapter, I introduced the genre of the Bildungsroman in my analysis of Chinese cinema. In so doing, I attempted to debunk the articulation of nationalist ideologies in coming-of-age narratives since the foundation of modern Chinese literature and cinema in the early twentieth century. Focusing on the nexus of childhood and nationhood in cinematic representation, my interpretations sought to unravel the ways in which the figure of youth has been symbolically associated with a range of political agendas. Whereas some depictions of youth were calculated to incite a collective national consciousness; others mobilize individual sensibility against the collective, thus challenging the legitimacy and superiority of the communist party state. If in Europe the Bildungsroman originated as a literary response to the advent of secular society and formation of the modern state, its variant in modern China, by contrast, is a site of discursive contestation. In and through the narrative space of the Chinese Bildungsroman, Chinese society and culture are both transformed by and pitted against Western knowledge and practice. The trope of youth has served to energize the national image, wherein China—once withering and wounded—can now rejuvenate and heal, indeed thrive. At the same time, it also feeds into critical intellectual movements that repudiate ruling authorities. The epitome of modern

Chinese culture, the genre of the Chinese Bildungsroman embodies an emergent national identity that negotiates external and internal conflicts.

In European literary history, the Bildungsroman worked to shore up bourgeois cultural hegemony and the privileged figure of the educated white man. Far from assimilating this worldview, the Chinese Bildungsroman complicated the tenets of the Western middle class. In their place, Chinese iterations of the genre instill revolutionary ideals—such as statism, nationalism, and socialism—to which China has attempted to resolve crises at various historical junctures. To grasp one of the salient ways in which the Chinese Bildungsroman has been ideologically reconfigured, consider a film titled *Song of Youth*, which I cited briefly in the previous chapter. The film presents a telling episode in Chinese women's history. It is set in a period in which an inchoate republican government is being thwarted by military factionalism and imperialist invaders. The female protagonist is Lin Daojing, a well-groomed and compassionate woman raised in an indigent family. In Lin's formative years, she zigzags through society as an exile who constantly encounters misogynic bigotry. At the same time, the prospect of war looms large. Throughout, Lin remains defiant to arranged marriage while devoted to revolution. This narrative of a young woman's experience registers nothing less than a new form of subjectivity—an epochal change of women's social status in China. More than a rebellion against her own personal circumstances, the female protagonist's pursuit of gender equality and personal freedom resonate with the socialist grand narrative of Chinese nation-building. In this sense, both the individual citizen and nation are redefined so as to establish a better society—whether in securing women's individual autonomy or the nation's sovereign integrity. Therefore, it is crucial that we investigate the connections between gender and nation in the Chinese context.

Central to this enquiry, I propose, are the ways in which representations of Chinese women have served as a symbol of Chinese nationhood. My prime concern lies in how nationalist ideologies have shaped cultural conceptions of womanhood over time. In the course of this volatile process, a variety of gender differences and relations (such as masculinity and femininity, man and woman) have been reworked into a new, modern, and national subject. Alerting to the fact that China's modernization has carried through over a century under successive regimes, I will address changing conceptions and expressions of femininity in modern Chinese society and culture, while focusing on the portrayal of female characters in Chinese cinema. My analysis is premised on a distinction between Chinese and Western

notions of "woman," according to which Chinese discourses of gender diverge from the universalizing vocabulary of gender emanated from the West. Moreover, against the backdrop of the transformation of Chinese society, politics, and epistemologies, it is equally important to interrogate how "woman" has transformed, to show how the concept has varied with the country's modernization and shifting relations with the West (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002, 34). Accordingly, this chapter intends to grapple with how narratives of femininity—above all the idea of Chinese Woman—mediate among a set of forces and factors, namely the individual and nation, convention and conversion, China and the West. Dwelling on womanhood, the chapter offers a vantage point on the complex interplay between gender and nation in Chinese culture.

Two Chinese-language films, *Song of Youth* (*Qing chun zhi ge*, 1959) and *Lust, Caution* (*Se jie*, 2007), provide pertinent cases studies for my discussion in that both were adapted from novels by female authors and organized around female characters. The first derives from the first decade of China's Socialist Era, The second belongs to the dramatic onset of economic globalization in the new millennium. Considering the time that elapsed between the two films, I argue that they furnish an apt comparative lens through which we can account for changing definitions of womanhood in modern Chinese culture. In *Song of Youth*, as we know, the female protagonist stands for a revolutionary figure. She not only breaks with from traditional Confucian ethics, which relegate women to the trivia of domestic life, but also subsumes her personal struggle under a larger leftist movement. In stark contrast *Lust, Caution* tells a different story. The female protagonist lives in similarly turbulent circumstances, which wed her personal existence to the nation's struggle for survival. Unlike Lin, this film's heroine unexpectedly forsakes her patriotic convictions. Rather than assassinate a treacherous spymaster, she gives in to love.

