UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Gendered Portrayals of the Nation: Men and Women in Twenty-First-Century Chinese Cinema

A thesis submitted to the University of Liverpool in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis has been composed by me and is based on my own work, to the best of my knowledge original, except where acknowledgements and references are made to materials previously published or written by other people.

Signed…………Sijia Meng……………………………………………

Abstract

Keywords: contemporary Chinese cinema, gender-as-nation, narrative role, three senses of the look

The evolution of Chinese national cinema has closely paralleled the efforts to reshape China as a modern nation, particularly since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Throughout the twentieth century, mainland Chinese film history has witnessed the creative construction of the cinematic representation of the nation by successive generations of directors, who have employed diverse portrayals of gender, encompassing women, men, and the complex dynamics of gender relations. While scholars such as Shuqin Cui (2003) and Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006) have delved into the interplay between gender portrayals and the construction of the national image in twentieth-century Chinese cinema, this intricate relationship between gender and the nation in the twenty-first century, as depicted by newer generations of directors, remains relatively unexplored.

This thesis aims to bridge this research gap by examining how two types of directors, namely representative independent art house Sixth Generation directors and politicised and commercially-oriented "directors within the system", present alternative/non-mainstream and mainstream visions of the nation through their portrayals of gender. In doing so, it strives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the nation as depicted in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema. Specifically, this study explores how gender portrayals and their relationship to the nation (referred to as gender-as-nation), are constructed through two dimensions:

the narrative roles of female and male protagonists and the three senses of the look they embody, including the character's appearance, the look of the camera upon the character, and the character's subjective look.

This research reveals that while newer generations of directors draw upon the narrative and cinematic conventions established by their predecessors, they exhibit more innovation than emulation in their portrayals of the nation through gender. This innovation results in the presentation of distinct images of the Chinese nation in the new century, deviating from those portrayed on screen in the twentieth century. Although the focus of this research centres on Chinese national cinema, its theoretical framework and methodology offer a potential model for exploring the complex interplay between gender and the nation on screen in other national cinemas worldwide.

Acknowledgements

In *Day for Night*[1] (1973), director François Truffaut draws a parallel between the filmmaking process to a tumultuous stagecoach journey in the Wild West: "At the start, you hope for a trouble-free trip, but quite quickly you wonder if you're ever going to make it, at all." This analogy aptly describes the arduous path of writing a doctoral thesis, and the completion of this challenging journey would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the remarkable individuals mentioned below, whom I would like to sincerely thank and acknowledge.

First and foremost, I express my gratitude to myself for the endurance and resilience that enabled me to persevere and not give up, even when faced with the difficulty of restarting my research and rewriting the thesis within a limited timeframe.

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[1] *Day for Night* (the original French title is *La Nuit américaine*) is a 1973 French film directed by François Truffaut about the making of a film, starring Truffaut himself as a director.

Table of Contents

Note on Chinese Words and Transliteration

In most cases, this thesis uses the *pinyin* (拼音) system of transliteration for representing Chinese words (and sounds) in English. The exceptions are those (usually the names of internationally known places and people) that are more commonly used in an alternative transliteration system, e.g., Hong Kong rather than Xianggang, Hou Hsiao Hsien rather than Hou Xiaoxian (as is common for people from Hong Kong or Taiwan).

Chinese characters are not included in the main body of the thesis, except for film titles and Chinese names (typically those of directors and characters in the films). This is because the same *pinyin* spelling can represent various characters and, consequently, different meanings.

For Chinese-language film titles, they are usually presented in their English translations wherever they are known. Since the English translations often vary from the original Chinese titles, the *pinyin* transliteration of the original title is included in parentheses after the first appearance of each Chinese film title in the text. There is also a filmography appended at the end of the thesis, which includes the Chinese character version of the original title.

Names in Chinese are generally presented as the family name followed by a personal name. This practice is followed throughout the thesis with one exception, usually through publication, where a person with a Chinese name has used an English

personal name, e.g., Sheldon Lu, or has indicated that they wish to be addressed by

their personal name followed by their family name, e.g., Yingjin Zhang.

List of Abbreviations

CEPA	Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (Mainland and Hong Kong)
CFCC	China Film Co-production Corporation
CFGC	China Film Group Corporation
CPC	Communist Party of China
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)
NPC	National People's Congress
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	*Renminbi* (The People's Currency)
SAR	Special Administrative Regions of China
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, known as Britain
USA	United States of America, commonly known as the United States (US) or America
WTO	World Trade Organisation

List of Figures

Chapter 1 Introduction

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the thesis by providing an overview of the key terms and concepts that will be explored in depth throughout the thesis. The approach to defining "gender" is established, acknowledging its binary understanding in a traditional sense and explaining the practical reasons behind this choice. However, the thesis also recognises the limitations of this approach and expresses support for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender. The definitions of "China" and "Chinese" are clarified, aligning with the "One China" policy to provide a specific context for the research. Additionally, the concept of a nation as an "imagined community" is introduced, drawing upon Benedict Anderson's work and emphasising the role of film in constructing and maintaining national identity.

The chapter proceeds by outlining the research background, including representations of the nation in twenty-first-century Chinese Cinema. It distinguishes between mainstream and non-mainstream films, emphasising the role of directors categorised as "directors within the system" [2] from the Fifth and New Force Generations, as well as independent Sixth Generation directors, in shaping the portrayal of the nation. Previous studies on gendered representations of the nation in Chinese cinema are discussed, revealing a gap in research regarding the interconnectedness of both genders and the importance of exploring gender dynamics in relation to the nation. The chapter concludes by presenting the research

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[2] "Directors within the system" (*tizhinei daoyan*) are widely acknowledged by Chinese film scholars (Li Lei 李磊, 2020; Chen Xuguang 陈旭光, 2020, 2021a, p. 12; Shen Zhaohui 申朝晖, 2021, pp. 92-4) for creating films that adhere to the mainstream ideologies of the Party-state while showcasing unique and recognisable cinematic styles.

aims and questions that will be addressed in the subsequent chapters and providing an outline of the main body of the thesis.

1.1 Approaches to Definitions

Gender

"Gender, *n*.

 a. *gen*. Males or females viewed as a group. Also: the property or fact of belonging to one of these groups.

 b. *Psychology* and *Sociology* (originally *U.S.*). The state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex. Also: a (male or female) group characterized in this way."

Oxford English Dictionary

In this thesis, the term "gender" is understood in a traditional, binary sense, aligning with the conventional understanding of male and female biological sex. It is important to note that this treatment does not reflect the author's personal understanding of gender or her perception of reality, but is motivated by practical considerations. Firstly, as the author identifies as a heterosexual woman who has experienced life within the traditional norms of Chinese society, she believes that incorporating her own experiences enriches the writing and lends it greater accuracy. The author also acknowledges that she may not fully grasp the experiences of individuals identifying with alternative genders and sexualities. The second reason is

influenced by the content and representation of gender that can be portrayed and is prevalent on the big screens and within the public consciousness in China.

It is crucial to recognise that this approach to "gender" is limited and does not encompass the full range of diverse gender identities. The author supports a more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender, recognising that it is a complex construct that extends beyond the binary framework of male and female. Judith Butler (1990) argued that gender is performative and exists along a spectrum that includes various fluid and nuanced identities such as transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluid.

To clarify, within the scope of this thesis, the author invites the reader to consider the term "gender" as encompassing the binary categories of "man and woman". However, this is essential to keep in mind that this narrow focus is specific to the research and does not encompass the full breadth of gender possibilities within society.

China

"China, *n*.1 and *adj*.

I. Senses relating to the country and its people.

1.

 a. The country so called, in Asia.

Oxford English Dictionary

In this thesis, the term "China" refers to the territory recognised under the "One China" policy as defined by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 (1971), the Shanghai Communiqué (1972), and the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (1979). Similarly, the term "Chinese" is used to denote the people, language, and products, including cultural production such as film, that exist, are performed, or are produced within the context of the aforementioned definition of "China".

Nation

"Nation, *n*.1

I. A people or group of peoples; a political state.

1.

a. A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people. Now also: such a people forming a political state; a political state. (In early use also in plural: a country.)"

Oxford English Dictionary

Building upon Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of a nation as "imagined community", this thesis asserts that national identity is not solely shaped by inherent or natural factors but predominantly through shared narratives, symbols, and the

collective imagination. Within this framework, film, along with other cultural, linguistic, and experiential elements that are widely disseminated throughout the community, plays a significant role in the construction and preservation of national identity. Furthermore, it goes beyond this notion by exploring the relationship between "the man/woman of the nation" and "the man/woman as the nation", delving into how gender becomes intertwined with the concept of the nation.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 Portrayals of the Nation in Twenty-First-Century Chinese Cinema

Twenty-first-century Chinese cinema showcases a captivating array of representations that intricately weave together the fabric of the nation. Within this cinematic landscape, a diverse range of films, spanning both mainstream and non-mainstream productions, unravels a tapestry of perspectives and approaches in portraying the Chinese nation. Through their distinct lenses, these films contribute to a multifaceted understanding of national identity, offering glimpses into the nuanced layers that shape the collective essence of China.

Mainstream films, which typically enjoy commercial success and wide distribution, play a significant role in shaping the portrayal of the nation. Notably, directors from the Fifth Generation like Zhang Yimou, widely regarded as a national director for China, have made profound contributions. Zhang's *Hero* (2002) holds a pivotal position in Chinese film history as the inaugural blockbuster, setting new standards and moulding the representation of the nation in the twenty-first century. *Hero* resonated powerfully with the state and the broad audience, leaving an indelible

mark. Similarly, directors from the New Force Generation, such as Wu Jing, have garnered acclaim for their involvement in top-grossing films. Their works deftly depict the Chinese nation in ways that resonate with the state and a diverse viewership. These mainstream films often employ grand narratives, visual spectacles, and patriotic themes to highlight the strength, unity, and historical heritage of the Chinese nation.

On the other hand, non-mainstream films, often produced by independent filmmakers and representing alternative voices and perspectives, provide a counterpoint to the mainstream portrayals. Directors like Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, prominent figures within the independent Sixth Generation movement, offer unique and thought-provoking interpretations of the Chinese nation. Their films delve into social issues, underrepresented communities, and personal narratives, challenging conventional notions of national identity. Through nuanced storytelling, artistic experimentation, and a focus on individual experiences, these non-mainstream films provide a more introspective and intimate exploration of the Chinese nation.

Both mainstream and non-mainstream films contribute to the rich landscape of representations of the nation in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema. While mainstream films strive to project a cohesive and aspirational image of the nation, non-mainstream films offer alternative perspectives that illuminate complexities, contradictions, and often overlooked narratives within the Chinese society. Together, these diverse portrayals foster a more comprehensive understanding of the

multifaceted nature of national identity and the evolving social, cultural, and political landscapes in contemporary China.

1.2.2 Previous Research on Gendered Portrayals of the Nation in Chinese Cinema

Gendered representations of the nation in Chinese cinema have been a subject of considerable scholarly attention, shedding light on the intricate interplay between gender and the construction of national identity. Noteworthy publications have significantly contributed to this field of research, offering insights into this complex relationship. First, Shuqin Cui's book, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (2003), provides an in-depth exploration of the portrayal of women and their intersection with the formation of the nation in Chinese cinema throughout twentieth century, specifically focusing on the mainland.

Second, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar's book, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), dedicates two chapters to examining how Chinese films construct images of the Chinese nation through the portrayal of women and men. Their analysis encompasses a diverse selection of Chinese films from various regions, both within and beyond the PRC, including the mainland, pre-1997 Hong Kong, and transnational contexts. Their examination extends across a significant period, covering the years leading up to 2002.