My analysis embarks upon the rifts between tradition and revolution, morality and desire, the individual and the nation that surface in these narratives of women. I begin with a brief survey of how ideologies of gender and nation have been mobilized since the advent of Chinese modernity, before turning to the conflicts over value, culture, and politics played out in representations of Chinese women.

Chinese "Woman," Western "Gender"

The emergence of a new notion of "woman" in China at the beginning of the twentieth century gathered momentum on two interrelated spurts. The first is the global transmission of Western knowledge and technology through the process of colonial expansion, in which late-imperial China was imbricated. The other is the onset of nationalist movements in China, which set out to supplant feudalism and Confucian values with a modern nation. Together these overlapping historical currents unfold a dialectic of national integration and disintegration—that is, a constant negotiation of what constitutes Western culture and what Chinese. Against this backdrop, conceptions of womanhood have undergone a drastic transition. In place of the inferior, compliant, submissive and ultimately subjugated role reserved for women in China's traditionally patriarchal society, the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new female subjectivity. This independent, capable, and versatile agent of the nation-state engages fully in the project of revolution. If the birth of the Chinese nation represents a collective response to Western intrusion, then this protean new "Chinese Woman" testifies to China's nation-building trajectory that mediates between Western knowledge and Chinese circumstances. Moreover, this new vision of femininity marks a distinguishing feature of Chinese nationalism. Chinese modernity is bound up with the female subject, as Chinese national identity is embodied, for the most part, by female figures. To explore the close entwinement of nationality and femininity in the cultural imagination of modern China, I will first present the ways in which notions of womanhood have transformed, while highlighting several decisive moments in the history of constructions of gender in China.

With the arrival of Western colonial powers in the mid-nineteenth century, the last monarchy of the imperial China, the Qing dynasty, suffered a string of military defeats. This sets the tone for the ensuing decades. In the gloom that followed the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the scholar Yan Fu (1854-1921), who had studied in Victorian England, pioneered the introduction of Western thought to China. To do so, he published a series of translations, ranging from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* to Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. His very first book, *Tian Yan Lun* (1898), inspired China's enlightenment, which in turn precipitated the onset of national modernization at the dawn of the twentieth century. In this book, which is based on British biologist Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1893), Yan Fu drew a comparison between biological evolution and human society. Mapping Charles Darwin's "natural selection" onto Herbert Spencer's notion of the "survival of the fittest," Yan urged that China must evolve if it was to survive fierce competition

among nations. Anchoring his beliefs in historical progressivism, Yan resolved to strengthen China by means of thorough reforms, as did many of his compatriots. Paradoxically enough, nationalist intellectuals and activists argued that the country's future could only be secured against Western incursion by emulating Western ideals and institutions. Coming to grips with this task, they looked to Western Europe, America, and Japan. This is where Homi Bhabha's indictment of the colonial project, his notion of colonial mimicry in particular, serves to diagnose this fraught emulation of the colonized. Late imperial China, he writes, fostered "a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline" to imitate elements of Western science and democracy (Bhabha 1984, 126). At the same time, though, it established itself as "the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal"—a disavowal, that, of the sameness that China felt forced to take upon itself (Bhabha 1984, 126). Put simply, China underwent a contradictory process in which it had to both accept and refuse Western models. Not least in the domain of gender relations, Chinese society and culture sought to navigate between internal and external sources of identity (Watson 2007, 175). Conceptions of womanhood were thus a key arena in which this balance was struck: a site at which China attempted to redefine itself by assuming a new gendered image.

Modern China's national identity was formulated, in the first instance, on the basis of racial discourses. This racialization of national identity implies that China's entrance into the colonial hierarchy was dictated by the West. Still, many in China came to recognize the nation's place in this hierarchy or races, In fact, shortly after the first Sino-Japanese War was lost, Yan Fu wrote a commentary that lashed out at imperial China's chauvinistic and narcissistic mentality. This mindset, he argued, had led to the emergence of dangerous illusions over the previous centuries. In trying to disabuse his compatriots of their complacence, Yan described the faltering empire as a "sick man"—a polity that appeared far less vital, less "physically active" than his Western counterparts (Rojas 2015, 2). This derogatory metaphor had been used before to characterize other nations that, like the Ottoman Empire, which were tumbling in the face of the West. Nevertheless, Yan's incentive rhetoric reinvented the analogy, such that the trope of the sick man was widely taken up as a racialized and pathologized stereotype for the late imperial China (Rojas, 14; Heinrich 2008, 76). This stereotype implicated not only China's geopolitical weakness, but also the urgent need to structurally transform the nation. The metaphor of a dying patient's terminal disease captured the widespread apprehension that China—an archaic kingdom—was

plummeting to the bottom of the hierarchy of races, which was dominated by the industrial West.

The phrase "sick man of Asia" (*Dong ya bing fu*) has become a notorious pejorative label for modern China. It brings into focus the power relation between China and the West, so much so that it projects a biased distinction between white and Asian or "yellow" races in cultural discourse. Whereas the phrase implicitly accords the West the role of a white robust male, the Chinese are denigrated as bearers of contagion: a "yellow peril" (Rojas 2015, 2). In appropriating this figure of speech, Yan Fu strategically acknowledged epistemic and material asymmetries between China and Western colonial powers. In so doing, he sowed the seed of nationalism, arguing that Western theories and inventions were the remedy that could cure China's malaise: "[to] promote the people's strength, expand their knowledge, and revive their virtue" (Price 2000, 260). Yan viewed nation-states through the prism of eugenics and social Darwinism. The goal for Chinese civilization, he proposed, should be to unburden all individuals of the physical and moral constraints imposed by social conventions and cultural creeds. With this imperative, Chinese women became the focus of intense debate and revolutionary efforts. Having long been constrained by Confucian patriarchal ideals of female chastity and domestic servitude, their fortunes would change from the late nineteenth century onward.

The racial slur of the "yellow peril" tainted the whole national community. Gender—in particular femininity—is another front of discursive formation that shaped the cultural imaginary of late-imperial China. The weakening of China's state power and cultural influence damaged the nation's masculine self-image, which devolved to the trope of a "sick" man. In this context, the image of China changed into that of a woman. This shift, I claim, also echoes the dissemination of feminism as part of the wider influx of Western knowledge into China. "While colonial racial discourse exerted an emasculating effect on the Chinese people," suggests Ping Zhu, Chinese intellectuals feminized the nation image (2015, 5). As such, China positioned itself "in the colonial world hierarchy as the feminized other of the West" (Zhu 2015, 13). For much of Chinese history, conceptions of race and gender have been closely intertwined in the discursive construction of national identity. At this historical conjuncture, however, a series of discursive shifts occurred. The constructed rivalry between strong/white and weak/yellow races was gradually displaced by two further contrasts: first that between a masculine man and an effeminate man, and then that between masculinity and femininity. In *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, feminist

theorists Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko shed light on the historical context in which the latter shift took place:

> As the civilizational status of the gentry class—coded "male"—came under increased threat by the superior military and discursive forces of the West, a number of contradictory social conditions began to emerge and prepare the ground for the rise of feminism in China. The movement began with a kind of protofeminist rhetoric and activism led by Chinese men alongside the responses of Chinese women at the turn of the century. (2013, 6)

Chinese intellectuals, albeit mostly male, posited women's emancipation as the cornerstone of the nationalist enterprise. In this way, the discursive construction of Chinese nationalism emerged through the gendered discourse of what constitutes a modern "woman."

The rise of feminism amid China's transition to modernity is telling on several counts. According to sociologist Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, it reveals "how gender relations frame nationalist demands," the ways in which "nationalist ideology configures gender relations within specific geopolitical contexts," and "how gender shapes relationships between nations," in this case, China and the West (2013, 2). Unlike nationalism in Europe and America, which is invested in narrowly masculinist ideologies, the birth of nation in modern China was bound up closely with feminism (Thapar-Björkert 8; Nagel 2010, 245). The feminist disposition of Chinese nationalism deviates from the masculinism upheld in both the West and traditional Chinese society. By means of a close reading of "woman" in cultural texts, centrally two contemporary films, I aim to trace the varied trajectory of womanhood in modern and contemporary China. The female subject on screen, I claim, is an index of China's political landscape. Attending to constructions of femininity then, I ultimately seek to unpack what Rey Chow describes as the "representational positioning characteristic of modern and contemporary cultural politics" (2013, 1).

In the most generic sense, Chinese feminism set out to extricate women from Confucian patrilineal society, in which they were denied access to the public domain. In reality, however, Chinese feminism is less a monolithic orchestra than a polyphonic

ensemble of distinct fragments. In recounting the development of Chinese feminism, it is crucial to attend to its different overlapping strands. Feminist scholar Tani Barlow suggests that a pair of Chinese concepts, *nüxing* and *funü*, corresponds to two correlated yet competing threads that run through modern China's feminist project. Whereas *nüxing* refers to a sexual, erotic, and carnal subjectivity resonant with Western sexology and eugenics, *funü* pertains to an ethical, political, and humanist stance in line with China's nationalist revolution (2004, 38). The conceptual demarcation of womanhood, along with the interaction between the two concepts of *nüxing* and *funü*, maps onto the tension between individual and collective. This latter tension figures prominently across various periods of China's governance, from the Republican (1912-1949), through the Maoist (1949-1979), to the Post-Maoist era (or post-socialist, 1979-present).

Here, I approach Chinese-language cinema through reference to *nüxing*/*funü* dyad, observing film narratives as a central stage on which the two concepts are voiced or performed by a broad cast of female characters. In exploring cinematic representations of Chinese women, it becomes clear that the notion of woman registers changing patterns of ideological struggle in the formation of Chinese nationhood.