Similarly, Sheldon Lu's book, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (2021), dedicates three chapters to investigating how Chinese films construct images of the Chinese nation through the portrayal of women and

men. His analysis covers a broad spectrum of Chinese films from different regions, both within and beyond the PRC, including the mainland, pre-1997 Hong Kong, post-1997 Hong Kong as a special administrative region (SAR) in China, Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora, and transnational contexts. His examination spans from the late twentieth century to the present.

These scholarly perspectives provide valuable frameworks and insights that can inform the examination of how the Chinese nation is constructed through gender portrayals on screen, specifically within the context of this thesis. Berry and Farquhar's (2006) meticulous attention to the visual language system in analysing the portrayal of female characters, which they refer to as the "three senses of the look", proves particularly enlightening. However, it is worth noting that previous studies have tended to focus exclusively on one gender, whether women or men, when exploring the intricate relationship between gender and the nation. This singular focus has occasionally overlooked the inherent interconnectedness between both genders and the significance of gender dynamics in relation to the nation.

In response to this gap, this study seeks to examine both women and men simultaneously, recognising their interplay and exploring their respective roles in representing the Chinese nation. By drawing upon the research and analytic approaches of these scholars, this study aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how gender shapes the depiction of the Chinese nation in cinema within the framework of national cinema, with a specific emphasis on the twenty-first century - an era that previous studies have yet to extensively explored. It is worth

noting that the concept of gender utilised in this thesis does not delve deeply into depth gender and sociological studies aspects, but rather refers to the portrayal of gender on screen, encompassing images of female characters, male characters, and their relationships and power dynamics.

1.3 Research Aims

The thesis aims to investigate the portrayal of the Chinese nation in twenty-first-century cinema through the lens of gender. Firstly, it seeks to explore the depiction of the Chinese nation on screen, with a particular emphasis on gender. This includes examining the portrayal of women, men, and their gender dynamics in relation to the concept of the nation as presented by different directors. Secondly, the study aims to examine the construction of these gender portrayals by analysing the narrative roles of female and male protagonists, as well as the three senses of the look they embody. This analysis will shed light on the cinematic techniques and storytelling strategies employed to gain a deeper understanding of how gender is constructed and represented within the context of the Chinese nation in cinematic narratives. Lastly, the thesis aims to compare the portrayals of the Chinese nation in the twentieth century with those in the present century, identifying potential similarities and differences that emerge. By addressing these research questions, the thesis endeavours to provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender shapes the depiction of the Chinese nation on screen and how it has evolved over time.

The research aims to address the following three questions:

1. How are the images of the Chinese nation portrayed on screen in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender, encompassing women, men, and their gender relations, as presented by various directors?

2. Specifically, how are these portrayals constructed through the narrative roles of female and male protagonists and the three senses of the look they embody?

3. In comparison to the gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation on screen in the twentieth century, are there any notable similarities and differences in the new century?

These questions form the foundation for exploring the portrayal of the Chinese nation through the lens of gender, examining the construction of gender roles, the dynamics between male and female protagonists, and the visual elements that contribute to the representation. By analysing these aspects and drawing comparisons to previous cinematic depictions, the research aims to offer insights into the evolving portrayals of the Chinese nation and their relationship to gender in the twenty-first century.

1.4 Chapter Outline

The main body of the thesis will consist of three chapters, each examining the portrayal of gender and its symbolic significance in relation to the concept of the nation during the twenty-first century. Part One (Chapter Four and Chapter Five) focuses on non-mainstream depictions of the nation through gender in commercially

less successful but artistically significant[3] Chinese films. Chapter Four analyses how director Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, a representative independent Six Generation director and one of the remaining auteurs in mainland Chinese cinema, portrays the nation through gender. Chapter Five scrutinises the representation of the nation through gender in films by Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦, another representative independent Sixth Generation director from a minority nationality (Tibetan), who has crafted a series of films specifically highlighting the Tibetan regions within the Chinese nation.

Part Two (Chapter Six) examines mainstream depictions of the nation in commercially successful Chinese films. Chapter Six explores how directors who are considered to be "working within the system", such as Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 and New Force Generation director Wu Jing 吴京, portray the nation through gender. Their films have achieved high box office success in the Chinese film market and received government recognition. By focusing more on the non-mainstream portrayals provided by independent Sixth Generation directors like Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, this thesis allows for a deeper exploration of alternative perspectives, underrepresented voices, and artistic innovation within the depiction of the nation through gender in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema. Together, these chapters shed light on the alternative and non-mainstream perspectives presented by representative independent Sixth Generation directors, juxtaposed with the mainstream approach adopted by "directors within the system", providing a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between gender and national identity in

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[3] This status is evidenced by their success as winners in prestigious international film festivals.

Chinese cinema. Through this exploration, the thesis aims to offer a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the nation as depicted in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The literature review chapter is organised into five main sections to ensure a systematic analysis of the existing literature. It begins with a comprehensive exploration of Chinese national cinema (Section 2.1). The subsequent sections examine the evolution of Chinese national cinema in the twentieth century (Section 2.2) and its transformations during the twenty-first century (Section 2.3). Additionally, gended portrayals of the nation in twentieth-century Chinese cinema are examined (Section 2.4). The final section of the literature review chapter (Section 2.5) focuses on the development of the theoretical framework that underpins this research. Building upon the literature review in Sections 2.1-2.4, this section discusses the key theoretical concepts and models employed in analysing gendered portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema.

Through a critical review of the literature in these distinct areas, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Chinese national cinema including its historical context and defining features. It also explores the gendered portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema and the theoretical framework that guides this research. The insights gained from this literature review lay the foundation for the subsequent chapters, which will delve into the methodology, conduct film analysis, and present detailed findings. By synthesising these key aspects, this chapter establishes a solid groundwork for the ensuing discussions, facilitating a more nuanced exploration of gendered portrayals of the nation in the twenty-first century.

It provides a strong basis for understanding the intricate relationship between gender dynamics and the representation of the nation in contemporary Chinese cinema.

It is important to acknowledge the inherent risks, limitations, and possibilities when examining multiple cultures or viewing one culture through the lens of another, as noted by Lu (1997, p. 20), a scholar of Chinese origin with training in Western academia. While the interpretation of Chinese film texts by Western scholars or those trained in Western academic traditions can uncover nuanced layers of meaning that may elude critics within the originating Chinese culture, it is equally valuable to consider and compare their analysis with the insights provided by Chinese scholars. Embracing diverse perspectives and frameworks allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese cinema. Therefore, this literature review primarily focuses on English-language sources while also incorporating sources in the Chinese language.

2.1 The Concept of Chinese National Cinema

This section serves as an introduction to the concept of a Chinese national cinema, establishing its importance as a platform for examining the representation of the nation. It offers a comprehensive exploration of the key characteristics and debates associated with the notion of a Chinese national cinema, laying the groundwork for the subsequent sections of the literature review. By delving into the foundational understanding of national cinema, this section provides a solid framework for the analysis of the portrayal of the nation in Chinese cinema.

2.1.1 The Discourse on Chinese Cinema

World-wide scholars knew little about Chinese cinema in the 1980s (Gina Marchetti, 1999, p. 78; Paul G. Pickowicz, 2014, p. vii). Chinese film studies or Chinese cinema only started to attract welcome attention abroad in the mid-1980s, for instance, in the first edition of *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* Chris Berry (1985, p. i) rightly emphasised the urgent need for "a multidisciplinary approach" and anticipated that "Chinese cinema can be productively studied from a number of angles." In this pioneering work and its revised and much expanded edition published in 1991, the editor, Berry, saw the volume as "marking, indeed celebrating, the emergence both of Chinese cinema on the international film scene and of Chinese film studies within academia". In this volume, the scope of Chinese cinema encompasses the cinema of mainland China, with particular emphasis on films of the "Fifth Generation" directors in the mainland.

Since the 21st century, a series of impressive achievements in Chinese cinema had occurred. At the time when the world had just entered the new millennium, Yingjin Zhang (2002, pp. 16-18) ventured to track the exciting development of Chinese cinema through its "box office boom and academic investment". Such box office boom can be seen from the commercial success of two Chinese blockbusters from the early 2000s in the United States, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000) and *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002). According to Stanley Rosen (2010, p. 47), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* grossed 128.1 million U.S. dollars, surpassing director Lee's earlier successful art film, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) by over 18 times, while *Hero* grossed 53.7 million U.S. dollars. Very much like the red-hot Chinese economy, which

became the world's second largest when China's GDP leapfrogged Japan's in 2010 (Justin McCurry & Julia Kollewe, 2011), in 2012, China became the second largest film market by box office revenue in the world, overtaking Japan's importance as a key market for Hollywood (BBC 2013; Felix Richter 2013; Screendaily 2013). While China's box office has seen marked growth, equally impressive is the academic investment in Chinese film studies in the English-language academic circle since the twenty-first century, as prestigious universities in North America, Europe, Australia and Asia have been actively expanding course offerings related to Chinese film, whether in the disciplines of film/media studies or Chinese studies/East Asian studies (Zhang, 2013, p. 2). In 2007, the field of Chinese film studies even had its own dedicated referred periodical, *The Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, to inaugurate in the United Kingdom. Many universities and academic publishers have increased the number of publications in the forms of books, chapters in edited volumes, and special issues and articles in academic journals in Chinese film studies (Lee & Ward, 2011, p. 2; Zhang, 2012, p. 2). Also, panels on Chinese cinema regularly feature in annual meetings of major scholarly organisations (for example, the Association for Asian Studies, Society for Cinema and Media Studies), and innumerable workshops and conferences are held around the world every year.

Ten years down the road, Chinese cinema has continued its extraordinary expansion in many fronts. In terms of box office, in 2020, China[4] surpassed the box office of U.S./Canada for the first time as the world's largest film market by box office revenue,

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[4] Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are not included.

with revenue of 3 billion U.S. dollars (Daniel Loria 2021; Motion Picture Association 2021; PwC 2021), being the first country achieved this status (Patrick Brzeski 2020). This transition, long predicted by analysts (Deloitte 2017), was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and China's effective containment approach. And unlike the American film industry, which cannot rely only on the American market, the Chinese film industry excels in serving its domestic audiences (Leung Wing-Fai and Sangjoon Lee, 2019, p. 199). According to Endata[5] and Maoyan Pro[6], Chinese domestic films occupied all of the top ten box office hits in 2020, and eight out of the top ten (the rest two being Hollywood blockbusters) in 2021. In terms of academic investment since 2010, most English-language periodicals publish articles related to Chinese cinema regularly, including those published in the USA such as *Film Quarterly*, *Journal of Cinema and Media*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Screen* published in the UK (Zhang, 2019, p. 1). *The Journal of Chinese Cinemas* has also successfully run for over a decade since its inauguration in 2007. *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (2018), which represents the latest disciplinary consensus, takes the study of Chinese film as the first chapter[7] out of its forty chapters, changing the awkward situation that Chinese films were little known in the West before the 1990s. As noted by Zhang (2019, p. 1), in the fields of Asian studies and literary studies, the recruitment of professors in modern Chinese literature generally requires them to

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[5] Endata is a Chinese website that tracks box-office revenue in a systematic, algorithmic way. https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/BO/Year/index.html
[6] Maoyan pro is a Chinese website that tracks box-office revenue in a systematic, algorithmic way. https://piaofang.maoyan.com/rankings/year
[7] This first chapter is written by Yingjin Zhang, The Cinematic and the Real in Contemporary Chinese Cinema. In Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison, & Alex Marlow-Mann (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (pp. 23-32).

offer courses in Chinese film and visual culture, which also nurtures a new generation of scholars for future research on Chinese film studies.