Revolutionary Ideal and Mundane Desire

The film *Song of Youth* (*Qing chun zhi ge*, 1959) is an adaptation of a 1958 novel of the same name by Yang Mo (1914-1995). The story recounts a vibrant and tumultuous period during the 1930s, as the newly founded Chinese Republic faced the imminent threat of imperialist intrusion and upsurge of public resentment against the government's compromised negotiations with Western colonial powers. The film's protagonist is Lin Daojing, who was born to a peasant mother and landlord father. Soon after Lin's birth, her father left her mother and remarried. Now eighteen years old, Lin is betrothed to a local official. This arranged marriage is being forced upon her by her stepmother. In an attempt to escape her engagement, Lin finds employment at a rural primary school in Hebei province, away from her hometown Beiping (now Beijing). The headmaster of this school, however, turns out to be yet another villain in that he wants to take advantage of Lin. Wary that he will trade her off as a concubine, Lin beings to despair. At length, she decides to drown herself in the ocean. A Peking

university student named Yu Yongze happens to witness Lin's suicide attempt, rescuing her in the nick of time. Upon her recovery, the two fall in love. On September 18, 1931, Japanese invaded Manchuria—a landmark incident that piqued fury across China, which would fight the Japanese army until 1945. Following the invasion, Lin returns to Beiping and agrees to marry Yu. Their marriage soon falls apart, however, because of their irreconcilable differences regarding national politics. Their feud involves a student and communist activist named Lu Jiachuan, who wins Lin's heart with his radical view of proletarian revolution.

Unsurprisingly, the two men that accompany Lin during her formative years, Yu and Lu, appear to be one another's nemeses. Although both are university students, Yu prides himself on his profound knowledge of literature, whereas Lu is primarily concerned with the fate of the nation. The chasm between the two is best illustrated by the ways in which Lin relates to them. When Lin still works as a junior teacher, for instance, she is drawn to Lu's inspiring speech. A patriot, Lin admires Lu's sense of responsibility, a quality sorely lacking in her husband Yu. In the novel on which the film was based, Lin's feelings for Lu are described as follows:

> Lin Daojing simply cannot turn her eyes away from Lu Jiachuan. Those impassioned words spark something other than outrage in her heart: she is enthralled. She has never met anyone like him before, as Lu Jiachuan is so different to Yu Yongze. Yu would frequently pontificate on either the fine arts or some sentimental anecdote. But this university student, whom she had only just met, solely devotes himself to state affairs. What he said with such ease and eloquence has opened up another world, a world she has not yet explored.[23]

At this moment, the key difference between the two men comes forth clearly. Lu is an outright revolutionary, who vehemently condemns the government's suppression of communism and inability to stand up to the Japanese. Yu, in contrast, is a young pedant who hopes to associate himself with cultural officials in the government. He despises communism. Worse still, Yu shows himself to be a manipulative husband, keen to confine his wife to the domestic sphere. A hypocritical patriarch, he is not the compassionate man he initially claimed to be. All of this earns Lin's revulsion; she

dreams of participating in social and political movements like Lu, her spiritual guide. In fact, the tension between these two male characters serves to externalize Lin's torn state of mind as her political consciousness awakens. Lin switches sides, leaving the reactionary Yu for the revolutionary Lu, which also entails a transition from romantic desire to political idealism. Here then we encounter the tension endemic to Chinese womanhood: that between *nüxing* and *funü*. In modern Chinese history, as I will soon discuss, the interplay between these two concepts has defined the contours of womanhood.

Funü (which literally means both a married or unmarried woman) initially seems to suggest that women are reproductive vessels of patrilineal kinship relations and Confucian ethics. In contrast, *Nüxing* (which literally means the female sex) is a new category that Chinese intellectuals devised as part of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, in defiance of conventional values (Barlow 2004, 40; Zhu 2015, 133). The traditional Chinese understanding of woman is premised on Confucian principles, according to which women are restricted to patriarchal marital and kinship relations (Barlow, 38). Reduced to docile objects, women are meant to uphold male supremacy. The category of *nüxing*, on the contrary, implies that Chinese women conform to an epistemological framework that is mediated by Western knowledge and theories of sexuality. This framework foregrounds the significance of anatomy and physiology (Zhu 2015, 11). Treating binaries of both gender and sex as universally valid scientific facts, *nüxing* is a fundamentally biological, even evolutionary concept. As such, it feeds into China's urgent need to reinvent itself as a modern nation-state. Hence, whereas *funü* represents a moral ideal of womanhood, which dismisses female autonomy, biology, and libido, *nüxing* deliberately breaks away from this conception. Rather, it conceives of woman as a conscious subject of sexual difference and erotic desire (Zhu 2015, 14).

However, the *nüxing*/*funü* dichotomy does not provide a yardstick by which perceptions of women can be neatly categorized. In fact, perceptions of women and their social conditions are often ambiguous, and might well fall between these two poles, Consider, for instance, *The Goddess* (*Shen nu*, 1934). This film's female protagonist is played by Ruan Lingyu—an icon of Chinese cinema adorned with glamor and melancholy. Her character embroiled in a life of hardship in the modern, colonial, and cosmopolitan Shanghai in the 1930s. A prostitute who seduces men under the cover of night, the female protagonist is also a caring mother, who strives to create a brighter future for her young son. This character encapsulates an apparent

contradiction between lucrative sexuality and motherly love. Hence, this representation of femininity confounds the *nüxing*/*funü* dichotomy, undercutting the strict division according to which one is either a sexual subject or moral agent. The mother figure represented in *The Goddess* embodies an ambiguous construction of femininity. Some other representations, such as Lin Daojing in *Song of Youth*, show women as engaging in a perpetual opposition of the antitheses to established norms, as befits the political turmoil and social unrest since modernity entered China.

Despite the ambivalent bifurcation of Chinese femininity, Tani Barlow suggests that both the concepts of *nüxing* and *funü* themselves, and the relation between them, have varied over time. The sexed and eroticized female of *nüxing* became prevalent in the Republican Era, reflecting a wider political and social tendency through which individuals detached themselves from moral discipline. In this way, new systems of shared knowledge and belief dislodged existing epistemologies (Barlow 2004, 37). In post-socialist China, however, *nüxing* came to embody emancipatory individualism. In this context, it stood at odds with Mao's sweeping ambition to mobilize class struggle and unify the mass. Instead, *funü* became the dominant model of womanhood during the Socialist Era. What makes this transition significant, Barlow stresses, is that the notion of *funü* was refashioned as "a national subject that stood for the collectivity of all politically normative or decent women" (38). Simply put, *funü* was enmeshed in the grand scheme of social revolution and socialist modernization.

To be clear, Mao's era marked a return—if not regression—to femininity, which enforced women's incorporation into the public sphere and encroached upon their privacy. The cost of establishing *funü* as an archetype of femininity for the New China, then, was that *nüxing* was denounced as its binary opposite: a Westernized, bourgeois, individualist, and voluptuous form of femininity (Barlow 38). Against this backdrop, *Song of Youth* offers a glimpse into the vacillations between *funü* and *nüxing* through which "woman" was defined in Chinese feminism. Specifically, the discursive construction of "woman" comes to be couched in the language of idealism and desire. For Yang Mo, the concept of womanhood is defined by the central character's commitment to revolutionary ideals and repudiation of mundane desire. This choice is somewhat romantically delineated as Lin's preference of Lu over Yu, who embodies idealism and desire respectively. As the narrative unfolds, Lin's political allegiance is bolstered by a situation of life and death in which she finds herself.

After arriving in Beiping, Lin Daojing moves in with Yu Yongze. Before long, she encounters Lu Jiachuan at a student gathering on New Year's Eve. Lin, Lu, and the other students have a shared sense of patriotism. Even still, they all resent the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT). Lin is convinced that China's future lies on a different path—that led forward by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From this point on, Lin immerses herself in Marxist thought under Lu's guidance. She ardently aspires to become a Communist. Stunned by the development between his wife and college mate, Yu becomes an obstacle standing in their way. He fears that Lin's and Lu's pursuit of communism will sabotage his promising career. This is the first climactic moment of the film. Lu shows up at Lin's doorstep one night with a package full of propaganda pamphlets for her to take care of. Knowing that numerous policemen are on Lu's tail, Yu refuses to shelter him, despite Lin's protest. Soon after having left the quarreling couple, Lu is arrested by the authorities. He is later executed. Realizing that their marriage is beyond repair, Lin parts ways with Yu. Once again, she walks away from home.[24] Through the two departures that mark the female protagonist's life, the film signifies the transformative passages undergone by Chinese womanhood in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Lin's escape from the arranged marriage represents a rejoinder to the repressive patriarchal society. However, her divorce from Yu—who pulled her back from the brink of death after all—is not so much another escape from domestic repression as a declaration of her political independence. Accordingly, her two departures are implicated in the differentiation between *nüxing* and *funü* in Chinese feminism. Lin's personal growth has taken several turns: having initially sought personal integrity and liberty during the Republican Era, she eventually dedicated herself to nationhood, as conceived by a particular political ideology, that is, communism. For Meng Yue, this plot development covertly reinforces the legitimacy of the party state through the representation of women:

> The combination of authentic political identity with womanhood is a double play. On the one hand, the state's political discourse translated itself through women into the private context of desire, love, marriage, divorce, and familial relations, and, on the other, it turned woman into an agent of politicizing desire, love, and family relations by delimiting and repressing sexuality, self, and all private emotions … [F]emale images in

> socialist literature functioned as a special agent of the state's appropriation of the "public." (Yue 1994, 118)

In this light, when it comes to womanhood in the Socialist Era, Lin Daojing is portrayed in a way that politically elevates the public over the personal. Although the narrative commences with Lin's genuine wish to establish individual autonomy, this personal struggle for gender equality is surmounted by collectivist ambitions.