The 2010s has also witnessed the maturity of the discipline of Chinese film studies, as exemplified by the emergence of scholars' books that provide a comprehensive overview of the subject. There were three such edited volumes published recently. In 2011, *The Chinese Cinema Book*, co-edited by Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward, containing twenty research essays within the scope of 218 pages, was published. In their volume, Lim and Ward (2011, p. 1) affirmed the maturity of Chinese film studies as a discipline, writing, "we can say with confidence that the state of Chinese cinema on the international film scene and of Chinese film studies within academia has moved from emergence towards establishment, and that Chinese films and Chinese film studies are increasingly located within or moving into the mainstream of international film culture and of anglophone academia." The volume initially outlines the development of Chinese cinema from the perspective of geographical trajectories, then narrates the film history of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in three eras, namely early cinema to 1949, 1949-80, and the new waves, and lastly discusses stars, directors and genres. In 2013, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, edited by Zhang, containing thirty essays within 684 pages, was published. Zhang's volume traces the film history of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan under the section of "History and Geography"; explores topics such as propaganda and censorship, media capital, stars, and film festivals under the section of "industry and institution"; discusses style, genre, documentary, women's cinema, and urban cinema under the section of "genre and representation", and analyses issues such as

masculinity, queer aesthetics, and the diasporic formation under the section of "issues and debates". In the same year of 2013, *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, co-edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-Yin-Chow, containing thirty-three essays within 709 pages, was published. In the section of "History", the influence of Hollywood and world cinema; in the section of "form", topics of opera films, art films, kung fu films, documentaries are discussed; and in the section of "structure", topics such as performance, music, woman, ethnographic representation, and remaking are studied. Scholars around the world, from America, Europe, Oceania and Asia, all contributed to the above three books. As noted by Lim and Ward (2011, p. 2), the theme of politics was the premise of a substantial proportion of scholarship on Chinese cinema in the 1990s, but it no longer exerts the same dominance in the new millennium as a more diverse range of concerns and interests usher in a more pluralistic outlook on Chinese cinema and Chinese film studies.

None of the above three comprehensive volumes in English aspires to be a general history of Chinese cinema (as in Zhang 2004), but historiography remains a central organising principle in all three. Compared with early films made before the founding of the PRC in 1949 and contemporary films made after the 1980s, there are few monographs in English scholarship researching films made between the two eras, that is, early PRC cinema. One of the exceptions is Zhuoyi Wang's *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979* published in 2014, which specifically analyses the direct impact of film policy changes on film creation during the Maoist revolutionary period.

According to Zhang (2019, p. 4-5), scholars in Chinese film studies prefer to study contemporary films made after the 1980s. Relevant research has focused on several key themes, such as globalisation, film soft power, and independent film. For example, from the perspectives of space and cultural geography, Zhang's *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalising China* published in 2010 examines the challenges faced by contemporary Chinese cinema at the end of the 20th century and its transregional adjustments in film art. David Leiwei Li's *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalisation on Speed* published in 2016 investigates the "homo economicus" (or economic man), the "homo sentimentalis" (or emotional man), and the "homo ethicus" (or ethical man) in the era of globalisation constructed by Chinese-language films by directors including Zhang Yimou, Zhou Xiaowen, Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Yang De-chang, and Fruit Chan. Paola Voci and Hui Luo's co-edited *Screening China's Soft Power* published in 2018 challenges the existing Western theories of soft power while analysing the overseas spread and acceptance of Chinese film and television works, and exploring alternative grassroot mode of soft power operation.

In recent years, several monographs on independent films all focus on examining the Sixth Generations of directors. Qi Wang's *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* published in 2014 emphasises the importance of narrating memory in the construction of subjectivity, and involves both narrative films and documentaries of the Sixth Generations (e.g., Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye) made between 1990 and 2010. Li Yang's *The Formation of Chinese Art Cinema: 1990-2003* published

in 2018 also focuses on the Sixth Generation and analyses the neo-realist and expressionist styles of the Sixth Generation. Two monographs by Xiaoping Wang were published in 2018, both of which examine the Sixth Generation. Wang's *Postsocialist Conditions: Ideas and History in China's "Independent Cinema", 1988-2008* offers a comprehensive survey of the hard effort made by the Sixth Generation whose films reflected on China's big social change in postsocialist China. *Ideology and Utopia in China's New Wave Cinema: Globalisation and Its Chinese Discontents* also pays attention to the transformation of ideology and the destruction and reconstruction of utopia by the Sixth Generation.

In the academic studies of Chinese cinema in China, film history has occupied a central place, due to the institutionalisation of film studies and the privileged position of film history in the country. A key moment is the publication of History of the Development of Chinese Film (*Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* 中国电影发展史) coauthored by Cheng Jihua 程季华, Li Shaobai 李少白 and Xing Zuwen 邢祖文 in the 1960s, who are also the founding fathers of academic Chinese film studies in China[8]. Yet the 1963 official film history constructs a binary narrative exclusively centred on perceived struggles between the Communist (or Left-wring) versus the Nationalist (or Right-wing). The book tends to downplay and sometimes degrade foreign influences and international elements in the historical evolution of Chinese cinema. In his postscript to Fu Hongxing's 2013 massive anthology on early Chinese cinema, Rao

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[8] Their disciples trained at the Academy of Arts of China (*Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan* 中国艺术研究院) in Beijing have turned out to be some of the most prominent and influential film scholars in China (Lu, 2021, p. 3).

Shuguang acknowledges the lack of new breakthroughs in a large number of recent film histories written in Chinese, which merely imitate or supplement the first official history written by Cheng, Li and Xing in 1963.

The study of stars or directors has become a continuous hot topic in English scholarship of Chinese film studies over the past decade or so. After Mary Farquhar and Zhang co-edited the volume *Chinese Film Stars* published in 2010 which offers an examination of ethnic Chinese film stars from the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, monographs discussing individual stars have appeared successively. For instance, Sabrina Qiong Yu's *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom* published in 2012, and Lin Feng's *Chow Yun-Fat and Territories of Hong Kong Stardom* published in 2017. Interestingly, studies of stars seem to favour action stars, one of the examples is Lisa Funnell's *Warrior Women: Gender, Race, and the Transnational Chinese Action Star* published in 2014. In Wing-Fai Leung and Andy Willis co-edited volume *East Asian Film Stars* published in 2014, Brigitte Lim, Donnie Yen and Chow Yun-fat are also action stars. It is also interesting to note that the study of stars has a preference for Hong Kong stars, especially Jackie Chan and Maggie Cheung, although Joan Chen and Zhang Ziyi are also covered in Leung and Willis's *East Asian Film Stars*. Jean Ma's *Sounding the Modern Women: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* can also be seen as a monograph dedicating to the study of stars, focusing on Shanghai films during the Republican era (1911-1949) and Hong Kong films.

Like the study of film stars, English scholarship in the study of directors also favour Hong Kong and Taiwan directors, especially the latter. After James Udden studied

Hou Hsiao-hsien in his monograph *No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien* published in 2009, Hou Hsiao-hsien was subsequently studied by Christopher Lupke in his *The Sinophone Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien: Culture, Style, Voice, and Motion* published in 2016. Song Hwee Lim analyses Tsai Ming-liang from a new angle by examining cinematic slowness through Tsai's films in his monograph *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* published in 2014. Apart from Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wong Kar-wai are also studied in Jean Ma's *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* published in 2010 by focusing on the highly stylised and nonlinear configurations of time in these directors' films. *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance* by Gary Bettinson published in 2014 analyses Wong's unique filmmaking techniques. Several essays in Kuei-fen Chiu, Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, and Gary D. Rawnsley's co-edited volume *Taiwan Cinema: International Reception and Social Change* published in 2017 focuses on Wei Te-sheng and his film *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale.* Although the research trend in the study of directors is on Taiwan and Hong Kong directors, there are several exceptions studying mainland directors. One exception is Rui Zhang's *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialisation and Censorship in Chinese Cinema after 1989* published in 2008, which approaches Feng as a special kind of director whose works must be interpreted with attention to the specific social and political context of contemporary China. Zhang Yimou was later studied by Wendy Larson in her *Zhang Yimou: Globalisation and the Subject of Culture* published in 2017, which challenges the popular critiques of Zhang Yimou and studies Zhang's unique cultural sensibility and visual aesthetics. English scholarship in the study of mainland directors has a preference for Jia Zhangke, with several monographs providing in-depth analysis of

Jia and his films, Michael Berry's *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy* published in 2009 and *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* published in 2022, Cecília Mello's *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film* published in 2019, Xiaoping Wang's *China in the Age of Global Capitalism: Jia Zhangke's Filmic World* published in 2020.

A mapping of the above select English publications in Chinese cinema in the last decade helps one outline the current research focus of Chinese film studies in the English-language academic circle, including the study of the Sixth Generation, or the post-1990s period of Chinese film history (1990-2010), and studies of stars/directors. Still, there is a relative paucity of academic attention in genre studies.

2.1.2 National and Transnational Cinema Paradigms

In the current Chinese film scholarship in English, "Chinese cinema", "Chinese cinemas", "Chinese-language cinema", and "Sinophone cinema" are the four most used terms, each working toward an explicit aim of deterritorialisation or reterritorialisation. First, Chinese film studies or Chinese cinema started to attract increasing attention abroad in the mid-1980s, for instance, in the first edition of *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* Chris Berry (1985: i) rightly emphasised the urgent need for "a multidisciplinary approach" and anticipated that "Chinese cinema can be productively studied from a number of angles." In this pioneering work and its revised and much expanded edition (Berry 1991), the scope of Chinese cinema encompasses the cinema of mainland China, with particular emphasis on films of the "Fifth Generation" directors in the mainland.

While keeping a similar multidisciplinary emphasis, in *New Chinese Cinemas* (1994) Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchak, and Esther Yau extended the parameters of Chinese cinema to include Hong Kong and Taiwan and justified this extension by pluralising Chinese cinemas. Retaining the plural form of designation, Sheldon Lu in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (1997) foregrounded transnationalism as a new framework that goes beyond national cinemas (*guozu dianying*)[9]. Instead of using the concept of the "national" implied in "Chinese cinema", Lu used "transnational" to transcend geopolitical boundaries and cover Chinese films in all regions, including the mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora.

Here, the history of the concepts of Chinese-language cinema and transnational Chinese cinema and some new issues that have arisen surrounding this discourse will be briefly rehearsed. As observed by Lu (2021, p. 15), the genealogy of the term *huayu dianying* (Chinese-language film) appeared briefly in mainland Chinese newspapers in as early as the 1930s. But the phrase was first elaborated and used by the Singaporean critic and filmmaker Yi Shui 易水 in a newspaper column published in Singapore in the 1950s. Most film scholars were only aware of the term when it was reactivated in the 1990s when filmmakers, critics, scholars, and the film industries from the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan began to interact and cooperate across the Taiwan Strait.

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[9] Chinese film studies took the lead in transnational film studies in the academia at the time, the mid- and late 1990s (Lu, 2021, p. 29).

The term of Chinese-language film was accepted and adopted by people from different geopolitical backgrounds in the broad Chinese-speaking communities. The Chinese term "*huayu dianying*" gained more traction in Chinese film scholarship in Chinese, along with the lifting of the ban for the cross-strait exchanges between the mainland and Taiwan and the return of Hong Kong to China's sovereignty in the 1990s (Xu Delin 2009: 37; Chen Xihe 2012: 469). The English phrase "Chinese-language film" gained currency in the academia outside of China with the publication of Lu and Yeh's anthology *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* in 2005.