The protagonist's mundane emotions and intimate desires, in the meantime, also dissolve into the grand sweep of history. In creating a female protagonist whose formative years coincide with China's course of modernization, Yang Mo—the author of the novel—staged the dramatic historical transition through which republican China (under the governance of the KMT) veered into another trajectory. Between the lines, as it were, this is less a biographical narrative than a story of the historical emergence of the CCP. In fact, Yang Mo's literary inscription of the femininity complies with the national history dictated by the communist bureaucracy. According to Meng Yue, this complicity between fiction and historiography poses a grave danger, in that as "it leaves no room open for a public or imagined public other than the one offered by the Communist Party" (129).

Recalling what I have argued in the previous chapter, it would seem that *Song of Youth* is characteristic of the Chinese Bildungsroman in that the heroine's maturation serves as an allegory of China's modern transformation. This allegorization of the feminine is highly problematic, for it means that the feminist project is displaced by, and reduced to, the central character's "simplified identification with the only available ideal subject position", namely, a national polity of communism (Yue 1994, 130). Switching from an emphasis on her individual gender equality to building the communist state, Lin identifies with a collective ideal, not private intimacy. This demonstrates not only the conflicts at work in the construction of the female subject, but directs formations of China's national identity at a certain ideological position. As a primary site of cross-cultural exchange, at which traditional Chinese society adapted to Western knowledge and practice, notions of womanhood register China's ideological battles over time. In particular, they bring into focus the tension between the individual and the state.

Sublime Mind and Profane Body

During the 1960s, at the height of the Maoist era, Chinese cinema enrolled the female figure as a means of addressing the national condition and conjuring collective consciousness. From the late 1970s onward, however, the communist regime has toned down its revolutionary rhetorics and shifted its focus to the economy. In this post-socialist period, the symbolic connections between womanhood and nationhood have been subjected to increasing skepticism. Following the uneasy realization that the country was doomed to failure if its continual state of political tumult could be not be quelled, the ruling party opted to defuse domestic tensions by reaching beyond its borders. Among other consequences, this foray into capitalist globalization has enlarged China's borders in the cultural imagination. Now, the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, despite their varied colonial pasts and historical processes of modernity, are all often seen as part of China.[25]

Whereas rhetorics of nationhood once united individuals together in a common project, today the bankruptcy of revolutionary idealism and widespread of neoliberal capitalism have together produced a disenchantment with nationalism in China. Now that the legacy of Maoism has waned, the symbolic equivalence of woman and nation has moved into the domain of personal experience, rather than totalizing ideology. Contemporary Chinese-speaking cinema is permeated with depictions of femininity that cut against the myth of China's modernity, in which CCP steers the nation through a progressive, developmental, and triumphal history. Among various filmic narratives that foreground modern Chinese women, Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* exemplifies how portrayals of women might refuse nationalism by playing on the ambiguity between *funü* and *nüxing*. Riveted on female emotions and desires, this film offers a close look at those intricacies of the human psyche that are irreducible to national sentiments. On the one hand, attentive to female sexuality and body, the film emphasizes that the protagonist is not merely submissive in the face of revolutionary ethics. On the other, it allows for an alternative historiography of modern China, which has been concealed by official narratives. As will become apparent in my analysis, the central female figure in *Lust, Caution* points to an epistemic shift within the category of "woman" in the post-socialist era. This transition heralds the emergence of an amoral and apolitical conception of womanhood as an individual with a reinvigorated sexual and psychic life.

Similar to *Song of Youth*, the film *Lust, Caution* centers on a young and innocent woman suffering from great distress. Set in the same historical period—the 1930s—the story revolves around Wong Chia Chih, an émigré who was born in Shanghai, flees at the outbreak of war to Hong Kong, the erstwhile British colony.[26] While studying at Lingnan University (one of the many schools to be evacuated from mainland China during the Second Sino-Japanese War), Wong joins a theater group on campus. There, she becomes associated with a group of patriotic students. The group leader, Kuang Yu Min, is secretly fond of Wong. Although their propagandistic plays are a great success, Kuang comes up with a daring plan: to kill a real enemy. The troupe plots the assassination of Mr. Yee, a confidant of Wang Jingwei (who will soon become the president of Japan's puppet government in China). Assigned to lure Mr. Yee into a trap, Wong Chia Chih assumes the identity of a businessman's wife. After several attempts, she infiltrates Mr. Yee's house by making the acquaintance of his wife. Just as their plan seems to go smoothly, Mr. Yee is summoned back to Shanghai on short notice, leaving the students with no choice but to abort their mission. Having dropped out of college and returned to Shanghai due to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, Wong reconnects with Kuang and the others four years later. Recruited by Chiang Kai-Shek's war-time government in Chongqing, Wong and the rest of the group are dispatched to finish where they left off.[27] Wong resumes her dangerous liaison with Mr. Yee, who has been appointed as the security chief in the collaborationist regime. The film begins with Wong Chia Chih's last day alive, just as she is about to bring her enemy to justice.