In 2005, Sheldon Lu, together with Emilie Yeh, chose "Chinese-language" rather than simply "Chinese" to define film in *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*. Such an emphasis on the language can be seen as an effort to loosen Chinese cinema's grounding in the territorial nation-state and include all parts of the Chinese-speaking world, as Lu and Yeh (2005: 1) stated that the concept of "Chinese-language film" extends to include films produced by Chinese diasporas "outside the sovereign Chinese nation-state – for example, Hollywood, Singapore, or elsewhere". Moreover, "Chinese-language film" also foregrounds the heterogeneity internal to a territory such as China by tracking dialects and other accented practices (Lu, 2007, pp. 150-63; Lu, 2021, p. 14). In other words, the concept highlights the rich variety of languages and dialects in Chinese cinema.

The diversity of this "Chinese-language" extends beyond *hanyu* and its dialects, namely the language and dialects of the Han nationality, and include various other languages such as the languages of China's ethnic minorities such as Tibetan,

Mongolian and Uighur. Yet the narrow linguistic emphasis of "Chinese-language film" may not be sufficient to capture the diversity of geopolitics, regionalism, ethnicity, and polylocality in Chinese cinema as Zhang (2010: 20) acutely points out. In reality, because of the Chinese government's continued promotion of the use of Mandarin nationwide since 1986 (Cong Lin and Liz Jackson 2021: 343), there have not been many films made entirely in regional dialects. Yet compared with their Western fellows, Chinese colleagues who put their emphasis on the language, mainland scholars have a different motivation to use "*huayu dianying*". The term is considered beneficial to China's united front work with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora (Chen Xuguang 2015: 75).

The concept of "transnational" has been applied quite often and is evident in many scholars' book-length studies on Chinese-language cinema. For example, Zhang's *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema Studies* (2002), Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu's *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (2005), Gina Marchetti's *From Tian'anmen to Time Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screen, 1989-1997* (2006), Berry and Farquhar's *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), Poshek Fu's *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema* (2008), Kenneth Chan's *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (2009), Jeremy E. Taylor's Rethinking Transnational Chinese Cinemas: The Amoy-Dialect Film Industry in Cold War Asia (2011), Lingzhen Wang's *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (2011), Xuelei Huang's *Shanghai*

Filmmaking: Crossing Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922-1938 (2014), Brian

Bergen-Aurand, Mary Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam's *Transnational Chinese Cinema:*

Corporality, Desire, and the Ethics of Failure (2014), Liao Jinfeng's *Brodsky and*

Companies: A Transnational History of Chinese Early Cinema (2015), Yongchun Fu's

The Early Transnational Chinese Cinema Industry (2019), and Daisy Yan Du's

Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s-1970s

(2019).

The paradigm of transnational Chinese cinema proposed by Lu in the first place has

been further refashioned and fine-turned in various ways in subsequent studies. For

instance, one common attempt is to consolidate the transnational perspective on

Chinese film history and historiography (see Huang, 2014; Liao, 2015; Zhang, 2016;

Lu, 2021, p. 3-9). In his study of the shifting spaces of contemporary Chinese cinema

in the age of globalisation, Zhang (2010) proposes that border-crossing can be a

matter of "polylocality". Also, international co-production remains a key component

of transnational Chinese cinema. In her study of Sino-French co-productions, or what

she calls the "Sino-French cinemas", Michelle E. Bloom (2016) identifies several

modes of operation: "métissage, intertextuality, the makeover, translation, and

imitation." In the words of Bloom (2016, p. 190), this set of concepts "comprise a

framework for consideration of fluid, border-crossing cinema, of which the Sino-

French provides a paradigmatic case". These new inquiries in the direction of

transnational Chinese cinema have helped one understand that border-crossing

beyond the nation-state, i.e. China, could happen at the local, subnational, regional,

and global levels.

Ten years later, this plural designation of "Chinese cinemas" is also captured in the title of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*[10]. However, one year after its inception, the editors of a special issue of the journal Berry and Laikwan Pang (2008) question precisely the necessity of keeping the plural form in an era of transnationalism of the Chinese film market when the mainland, Hong Kong[11], and Taiwan are increasingly involved in the transborder co-productions of Chinese blockbuster films. Neither transnational Chinese film studies nor Chinese-language film studies recognise and work around the limits of grounding taxonomy such as Chinese cinema on the singularity and integrity of the nation form. Put simply, neither discourse is predicated upon the nation-state as an absolute category of analysis.

Albeit equally emphasizing the language, Shu-mei Shih (2007; 2011) proposes the concept of the "Sinophone". In Shih's (2007: 4) conceptualisation, "Sinophone" refers to "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness", the former exemplified by Taiwan and the latter by Hong Kong. While Shih's attempt to map out a vast – albeit scattered and fragmented – space of cultural productions in the Chinese language or by the ethnic Chinese around the world (like herself who are an ethnic Chinese born in South Korea) bespeaks the complicated geopolitics of Chinese cinema from its early years to the present day, her re-territorialised method of positioning the Sinophone exclusive of mainland

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[10] *Journal of Chinese Cinema* is a major refereed academic publication devoted to the study of Chinese film first published in the UK in 2007.

[11] Eighty per cent of films made in Hong Kong each year are Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions (Zhang 2012: 31).

China in a counterhegemonic fashion fails to recognise an even longer historical process of heterogenesis and localising of continental Chinese culture within mainland China that has lasted a few millennia (Zhang 2010: 20-1). While Lu (2007: 161-3) expounds on the ideas of "Chinese-language cinema" and "Sinophone cinema", he refutes Shih's exclusive use of the "Sinophone" as "Sinophone" simply cannot exclude mainland China. Its translation into Chinese is *huayu yuxi* (Shih 2010: 29), which is still equivalent to the Chinese language. But unlike the widely accepted concept of "Chinese-language film" in Chinese scholarship, Shih's "Sinophone" remains contentious (see Xiang Yu 2016; Sum Lim Teo 2017; Zhang Chonggang 2018).

"Chinese-language cinema" and "Sinophone cinema" seem to be equivalent terms privileging language. Yet neither of these terms is adequate for referencing Chinese films which intentionally deploy extensive English dialogue in a mixture of "global mélange" and employ a multinational cast in order to expand international viewership beyond an established base of Chinese-language or Sinophone audiences (Zhang 2010: 20). Such inadequacy also applies to Chinese-Foreign co-productions. Precious due to its open horizons linguistically, "Chinese cinema" is preferred in this thesis to the above-mentioned two terms, as it covers Chinese-language or Sinophone films as well as films with mixed Chinese and other foreign languages.

Furthermore, the history of Chinese national cinema has been an intense affair of international cross-fertilisation. Despite film censorship and control, the transnational configuration of film culture is also true of Chinese national cinema. According to Lu (2021, p. 8), the translation, circulation, and screening of foreign films

provide examples of the transnational forces at work in the formation of a Chinese brand of film art. From 1949-1994, mainland China translated, dubbed, and screened more than one thousand films from the Soviet Bloc, Western Europe, and other countries, and these films make up one-third to one-half of the total amount of film screening and exhibition time for the audience in that period (Weijia Du, 2018, p. 285).

So far, as examined in the sections above, there are predominantly two approaches to Chinese film studies, namely a territorial nation-state approach, asserting the indigenous legacy in Chinese film and a deterritorialised approach intending to bypass the political and cultural division among the Chinese-speaking communities such as the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. However, the imagining of the Chinese nation in the context of this thesis is highlighted in the framework of Chinese national cinema.

2.1.3 A Chinese National Cinema

The above-mentioned variation in the naming of the object of this study reveals that the connotations of these terms may diverge as well as overlap and "Chinese cinema" has unstable borders; it may simultaneously refer to mainland cinema of the PRC (1949-present), Taiwan cinema, Hong Kong cinema (both prior to and after Hong Kong's handover to China's sovereignty in 1997), and even Chinese diaspora cinema (e.g., films by directors who are based overseas like Ang Lee).

The transnational character of Chinese cinema is more reflected in its mode of production (across the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the global diaspora), circulation of cast and crew (e.g., directors and stars), but is less reflected in its narrative and aesthetic strategies with reference to national or cultural tradition or community. Chinese cinema, therefore, is understood as a collective of distinct and novel takes on a national cinema identity and contains indigenous traits and characteristics that may be defined as 'national'.

The geographic range of the films in this thesis comes from the PRC, which includes the mainland, and to a lesser extent Hong Kong. Throughout this thesis, "Chinese cinema" is used to be rendered as *Zhongguo dianying* (中国电影, "cinema of the Chinese nation"), not *huayu dianying* (华语电影, "cinema of the Chinese language"). Chinese cinema studies also belong to the larger terrain of Chinese-language cinema studies.

In this thesis, the definition of "Chinese cinema" typically refers to the cinema of the PRC after Hong Kong's handover to the mainland in 1997. In other words, Chinese cinema here includes the cinemas of the mainland and Hong Kong but excludes the cinemas of Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. Chinese cinema also includes the idea of a national cinema industry that is different from any other national cinemas in world cinema such as British cinema or American cinema, which concerns film production within or with (if co-productions) a particular territory, i.e., the PRC, and the policies that affect it, censorship, and includes participation in the production of a national culture.

This thesis puts the problem of what a distinct national identity of the PRC is, how it is constructed, maintained, and/or transformed, at its centre. Within this larger framework, it's particular focus is on the role of gender in relation to the idea of the nation in a Chinese national cinema. This argues for the abandonment of the larger and more popular transnational cinemas approach and the adoption of the older national cinemas model.

When tracing the history of the imagining of the nation throughout twentieth-century mainland Chinese cinema, one must also confront a kind of messiness unique to Chinese national cinema, namely that the Chinese language does not possess an exact equivalent to the English word "nation". According to Zhang (2002, pp. 152-7) and Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 21), a nation can be translated as both *minzu* (nation-people or nation as a people) or *guojia* (nation-state) in Chinese. Thus, exploring the image of the nation in mainland Chinese cinema means more than the image of the nation-state, for it also implies the image of, by or for the nation-people. The construction of the nation on screen in China has consequently become an ongoing project of contestation whereby the state, via mainstream films, and the people, via nonmainstream films, compete for the right to speak in the name of the nation.

It is also worth noting that China and in extension Chinese cinma, is not necessarily a monolithic, oppressive geopolitical and national entity, or an intrinsically conservative concept, as it is sometimes perceived in Western imagination. One of

the biggest advantages of Chinese cinema being a counterhegemonic-against-the-state-project lies in the fact that films are fictional representations, as nearly every film starts or end with some variation of the same and typical disclaimer: "This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, or actual even, is purely coincidental." Chinese cinema thus assumes a more flexible position regarding national identity. There is no one monolithic representation of nation. The multiple regions and ethnicities represented in varieties of Chinese cinema testify to the different, alternative, and heterogeneous formations of national identities.

Film production aside, film censorship, studio ownership, government intervention, and public opinion are all important terrains in the establishment of a Chinese national cinema and a symbolic China. Like other national cinemas, Chinese cinema is the "mobiliser of the nation's myths and the myth of the nation" (Susan Hayward, 1993, p. 14). Through the creation of a coherent set of images and meanings, the narration of a collective history, and the enactment of the dramas and lives of ordinary people, cinema gives a symbolic unity to what would otherwise appear to be a quite heterogeneous entity: "modern China (Hayward 1993).