Lust, Caution is based on an eponymous novella by Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing, 1920-1995), arguably modern Chinese literature's most celebrated female author, certainly among Chinese-language communities. In fact, the film induced a renewed appreciation of her literary legacy. *Lust, Caution* is rather shorter and less known in comparison with Chang's other books, such as *Love in a Fallen City* (*Qing cheng zhi lian*) and *The Golden Cangue* (*Jin suo ji*). Still, it brings together political intrigue and psychological thrill with remarkable narrative finesse. The storyline, as it turns out, bears traces of Chang's own life experience. Born in Shanghai in a privileged family that had fallen on harsh times, the author suffered an unhappy childhood due to her parents' divorce. If not for these setbacks, Chang would have studied in Britain had it not been for the World War II, which derailed her plans.[28] Instead, Chang studied English literature at the University of Hong Kong until 1941, until the colonial harbor fell into Japanese hands. Chang was first forced to return to Shanghai the following year, before eventually leaving mainland China after the Communists took over.

Inspired by a real assassination of this era, [29] Chang wove a story around her own adventures, romances, and migration.[30]

Although the original story was not published until the late 1970s, Chang had already completed the first draft as early as in the 1950s, under the title of "The Spyring" (*Apple Daily* 2008). The film version basically adheres to the original novel's structure. Like the novel, it features a lengthy flashback showing how Wong Chia Chih embarks on her mission. Ang Lee's filmic rendition of Chang's espionage thriller is distinguished by its explicit depictions of sex, which is merely hinted at in the novel.[31] The film is punctuated by three graphic sex scenes involving the heroine Wong Chia Chih and villain Mr. Yee. Moreover, it presents another lengthy flashback showing how the protagonists become both intimate lovers and implacable foes. Through Wong's encounters with Mr. Yee, the narrative unveils an aspect of modern Chinese history that has yet to be openly acknowledged by the communist authorities. To be sure, this story's central ideological conflict is not that between the KMT and the CCP, although this tension would ultimately result in the overthrow of the Chinese Republic and their clash in civil war. Rather, the explanation as to why the female protagonist is willing to sacrifice herself by seducing a callous man, lies in the warring factions inside the nationalist regime itself.[32] The peculiar historical context in which Eileen Chang (and Ang Lee) sets the story, Leo Ou-fan Lee points out, has been addressed by neither Chinese nor Western critics of the film (2008, 227-8).

Lust, Caution distances itself from the grand historical narrative in which China withstood Japanese invasion through a military coalition between nationalist and communist forces. Instead, it explores how individuals grapple with extraordinary tasks in ordinary circumstances. In other words, by focusing on a Chinese woman's private life, the film invites us to ponder the extent to which the nation interferes with, calls upon, or commandeers the individual. Further, it prompts reflection on whether ordinary people can assert their agency in maneuvering among various political ideologies and personal sensibilities. In this case, the female protagonist achieves personal agency by engaging emotionally and sensually with her sworn enemy. At long last, these emotional and somatic intensities discharge her of ingrained political dogmas.

This narrative approach is clearest in scenes of sex and sensuality, through which Ang Lee teases out aspects of Wong Chia Chih's personhood from behind the ideological facade. The first time that Wong and Mr. Yee have sexual intercourse is an egregious case of rape. Inside a secret chamber in a suburban flat, Mr. Yee tears off

Wong's cheongsam, presses her to a wall, ties her hands with his belt, pins her down against the bed, and forcibly penetrates her.[33] On the one hand, the sexual violence endured by the heroine is a form of physical torture. The cruelty unleashed in this scene seems to justify the victim's patriotic cause. It further prepares the ground for a later plot twist in which her enmity toward Mr. Yee eventually gives way to affection. On the other hand, the female body becomes a gendered trope. As such, it brings into focus the ways in which Chinese women have fallen prey to male chauvinism. It provides a metaphor for the violation of the Chinese nation by imperialist powers and their accomplices.

Having given him sexual favors over a considerable period, Wong gains Mr. Yee's trust. Ironically, it is Wong, the victim of sadism, who loses moral ground (Berry 2012, 84). After Mr. Yee agrees to provide her a flat for their intimate rendezvous, Wong realizes that her feelings have grown for him, despite his treachery. Finally, she voices her internal struggles, through which she tries to reconcile her competing commitments. At this point, her superintendent, Old Wu, decides to postpone the assassination attempt, despite the fact that they could now lure Mr. Lee to the flat. At a hideout somewhere in a riverside village, the protagonist confronts Old Wu and her old-time lover, Kuang Yu Min:

> Wu: Remember, for an intelligence agent, there is only one rule—loyalty: loyal to the party, loyal to the people, and loyal to your country. Is that understood?
>
> Wong: Rest assured. I will do whatever you say.
>
> Wu: Very well then. Now you just need to keep him in the trap. If there is anything you need…
>
> Wong: What do you mean by "the trap"? My body? What do you take him for? He knows better than either of you how to put on an act. Not only does he sneak inside my body, but also my heart, deeper and deeper, like a snake. I have to let him in as if I am a slave…Only by staying loyal can I get into his heart. Every time he is inside me, he will not be gratified or feel alive until I bleed or cry. He is the only one who can tell what is real in the dark…
>
> Wu: That is enough.