For recent parallel studies of other national and regional cinemas, see Andrew Higson, Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Sumita Chakravarty, National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema (Austin: Univer- sity of Texas Press, 1993); Manthia Diawara, African Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, Black African Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Pierre Sorlin, Italian

National Cinema, 1896–1996 (London: Routledge, 1996); Pierre Sorlin, European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939– 1990 (London: Routledge, 1991); Tom O'Regan, Australian National Cinema (London: Routledge, 1996); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multicultural-ism and the Media (London: Routledge, 1994).

2.2 The Evolution of Chinese National Cinema in the Twentieth Century

This section delves into a comprehensive historical analysis of Chinese national cinema in the twentieth century. It examines the various generations of directors and their contributions in depicting the nation on screen. Moreover, it reveals the crucial role of gender imagery in shaping the construction of the nation across different historical periods. By exploring the cinematic trends and thematic concerns of each generation, this section provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of Chinese national cinema and its depiction of the nation throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, it illuminates the historical backdrop that influences the gendered portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema, thereby enhancing one's understanding of its development and significance.

The cinema of China as a national cinema needs to be considered within the context of the history of Chinese film in the mainland and the evolution of China's national film industry. The development of Chinese national cinema is isomorphic with the efforts and plight to recast China as a modern nation. In other words, Chinese national cinema has grown to be a critical apparatus in the nation-building process.

The effort to build the image of the nation through cinema can be observed at both the cinematic text and film aesthetics level and the film industry level.

The stylistic mannerism of the cinematic text film aesthetics is significant in imagining China as a community, for as Anderson (1991, p. 6) stated, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." Andrew Higson (1989, p. 37) wrote that national cinema had performed a dual function: "a hegemonising, mythologising process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings. At the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilized as a strategy of cultural (economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's inter-national domination." This double process of hegemony and resistance concerning the domestic audience and international film culture has also defined the history and function of Chinese national cinema.

The history of Chinese film has evolved for over a hundred and fifteen years[12] - from the earliest silent films to the latest box office blockbusters. As China has had a

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[12] China was among the few countries exposed to a cinematic culture very early. Cinema was introduced in Shanghai in 1896, a year after Louis Lumière invented cinematography in France, and the first Chinese film, *Dingjun Mountain* 定军山, was made in 1905 (Lu, 1997, p. 4; Zhang, 2004, p. 34; Berry & Farquahr, 2006, pp. 223-4; James Wicks, 2009, p. 396; Tan Ye & Yun Zhu, 2012, p. 2). This first Chinese film was an opera film (*xiqvpian*) - an act of the classic Peking Opera of the same name was filmed for the screen, portraying famous Peking Opera performer Tan Xinpei 谭鑫培 (Lu, 1997, p. 4; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 51; Ye & Zhu, 2012, pp. 2-3). *Dingjun Mountain* set the long tradition of using Chinese opera as an attraction in Chinese cinema. Specific examples include *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (1931), *Hua Mulan* (1956), *Two Stage Sisters* (1964), *Woman, Demon, Human* (1987), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). From here, one can see that Chinese films have possessed distinct national characteristics since their earliest stages of development.

tumultuous history throughout the first half of the twentieth century, that tumult is also clearly seen in its film history. For this reason, filmmaking in China has been multipolar from the beginning to the present day, producing three major production centres and film industries: the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Thus, the history of Chinese film has three distinct historical threads of development, namely the cinema of the mainland, the cinema of Hong Kong, and the cinema of Taiwan (Browne et al., 1994; Lu, 1997; Zhang, 2004; Berry & Farquhar, 2006; Li Shaobai 李少白, 2006; Hu Xingliang 胡星亮, 2014; Yin Hong 尹鸿 & Ling Yan 凌燕, 2015; Ding Yaping 丁亚平, 2015). As this thesis foregrounds the subject position of Chinese filmmakers and the emergence, consolidation, and growth of Chinese national cinema, which signifies a Chinese effort to develop an indigenous cinema distinct from the Western model, it is fruitful to track the development of the film history of the mainland, which became the PRC as a nation-state in 1949.

2.2.1 Periodisation of Film History Based on Political Movements

In Chinese film scholarship, both inside and outside China, dividing the history of mainland Chinese cinema is either based on political movements (Zhang, 2004; Li, 2006; Hu, 2014; Yin & Ling, 2015; Ding, 2015; Yu Ji 虞吉, 2017) or the generations of Chinese filmmakers (Wicks, 2009; Rebecca E. Harvey, 2019). Take Hu's *Screening China: A One Hundred Year's History of Chinese Movie Art* (2014), for example; the history of mainland Chinese cinema is divided according to political movements into

four phases, namely "Difficult Beginnings (1905[13]-1930)", "The Golden Ages (1930-1949)", "The Communist Era and the Cultural Revolution (1949-1979)", "New Wave after China's Economic Reform and Opening-up (1979-2005)". Hu's division of mainland Chinese film history stops in 2005 as he traces a hundred years of Chinese film history since 1905. Still, his scheme of periodisation echoes other scholars in Chinese academia, such as Li (2006), Yin and Ling (2015), Ding (2015), and Yu (2017). These scholars' divisions were more detailed compared with Hu's. For example, while Hu categorises the years from 1979 to 2005 as a whole as New Wave after Chinese Economic Reform, Li divided the years from 1979 to 2006 (the year of Li's publication) into two separate phases, namely "New Wave after Chinese Economic Reform (1979-1992)", and "Period of Marketisation (1992-2006)".

The above Chinese scholars' periodisation scheme also echoes scholars in Western academia, such as Zhang (2004), Yan Ye and Yun Zhu (2012). Take the former's *Chinese National Cinema*, for example, he divided the history of mainland Chinese cinema into five phases, namely "early cinema (1896-1929)", "'golden age' (1930-1949)", "socialist cinema of the PRC (1949-1978)", "New Wave (1979-1989)", and "post-socialist cinema in the age of globalisation (1990-2002)".

No matter how general or detailed the above scholars divide mainland Chinese film history, one can see that the end of each phase marks the beginning of a new historical political movement or trend. The year after 1930 (i.e. 1931) marked the

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[13] Although 1896 was the year of the beginning of film consumption and distribution in China, it is conceivable that an account of Chinese national cinema would start with the first Chinese film production in 1905.

Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and China entered a historical stage of resisting Japanese aggression and national salvation. The year 1949 was the establishment of the PRC. 1966-1976 was the period of China's Cultural Revolution, during which the film industry was severely restricted. The year 1978 marked the beginning of China's economic reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放)[14]. Later in 1992, originating in the economic reforms, the socialist market economy[15] was initiated. And only after the employment of this market-oriented economy, China's film industry could enter the marketisation and commercialisation phase.

2.2.2 Periodisation of Film History Based on Generations of Directors

Apart from dividing the history of mainland Chinese cinema by political movements, another common approach employed by scholars is to divide mainland Chinese film history by generations of directors into six generations (Wicks, 2009, p. 396; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 1; Zhang Jing 张晶, 2017, pp. 10-2; Harvey, 2019, p. 1). As Ye and Zhu (2012, p. 1) and Zhang Jing (2017, p. 11) note, this division was not made until the end of the 1990s, when the later so-called Fifth Generation[16] of Chinese filmmakers received both international and domestic reputation and recognition. In other words,

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[14] China's economic reform and opening-up, also known domestically as Reform and Opening-up, is the program of economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. This policy also positively impacted China's national film industry, including a relaxation of censorship and a greater openness to cultural exchange with foreign countries. Especially after Deng's Southern Tour in 1992, the newly energised economic reform program propelled a thorough structural overhaul of the film industry in the 1990s toward marketisation (Ying Zhu & Seio Nakajima, 2010, pp. 27-8).

[15] The term "socialist market economy" was introduced by Jiang Zemin 江泽民 during the 14th National Congress of the CPC in 1992 to describe the goal of China's economic reforms (Ezra Vogel, 2011, p. 682).

[16] The Fifth Generation refers chronologically and aesthetically to young filmmakers who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982 and moved Chinese cinema in a direction never explored (Lu, 1997, p. 7; Zhang Jing, 2017, p. 11).

the generation division in mainland Chinese cinema started directly from the Fifth Generation. All the previous four generations were retrospectively categorised after naming the Fifth Generation. Each generation reflected film technology, government politics and economics, the society and culture of its time, and the aesthetics of the filmmakers. In other words, categorising mainland Chinese film history by generations of directors allows one to consider how changing film technology, political and economic climate, and society and culture affected the cinema arts, including how each generation of directors construct their visions of the nation through their distinctive cinema arts.

In addition, the Sinification of Western technology and form of art and the development of a native art form remain essential tasks for Chinese filmmakers. After being introduced to China, Chinese filmmakers must find a solution to how a Western art form has unique "national", "Chinese" characteristics. As Douglas Wilkerson (1994, p. 40) puts it, "Can Western modes of cinematography, linked to the very mechanism of the camera through the dominant postmedieval perspective system, be replaced by modes which are linked to traditional Chinese aesthetics?" In this regard, Chinese filmmakers find ways to achieve a synthesis of film as an imported Western medium and indigenous Chinese artistic conventions (traditional Chinese painting, literature, poetry, storytelling, local operas, and folk art). Tracing each generation of Chinese filmmakers can uncover the enormity and complexity of such a process.

It must be remembered that the identifying label of each generation of directors refers to more than a chronological convenience in grouping directors in mainland Chinese cinema. One generation is distinguished from another primarily according to a shared, collective set of historical memory and national experiences. It indicates the creation of a newer cinema and significant shifts in cinematic practice, characterised by an aesthetic culture and innovation in the film language system distinct from the films of the previous generation or past.

The stylistic mannerism of each generation of filmmakers is significant in the imagining and imaging of China as a community, for as Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 6) stated, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." The explorations in the manner of narration and art of cinematography in the cinema of each generation have contributed to the creation of Chinese cinema tradition and the innovation of a new film language in world cinema. The core of the "national" in Chinese national cinema lies in the retrospective recognition of various cinematic conventions that cite and recite Chinese national identities. These conventions play a significant role in disseminating images and narratives about the nation, contributing to the construction of national imagery and identity. Chinese national cinema explores central themes such as modernity, nation-building, nationalism, anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and the emergence of new gender identities (Lu, 1997, p. 4). These themes are crucial in shaping the discourse and representation of the nation within the realm of Chinese cinema.

2.2.3 First and Second Generation: The Emergence of Chinese National Cinema

As in most of the world, the cinema arrived in China in 1896 as a foreign thing. When the Chinese began making films starting from 1905, they were conscious that the production companies were foreign-owned and foreign films dominated the Chinese market. At the same time, they increasingly saw the cinema as essential for promoting patriotic resistance to Western and especially Japanese domination of China. Representatives of the First Generation filmmakers[17], such as Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋 and Zhang Shichuan 张石川, were the pioneers of developing the first stages of the Chinese national film industry.

According to Zhang (2004, p. 25), Zheng Zhengqiu was known as "the father of Chinese cinema". Along with Zhang Shichuan, they directed the first Chinese feature film in 1913, *The Difficult Couple*[18] (*Nanfu nanqi* 难夫难妻) (Lu, 1997, p. 4). Zheng Zhengqiu later wrote the screenplay for now reputedly the earliest extant film in China, *Laborer's Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing* 劳工之爱情, 1922), which was directed by Zhang Shichuan (Zhang, 2004, p. 25). Zhang later established the first Chinese-owned film production company in China called "Mingxing" (Star) Motion Picture[19] in 1916 (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 224). In 1923, Mingxing film studio premiered a remarkably successful family melodrama that simulates the Chinese film industry entitled *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (*Guer jiuzu ji* 孤儿救祖记, 1923), directed by Zhang and written by Zheng. While the cinema of the First Generation (1905-1929)

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[17] The First Generation filmmakers' education in cinema was a combination of apprenticeship in the studio and observation of Hollywood products, where film training was minimal (Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 3).

[18] Yet an American studio in China produced this short family drama.

[19] Mingxing film studio was later infiltrated or influenced by left-wing filmmakers (Lu, 1997, p. 20).

covered the silent film era, Zhang later directed the first Chinese sound film, *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (*Genv hongmudan* 歌女红牡丹, 1931), indicating a new phase in early Chinese cinema (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 225; Wicks, 2009, p. 396; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 3).

Apart from making comedies (e.g., *Labourer's Love*) and family dramas (e.g., *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*), the First Generation filmmakers also began to draw inspiration more consciously from Chinese own cultural tradition. Therefore other popular genres that dominated the Shanghai-based film industry in the 1920s included martial arts films and god-spirit martial arts films (Cui, 2003, p. 8; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 58; Wicks, 2009, p. 396; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 3). In 1928, Mingxing film studio's martial arts film, *Burning of Red Lotus Temple* (*Huoshao hongliansi* 火烧红莲寺), again directed by Zhang and written by Zheng, was released. The film, glorifying martial arts, became a big box office success, so successful that 18 sequels were made in the next few years. Another film company called "Tianyi" (First), founded by the Shao (Shaw) brothers, was also famous for producing martial arts films in the 1920s. While the realist[20] mode of film practice was often officially prescribed as the mode of nationhood in mainland Chinese cinema (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 74), it is not surprising that martial arts films and god-spirit martial arts films were banned by the then state[21] in 1931 as feudal and unrealistic (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 58; Wicks, 2009, p. 397).

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[20] Theoretically a loose concept, realism in Chinese cinema can be further differentiated into different variations, such as social realism of the 1930s, critical realism of the late 1940s, and socialist realism of the 1950s and 1960s (Zhang, 2004, p. 105; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 80).

[21] Shanghai in the 1930s was under the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalist government.

The cinema of the Second Generation (1930-1949) started with the appearance of sound films[22], covered the War of Resistance against Japan, and ended shortly after the establishment of the PRC. Both what some scholars see as two "golden ages"[23] of Chinese cinema occurred in the cinema of the Second Generation. Influenced by social movements, such as the May Fourth Movement[24] that called for a modern nation, and foreign invasion, such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria that challenged China's national sovereignty, the 1930s (aka the first "golden age") saw the transformation of early Chinese cinema (aka the cinema of the First Generation directors) into a socionational and nation-building practice, in which the concept of the nationhood became a subject central to film production (Lu, 1997, p. 4; Cui, 2003, p. 9). As Zhang (1997, p. 86) pointed out, nationalism was articulated more explicitly in "leftist films"[25] (*zuoyi dianying*) of the 1930s, marking the juncture where Chinese

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[22] Technologically, Chinese films of the early 1930 were in the midst of the transition from silent to sound cinema (Wicks, 2009, p. 397).

[23] In general, the prewar 1930s, or more precisely, the period between 1933 and 1937, was considered the first "golden age" of Chinese cinema (Teo, 1997, p. x; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 3), and the postwar 1940s (1946-1949) was considered the second "golden age" (Lee, 1991, p. 6; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, as noted by Zhang (2004, p. 298), an alternative categorisation is to consider the 1930s and 1940s together as a "golden age" period in which creativity was interrupted by the war.

[24] The May Fourth Movement was a Chinese anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist, cultural, and political movement which grew out of student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, to protest the then Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles and failure to preserve the sovereign right, which gives Shandong Province to Japan. The May Fourth demonstrations sparked nationwide protests, spurred an upsurge in Chinese nationalism, and heralded a modern, cultural renaissance based on the rejection of local "feudal" traditions and the appropriation of Western culture into Chinese culture (Vera Schwarcz, 1986; Gina Marchetti, 1997, p. 64; Cui, 2003, p. xi; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 224). The movement itself was short-lived, but many of its student members later became CCP cadres, including two CCP founders, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Li Dazhao 李大钊. This is where Schwarcz sees the movement's long-term effect.

[25] "Leftist films" refer to a body of films of the 1930s and 1940s directed mainly by the "progressive" filmmakers at the time but based on scripts by underground Communist activists, such as Tian Han 田汉 and Xia Yan 夏衍 (Zhang, 1997, p. 99; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 225; Wicks, 2009, p. 397). Xia Yan wrote the screenplay for the first leftist film, *Wild Torrents* (*Kuangliu* 狂流, 1933), which depicts class conflicts between peasants and landlords in 1932 when flooding along the Yangtze River swallowed southern China. The film established Xia Yan's reputation as a leading leftist screenwriter (Cui, 2003, p. 249).

cinema gradually turned from earlier popular genres of "soft-core" entertainment films (romance, martial arts, immortals/ghosts, costume drama) to "hard" social films reenacting in graphic details the existential crises in modern China.

Distinct features of classic films of the period include their thematic pursuit of nationalism (Zhang, 1997, p. 86) and engendering nationhood through a gendered discourse (Cui, 2003, p. 251), and their realist mode of film practice, proffering views of modernity and nationhood during national peril (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 11). "Chinese national cinema [of the Second Generation]," Lu (1997, p. 5) wrote, "has grown to be a key apparatus in the nation-building process. It is an indispensable cultural link in the modern Chinese nation-state, an essential political component of Chinese nationalism." Indeed, in 1930, Lianhua[26] (United China) film company was launched with a patriotic slogan calling for the "revival of Chinese national cinema" (*fuxing guopian*) (Li Suyuan 俪苏元 & Hu Jubin 胡菊彬, 1996, p. 198; Laikwan Pang, 2002, pp. 24-5).

The 1930s also saw the advent of what some scholars see as a "left-wing/leftist cinema movement"[27], in which many leftist films were made (Berry, 1989; Chen Bo 陈播, 1992; Pang, 2002; Zhang, 2004, p. 6; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 119). Leftist

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[26] Lianhua film company joined Mingxing and Tianyi as the three major domestic studios dominating the market during the prewar phase.

[27] The ideological fissure between the population and the government of the day (i.e., Kuomintang government) for the KMT policy of non-provocation seeking peace with Japan opened the door for a leftist cinema movement (1932-1937), affiliated with the CCP (Zhang, 2004, p. 58). Lianhua became one of the targets of infiltration by the leftist cinema movement, producing Chinese cinema's first female stars, such as Ruan Lingyu, who is most celebrated for her portrayals of various suffering women in leftist films (Lu, 1997, p. 20; Pang, 2002, pp. 24-5; Zhang, 2004, p. 75; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 119; Wicks, 2009, p. 397). Mingxing and Lianhua leaned left, while Tianyi retained a politically neutral position (Lu, 1997, p. 20; Cui, 2003, pp. 249-51; Zhang, 2004, pp. 76-9).

films displayed several distinct thematic features, for example, the danger of imperialist invasion and the urgency of national salvation, exposure of class exploitation and bourgeois lifestyle, depiction of the working-class or lower-class people and their tragic life, and encouragement to fight and to survive rather than to compromise with realities (Zhang, 2004, p. 79; Hu, 2014, p. 121). One can see that the leftist filmmakers seized upon the political and revolutionary potential of this imported Western film technology. They attempted to make it into a mass art of conscious social criticism.

The first golden age nourished representative Second Generation directors such as Wu Yonggang 吴永刚, Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, and Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之. Compared with the First Generation directors who made more "vulgar" and "escapist" commercial films in the 1920s (Zhang, 2002, pp. 27-8), these Second Generation directors made more realist[28] and progressive, if not necessarily leftist films in the 1930s. Major leftist films of the period include *The Goddess* (*Shennv* 神女, 1934), directed by Wu Yonggang, *Big Road* (Dalu 大路, 1934), *The New Woman* (*Xinnvxing* 新女性, 1935), directed by Cai Chusheng, *Children of Troubled Times* (*Fengyun ernv* 风云儿女, 1935)[29] starring Yuan Muzhi, and *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi* 马路天使, 1937) directed by Yuan. These leftist films expressed profound concern with social

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[28] For the Second Generation, as noted by Zhang (2004, p. 105), there were three ways to intensify realism: the first way was to include documentary footage of disasters and wars, as in *Big Road* and *Spring River Flows East*, the second method was to use a cast whose real-life experience approximated that of the main characters, and the third way was to cast non-professional actors.
[29] The theme song of the film, "The March of the Volunteers", was later adopted as the national anthem of the PRC (Paul G. Pickowicz, 1991, 65; Zhang, 2004, pp. 68-9).

injustice and the sufferings of ordinary Chinese (as in *The Goddess*, *The New Woman*, *Street Angel*) and the Japanese invasion (as in *Big Road*, *Children of Troubled Times*).

What is particularly striking is that the leftist films focused heavily on the plight of Chinese women. As in modern Chinese literature since the May Fourth Movement, where women have been portrayed as victims of feudal oppression, and their bodies have been the bearers of suffering and cruelty in a dehumanising society (Lu, 1997, p. 21), womanhood was portrayed as a trope for the nation, a national allegory in Chinese cinema of the period. Specifically, Chinese women on screen at that time were taken as visual signs to indicate weighty questions such as the spiritual health of the nation (Paul G. Pickowicz, 1991), modernity (Zhang, 1994; Lu, 1997, p. 20), and anti-imperialism (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 123-4).

The full-scale Japanese invasion of China or the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937, in particular the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, ended this first golden age in Chinese cinema. Many veteran Chinese filmmakers, including notable leftist filmmakers fled Shanghai, some following the Nationalist government retreating to Chongqing, some relocating to Hong Kong, some joining Communists in Yan'an, while some were staying on the "orphan island" of the foreign concession in Shanghai between 1937 and 1941 (Zhang, 2004, p. 83; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 226; Wicks, 2009, p. 398). In war time cinema (1937-1945), Chinese filmmakers used cinema to promote national defence. They made many patriotic films, such as *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan congjun* 木兰从军, 1939) directed by Bu Wancang 卜万苍,

whose patriotic theme was hidden under Confucian ideas of loyalty and filiality (Zhang, 2004, p. 86; Wicks, 2009, p. 398; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 4).

A second "golden age" (1946-1949) took place soon after the defeat of Japan in 1945, with production in Shanghai resuming (Zhang, 2004, p. 95; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 4). The second golden age nourished more notable Second Generation directors such as Fei Mu 费穆, who was retrospectively seen by Chinese film historian Li Shaobai (1996) as "a forerunner of modern Chinese film", and Zheng Junli 郑君里. They made paradigmatic films of the time, taking the war and its aftermath as their subject, such as *The Spring River Flows East* (*Yijiang chunshui xiangdong liu* 一江春水向东流, 1947) directed by Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun* 小城之春, 1948) directed by Fei Mu, and *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque* 乌鸦与麻雀, 1949) directed by Zheng Junli.