Wong: This is exactly why…why I can torture him too, by keeping him busy even when he is tired, until I am too exhausted and collapse.

Wu: Enough…

Wong: Every time he comes, I wonder if this is the moment you barge in and shoot him in the back of the head, and so his blood and brains will spill all over me!

Wu: Shut up![34]

Here, in this sudden emotional outburst, the female protagonist opens up about her inner troubles. For the noble cause of saving the country and serving the people, Wong has not only relinquished her body to the enemy, but her sense of self. In this scene, she decries Old Wu's simple-minded plan, according to which she would simply engage in sexual acts with Mr. Yee as an insensate object. Here Wong claims her subjectivity by emphatically addressing her anguished existence. Although she agrees to stay on the mission, this moment reveals the character's resentment toward the grand ambitions in which she once convicted and so upheld.

The character of Wong Chia Chih recalls femme fatales in film noir—Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1944), for instance. The allegiances of such female figures are contradicted: she not only loves the man she has vowed to kill, but also struggles between personal and political callings, which contest the mind/body distinction. If we return momentarily to female protagonists in socialist Chinese cinema, such as *Song of Youth*, we see that, more often than not, the narratives abstain from the issue of sexuality. In this way, female characters are largely portrayed through reference to their spiritual, psychical, and intellectual development—Lin Daojing being a case in point. Earlier Chinese films desexualized these figures by foregrounding their intellectual development, which transcends their individual being with national rhetorics of patriotism and revolution (Berry 2012, 85). This representational approach to Chinese women replaces the individual's sexual desires with ideological devotions. The paradigm of this operation was the Model Works (*Yang ban xi*, often described as "revolutionary operas") of the Cultural Revolution. Devised to inculcate Maoist ideologies among the public, these shows employed repetitive narrative styles and patterns (Rao 2016, 222).

In Meng Yue's words, in socialist Chinese cinema the female image functions as a symbolic placeholder of the party state's transcendental authority over individuality, which is located in the private psyche as opposed to the body (1993, 124). For Ang Lee, however, the female image emerges from the decoupling of the personal from the political. With this separation, female characters' physical and psychical experiences become inseparable from one another. Lee's individualist approach to female embodiment, premised on sentimentality and eroticism, conforms to neither the submissiveness of *funü*, which is associated with masculinist nationalism, nor revolutionary ethics. On the contrary, this approach equates femininity with the sexuality of *nüxing*, thereby neutralizing the docile subject's ideological interpellation. Of course, this representation of gendered subjectivity does not follow poststructuralist feminism all the way in subverting socially constructed gender categories altogether. Instead, it speaks to a resurgence of the private domain, as against the politicization of gender identities in the name of nation. That is why, when Wong Chia Chih is presented with a glamorous ring that Mr. Yee offers her toward the end of *Lust, Caution*, its beauty takes her by surprise. Caught in between her patriotic mission and guilty conscience, Wong warns off Mr. Yee at the last minute, as she watches him hop into an armored car and narrowly make his escape. After infiltrating Mr. Yee's spy ring at grievous personal cost, Wong ultimately finds herself alone in a rickshaw on Shanghai's busy streets. Both morally and politically, she is disoriented. Soon afterwards she is captured and gunned down alongside her comrades. Wong Chia Chih's death contradicts stereotypical visions of heroism that exalts the protagonist's solemn devotion. Instead, her execution foregrounds how ideologies that blur the boundaries between the nation and the individual have grossly failed.

Conclusion

The novels behind the two films analyzed in this chapter were both written during the same period, and both combined true historical events with personal love affairs. Nevertheless, Yang Mo's and Eileen Chang's approaches to representing women differ significantly. Whereas Yang's *Song of Youth* embeds women in the national community, diminishing female individuality, Chang's *Lust, Caution* imbues the female character with intricate sensibilities.

This difference between the two novels aligns with shifting trends in the discursive construction of femininity in China, which oscillated between a conception of woman as a political subject (*funü*) or sexual subject (*nüxing*). Initially, *funü* is taken up as a symbol of the nation, whether because women embody Confucian ethics and patriarchal tradition, or revolutionary ideologies and collective unity. Based on overlapping binaries of sex and gender, *nüxing* affirms women's biological characteristics and bodily needs. In this chapter, I have unraveled how the female protagonists of two films, Lin Daojing and Wong Chia Chih, can be attributed to these two distinctive categories of womanhood. In so doing, I have reflected on the ways in which political movements have intervened in the development of Chinese feminism. Still, my interpretations of these films do not confirm a binary differentiation of the female subjectivity in Chinese cinema. The differentiation between *funü* and *nüxing*, I have shown, is rarely static and clear. Nor does *funü* pertain to the subject's mind, while *nüxing* has merely to do with the body. I have rather deciphered and applied this dyad as a relational and comparative construct, as befits the rapid transformation of Chinese society and culture. Attending to fluid constructions of gender in this way has allowed me to explore changing power dynamics among individuals and the state.