Further, while Chinese people began to make films in the cinemas of the First and Second Generation, one notices that the phases of mainland Chinese cinema before the establishment of the PRC coincided with the worldwide success of Hollywood cinema (1908-1947)[30]. Hollywood films dominated China's film market from 1912 to 1949, accounting for an 80% share (Ying Zhu, 2019, p. 100). Hollywood cinema has an extensive history of projecting China and/or the Chinese people, including the Chinese in the US (Naomi Greene, 2014; Oliver Turner, 2014; Gary Bettinson, 2015,

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[30] 1908-1927 marked the origins of the classical Hollywood cinema in the silent period and 1926-1947 marked the classical Hollywood cinema after the coming of sound (Richard Barsam & Dave Monahan, 2019, pp. 366-9 & 376-80; David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson & Jeff Smith, 2020, pp. 462-5 & 476-9).

p. 6; Jeffrey Richards, 2017; Longden Kenneth, 2018). When the medium of film was introduced to China and the Chinese production system slowly took shape, Hollywood cinema started to produce images of China across the globe. By the 1930s, Hollywood China-themed films had turned China into a country of stereotypes, usually in demeaning ways (Zhu, 2019, p. 102). The Chinese were depicted as the very embodiment of the Oriental other[31], and as the "Yellow Peril" who threaten Western civilisation, for instance, Hollywood's time-honoured depiction of the Oriental supervillain, Dr. Fu Manchu[32]. Among the many portrayals of the character such as *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1930), *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), *The Mast of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932) is considered the most controversial incarnation of the character and one of the best demonstrations of Hollywood's stereotypically Orientalist potrayals of the Chinese (Ruth Mayer, 2012, p. 416; Richards, 2017). Fu Manchu's image as evil and racially different from Americans (and Westerners at large) is externalised through the film's depiction of him as a grotesque character whose face is like a mask, and alien (Mayer, 2012, p. 410).

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[31] Hollywood's representation of China and Chinese resonate with Edward W. Said's watershed work, *Orientalism* (1978), in which he made the following observation: "The Orient," he wrote, "is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also … its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (Said, 1978, pp. 1-2)." Said (1978, pp. 5-6) suggested that orientalism constructs the "Orient" as an object to be apprehended by the Western subject.

[32] Dr. Fu Manchu is a sinister Oriental mastermind who was created by the English author Sax Rohmer in a series of thirteen novels published between 1913 and 1959 (Richards, 2017, p. 30). Rohmer (1967, p. 16) described Fu Manchu as: "Imagine a person tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources … of a wealthy government – which, however, has already denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being and you have a mental image of Dr Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man."

Like the character of Fu Manchu, many Hollywood films featuring Charlie Chan, another character archetype of the Chinese who is a sergeant in the Honolulu police department [33], were made, beginning in 1926 (Richards, 2017, p. 224). If the visualisation of Fu Manchu apparently projects a rather negative image of the Chinese on screen, Charlie Chan epitomises a more overtly positive depiction of the Chinese in Hollywood cinema (Turner, 2014, p. 1; Richards, 2017). Yet this ostensible benign image of the Chinese is actually no less a racist stereotype than Fu Manchu. After all, even as his integrative Chinese American name suggests, Charlie Chan symbolises the assimilated and Americanised Chinese (Peter X Feng, 2002, p. 3; Greene, 2014, p. 15). The Chan figure was also perceived as reinforcing condescending Asian stereotypes such as an alleged incapacity to speak idiomatic English and a tradition-bound and subservient nature. In this respect, the Chinese are being constructed as a subordinate Oriental other and intrinsically inferior to Americans. Apart from his submissiveness to Americans, the distinctive utterances of Charlie Chan overtly reinforcing the "wisdom of the Orient" stereotype marks his otherness compared to Americans (Bettinson, 2015, p. 8).

Significantly, America's Chinatowns in the Hollywood imaginary serve as a microcosm of China, which are often associated with criminality, or the mysticism of Chinese culture (Bettinson, 2016, p. 7). For example, *Welcome Danger* (Clyde Bruckman & Malcolm St. Clair, 1929) starring Hollywood's celebrated comedian, features stock Chinese characters drug trafficking, stealing, robbing and kidnapping their way

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[33] Charlie Chan was created by American author Earl Derr Biggers for a series of six mystery novels between 1925 and 1932 (Richards, 2017, p. 224).

around Chinatown. In the film, Chinese women are portrayed as bound feet women while Chinese men are portrayed as men with long fingernails who smoke opium.

According to Zhiwei Xiao (1997), film censorship as a national policy in China can be traced back as early as to 1927, immediately after the unification of China by the then government led by the KMT. Foreign films perceived to portray the Chinese people in degrading, offensive way could not be released in China. In the same period, a conscious effort was also made to prevent foreign ownership of film studios (Lu, 1997, p. 5).

2.2.4 Third Generation: Directing Politicised Films in Service of the Nation-State

The final celebration of the Chinese New Year in the Second Generation director Zheng Junli's *Crows and Sparrows*, completed after the Communist Party of China's (CPC) takeover of the mainland and the founding of the PRC under Chairman Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1949, can be seen as simultaneously celebrating the beginning of a new era in Chinese history when there appeared the Third Generation directors. As a cohort of filmmakers, the creative practice of the Third Generation mainly focused on the period from the establishment of the PRC to the outbreak of the "Cultural Revolution", from 1949-1978 (Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 1; Hu, 2014, p. 187). Most of the Third Generation grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, participating in left-wing theatre and film activities or being influenced by left-wing literary and cinema movements.

Cinema was explicitly harnessed to national reconstruction and dictation of Maoism and the CPC ideals in the Mao/socialist era (Paul Clark, 1987; Lu, 1997, p. 7; Williams, 2004, p. 77; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 114; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Hu, 2014, p. 187). By 1952 all of the film studios were nationalised, consolidated into the state system under three studio branches, namely Northeast, Beijing, and Shanghai, and consequently came under total government control (Lu, 1997, p. 6; Zhang, 2004, p. 189; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 4). There was also strict censorship of both foreign and domestic films. Whereas in the years up to 1949, foreign films were regularly shown in the mainland and dominated its film market, with Hollywood films being the predominant presence; following the founding of the PRC, most foreign, especially Hollywood films, were prohibited, and an effort was made to "sinicise" the cinema (Lu, 1997, p. 6; Wicks, 2009, p. 399).

The Third Generation directors produced Soviet-inspired socialist realist films[34] were produced in an attempt to build an indigenous cinema of socialist realism[35] (Yau, 1997, p. 693; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 78; Wicks, 2009, p. 399). The subject matter of the films of the Third Generation usually depicts the revolutionary struggle of the Chinese people to overthrow their feudal, imperialist, and capitalist oppressors and to reflect the socialist construction and nation-building in the post-liberation (post-1949) period. Through portraying idealised images of proletarian heroes and heroines, their films promoted the formation and legitimation of the new regime, a

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[35] Socialist realist films in China demonise the feudal past and romanticise the revolution in a melodramatic mode that polarises past and present, rich and poor, and exploiters and victims. The revolutionary poor and victims are heroes, heroines, and masters of the new China (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 92).

socialist nation-state. Socialist realist filmmaking also follows the dictates of Maoist thought (see *Mao's Talks on Literature and Art at the Yan'an Forum*[36]) to provide positive role models, such as exemplary workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing* 工农兵), for the betterment of a mass audience (Williams, 2004, p. 77; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Lu, 2021).

Even though the politics of the Mao/socialist era significantly restricted the Third Generation directors, they found subtle ways to negotiate with politics. They developed artistic means concerning both domestic and foreign cinematic and theoretical formulations, among them Xie Jin 谢晋 is considered one of the most prominent (Marchetti, 1997, pp. 59-80; Yau, 1997, p. 696; Zhang, 2004, p. 206; Wicks, 2009, p. 399). Xie Jin's two socialist classics in particular, *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun* 红色娘子军, 1960) and *Two Stage Sister* (*Wutai jiemei* 舞台姐妹, 1964), exemplify the norm of revolutionary and socialist aesthetics (Marchetti, 1997, pp. 60, 75; Zhang, 2004, p. 216) and show how the woman becomes a visual code in the master narrative of communist revolution and the construction of the vision of the nation in the Mao era (Cui, 2003, p. xv). While the proletariat is the central position of both the film topic and the viewing audience, gender relations are established more based on class than on sex. Internal differences and tensions in gender are erased for the sake of constructing of a unitary socialist nation.

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[36] *Mao's Talks at the Yan'an Forum* set cultural policy for the communists based on the idea of the subordination of art to politics (Berry & Faruqhar, 2006, pp. 59-62).

In the Mao/socialist era (1949-78), the state played a significant role in developing a Chinese national cinema that would promote the ideals of Maoism and the CPC. In the early years of the communist regime, the government nationalised the film industry and used it as a tool for propaganda and political education. This continued into the 1950s and 1960s when films were used to promote socialist values and revolutionary ideals. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the worst time for mainland Chinese cinema and the entire country, the film industry in China was severely restricted, coming almost to a standstill from 1966 to 1970, and only gradually restarted with an exclusive output of filmed ideologically orthodox operas (aka "revolutionary model operas") (Yau, 1997, p. 693; Zhang, 2004, pp. 217-222; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 229; Wicks, 2009, p. 400). Overall the Third Generation of directors in this period made films, to borrow Zhang's (2004, pp. 189-224) term, "in the name of the nation-state".

2.2.5 Fourth, Fifth, and Six Generation: Directing New Wave Art Films in Service of the Nation-People

After the Cultural Revolution, directors who completed their professional training in cinema before 1966 but whose careers were suspended by the event emerged. These directors are known as the Fourth Generation (1979-1983). The Fourth Generation is the first generation in mainland Chinese cinema to have systematically studied cinema and included prominent women directors in Chinese film history, such as Zhang Nuanxin 张暖昕 and Huang Shuqin 黄蜀芹. Some of the most notable Fourth Generation figures include Wu Tianming 吴天明, Xie Fei 谢飞, and Huang Jianzhong

黄健中; the former two also served as mentors to the leading lights of the Fifth Generation (Lu, 1997, p. 28; Zhang, 2004, p. 231; Hu, 2014, p. 260).

Made under the background of ideological liberation and the fervent call for modernity in the Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 era, the films of the Fourth Generation started to show a comprehensive "rebellion" from content to form compared with the Third Generation. Specifically, the Fourth Generation sought ways to express the destructiveness and pain left by the Cultural Revolution. The output was the so-called "wound" or "scar" films[37], affecting dramas that employ intimate and small-scale narratives focusing on individual tragedies as microcosmic representations of massive societal trauma (Yau, 1997, p. 698; Hu, 2014, p. 246; Wang Haizhou, 2022, pp. 164-5). The pursuit of humanism (the priority of humans over politics and individuality over collectivity) in the films of the Fourth Generation enabled their films to "escape" the confines of the films of the Third Generation as a political instrument and moral didacticism. The Fourth Generation also dismantled the conventions of classical socialist realism of the previous generation, self-consciously imitating foreign film aesthetics and techniques in an effort to redefine China's cinematic conventions (Yau, 1997, p. 698; Zhang, 2004, p. 231; Hu, 2014, p. 258).

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[37] The best-known of these is Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen* 芙蓉镇, 1986) (Hu, 2014, p. 246). In the inaugural 1981 Golden Rooster Awards, the Best Picture prize was given to two "scar" films, *Evening Rain* (*Bashan yeyu* 巴山夜雨, 1980), directed by Wu Yonggang and the Fourth Generation director Wu Yigong 吴贻弓, *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi* 天云山传奇, 1980) directed by Xie Jin (Yau, 1997, p. 698). However, the genre of "scar" films had run its course by 1984, as the imagination of writers and directors was captured by China's modernisation.

While the Fourth Generation in the 1980s continued to make "scar" films, the first graduates from Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution burst onto the scene in 1984 with Zhang Junzhao's 张军钊 *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage* 一个和八个) and Chen Kaige's 陈凯歌 directorial debut *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地) (Yau, 1997, p. 699; Zhang, 2004, p. 235; Wicks, 2009, p. 403; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 7; Hu, 2014, p. 243), both featuring Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 cinematography, characterised by disproportionate framing, natural lighting and barren landscapes (Jerome Silbergeld, 1999, pp. 15-52). While Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* portrayed peasants and soldiers – familiar subjects by his Third Generation predecessors – the method of presentation was completely different. Instead of clearly delineated lines between "heroes" and "villains", *Yellow Earth* featured morally ambiguous characters, a probing and brooding existential tone, an open-ended conclusion, and a bold new film language that employed unorthodox horizon lines and extensive use of montage, metaphor, and symbolism.

Films like *Yellow Earth* made by these young Beijing Film Academy graduates were identified by scholars as "exploratory films" (*tansuo dianying*) (Yau, 1997, p. 700; Hu, 2014, p. 247) or "new wave films" (Cui, 2003, p. 99; Michael Berry, 2022, p. 2) or "avant-garde films" (Lu, 1997, p. 12; Zhang, 2004, p. 235). Makers of the films were named the "Fifth Generation". The Fifth Generation was fueled equally by the experience of growing up during the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution yet reaching early adulthood during the vibrant days of the Reform Era, giving them a fresh perspective on human values and China's cultural heritage. So when they began their formal education at Beijing Film Academy, the would-be Fifth Generation

studied with a more critical perspective than their predecessors and were more than ready to rebel against the old format of film language.

Making what Chow (1995) saw as "autoethnography[ies]", the Fifth Generation directors situated themselves outside official representation, unlike the Third Generation, and expressed their relentless cultural critique of Chinese history, politics, and society (Lu, 1997, p. 8; Yau, 1997, p. 698; Zhang, 2004, pp. 236-8; Wicks, 2009, p. 403; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 7). For example, Chen Kaige questioned the worshipping of Mao in *Yellow Earth* and the oppressive nature of China's symbolic order in *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang* 孩子王, 1987), and Huang Jianxin 黄建新 ridiculed China's political absurdity in *Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shjian* 黑炮事件, 1985). Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, a classmate of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, situated his stories among the Mongolian and Tibetan minority nationalities, respectively, in *On the Hunting Ground* (*Liechang zhasa* 猎场扎撒, 1985) and *Horse Thief* (*Daoma zei* 盗马贼, 1986), which Yau (1997, p. 698) saw as "obliquely expressing a disdain for the dominant Han nationality and their ethnocentrism". Films of the Fifth Generation are therefore seen by scholars as best exemplifying a Chinese national cinema, in which the predominant trope is "cultural critique" (Nick Browne, 1994, pp. 1-11), or "the self-reflexive gaze of the nation" (Lu, 1997, p. 8). This self-reflexive cultural critique or gaze of the nation is sustained by an ambivalent attitude of the filmmakers toward China's past, an iconoclastic attack on feudalism in the fashion of the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and, at the same

time, a return to, or a search for, the deep roots that gave life to Chinese civilisation in the first place.

The self-reflexive cultural critique also constitutes the signature pieces of the Fifth Generation, such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, *King of the Children*, *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji* 霸王别姬, 1993), and Zhang Yimou's "allegorical red trilogy" - *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱, 1987), *Ju Dou* (*Judou* 菊豆, 1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Dahong denglong gaogao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂, 1991), in which directors use symbolism and allegory in constructing their visions of the nation. While the Fourth Generation of directors also redefined the language of mainland Chinese cinema by favouring a depoliticised narration focusing on humanism, the Fifth Generation went father with sparse dialogue and music, as well as ambiguous imagery and enigmatic characters (Yau, 1997, p. 699; Zhang, 2004, pp. 236-8; Hu, 2014, p. 248). In this sense, the Fifth Generation can be seen as "showing" their films rather than "telling" what had happened. As Lu (1997, p. 131) pointed out, Zhang Yimou's allegorical, ahistorical approach in his "allegorical red trilogy" presents a departure from the manner of socialist realism filmmaking of previous generations. The Fifth Generations' explorations in the style of narration and art of cinematography in their films have contributed to the innovation of Chinese cinematic conventions and the creation of a new narrative and aesthetic language for Chinese film.

With the Fifth Generation director's unprecedented innovation in the film language, mainland Chinese cinema finally broke away from the previous dominance of "films

by literature people" who upheld the supremacy of a film's literary quality (e.g., screenplay) and entered an age of new Chinese cinema contested by "films by film people" who prefer film's visual qualities[38] (e.g., mise-en-scene, camerawork) (Cui, 2003, p. 104; Zhang, 2004, p. 237). As Zhang (2004, p. 238) remarked, "film people no longer treat film as a dramatic rendition of literature that spoon-feeds a preconceived message to the [passive] viewer, rather they see it as a process of signification by audio-visual means in which the [active] viewer participates perceptually and conceptually in generating multiple meanings and narratives." The next generation of filmmakers, the Sixth Generation, also shares the Fifth Generation's preference for highlighting film's visual aspects.

Of the many talents to emerge among the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yimou is arguably the most significant and versatile, with international awards for acting, cinematography, and direction. Zhang cultivated a more sensual and popular style than many of his fellow Fifth Generation directors. His first film, *Red Sorghum* (1987), pleased a broad spectrum of audiences with its sophisticated cinematic techniques and lavish ethnographic elements (Zhang, 2002, pp. 208-20), winning the Golden Bear for Best Picture at the 1988 Berlin international film festival (Lu, 1997, p. 8; Zhang, 2004, p. 238; Wicks, 2009, p. 403; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 7). Zhang's *Red Sorghum* is also the first Chinese film to receive a significant award from a Western film festival

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[38] "Films by film people" attain autonomy from and popularity over literary writing. The Fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, turned major literary writings in the 1980s and 1990s into cinematic spectacles. For example, Zhang's *Red Sorghum*, is based on Mo Yan 莫言's novel of the same name, his *Ju Dou*, is based on Liu Heng 刘恒's novel *Fuxi Fuxi* 伏羲伏羲, his *Raise the Red Lantern*, is based on Su Tong 苏童's novella *Wives and Concubines*, and his *To Live*, is based on Yu Hua 余华's novel of the same name. Likewise, Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* is based on Lilian Lee's novel of the same name.

in mainland Chinese film history. In this regard, Zhang Yimou can be seen as a prominent (Fifth Generation) director in mainland Chinese cinema who began integrating Chinese national cinema into world cinema and attracting international attention with images of China.

Since the success of his *Red Sorghum*, Zhang Yimou started to work with producers outside of the mainland (Lu, 1997, p. 9; Zhang, 1997, p. 96). Further investigation into Zhang's subsequent films following *Red Sorghum* shows how films directed by the Fifth Generation can project themselves onto international screens by articulating the image of gender and its association with the vision of the Chinese nation in imageries and allegorical narratives (Lu, 1997; Cui, 2003, p. xv; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 127). Specifically, the woman is highlighted as a visual signifier of the nation and as a sexual image for the world's gaze. While many Fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, would eventually turn toward more commercial cinematic pursuits, the experimental edge of their early work would be embraced and continued by the Sixth Generation in the early 1990s.

As the established Fourth and Fifth Generation filmmakers continued to earn international acclaim and win overseas investment, a whole cohort of new directors also burst onto the global market in the early 1990s[39], with enough innovation in theme, aesthetics, and production to qualify for their generational moniker, the Sixth

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[39] While scholars named the Fourth Generation and Fifth Generation of directors, emerging filmmakers mostly graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989 called themselves the Sixth Generation (Chen, 2021a, p. 2). The 1993 film *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong* 北京杂种), directed by Zhang Yuan 张元 is commonly considered the first Sixth Generation film (Zhang, 2004, p. 289; Vulpiani, 2014, p. 89).

Generation (Yau, 1997, p. 704; Zhang, 2004, p. 28; Wicks, 2009, p. 403; Ying Zhu, 2010, p. 457; Ye & Zhu, 2012, p. 9; Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu & Luke Vulpiani, 2014; Michael Berry, 2022, pp. 2-3). The voice of this new group can be seen as fundamentally different from that of their Fifth Generation predecessors. The Sixth Generation directors produced films in which contemporary sensibility replaced historical reflection, characters from the margins of society[40] replaced heroes, aestheticised mise-en-scene was abandoned in favour of gritty documentary-esque aesthetics[41], and adaptations of contemporary literary classics set in the rural landscape were tossed aside to adapt original, autobiographical, and real-life stories often set in contemporary urban China (Zhang, 2004, p. 290; Zhen Zhang, 2007, p. 2; Vulpiani, 2014, p. 89). Representative directors of the Sixth Generation include Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, and Lou Ye 娄烨. Like the Fifth Generation, their work has also been highly influential in China and internationally. Jia Zhangke, whose films will be examined in detail in Chapter Four, is commonly considered the leading voice of the Sixth Generation and a name synonymous with "Chinese film" in the world of international art-house cinema (M. Berry, 2022, p. 194).

In the 1990s, the state began to implement market-oriented reforms aimed at promoting the development of the country's national cinema and a domestic film

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[40] The Sixth Generation confronted the gritty realities of contemporary Chinese society by depicting marginalised individuals, including dissatisfied urban youths, as in Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi* 冬春的日子, 1993), Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures* (Ren xiaoyao 任逍遥, 2002); migrant workers, as in Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqisui de danche* 十七岁的单车, 2001), Jia Zhangke's *The World* (*Shijie* 世界, 2004); and queer characters, as in Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong xigong* 东宫西宫, 1996).

[41] Often long takes, hand-held cameras, and ambient sound, akin to Italian neorealism and cinéma verité.

industry that can compete with the global cultural hegemony of Hollywood (Lu, 1997, pp. 9-10; Ying Zhu & Seio Nakajima, 2010, pp. 27-8). These reforms included privatising film distribution and the introduction of market mechanisms for film financing and investment (Hongwei Lu, 2015, p. 175). When economic reform took away the kind of centralised state sponsorship of filmmaking the previous two generations of directors had enjoyed, the Sixth Generation found alternative ways to produce low-budget films without acquiring official permits as a counter-cinema marginal to mainstream production, either by funding films themselves or receiving investment overseas. Thus their films are also referred to as "independent" (independent from state funding and control) or "underground". As Vulpiani (2014, p. 101) comments, the Sixth Generation followed the familiar model of minor national cinemas gaining recognition through distribution and visibility at international (mainly Western) film festivals and the international art film circuit.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese national cinema underwent a period of liberalisation and experimentation, with the Fourth Generation, Fifth Generation, and Sixth Generation of directors exploring new artistic styles and themes. With the Reform and Opening-up policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, a new cultural space opened up in China. The government began to relax censorship rules, allowing for the production of more socially critical films since the 1980s (Wang Haizhou, 2022). Despite differences with each other, on some level, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Generation directors can be seen as collectively constituting a distinct phase in Chinese film history different from that of their Third Generation predecessors (i.e., the socialist period), a second stage that was very much dominated by aesthetics and

principles of New Wave art cinema (M. Berry, 2022, p. 3). The Fifth and the Six Generation played a critical role in establishing Chinese national cinema as a significant force in world cinema. They also helped and are still helping to shape the Chinese film industry today in the early twenty-first century. Together, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Generation directors can be seen to make films, to borrow Zhang's (2004, pp. 111-2) term, "in the name of the nation-people", focusing on portraying "people" (*min*) over "*state*" (*guo*).

2.2.6 The History and Role of Minority Nationality Film in Nation Building

Throughout the history of PRC cinema, a distinct production category has focused on portraying Chinese minority nationalities and their role in constructing the cinematic representation of the nation (Zhang, 1997, p. 81; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 170; Yan, 2020, p. 2; Lu, 2021). Before the establishment of the PRC, films about minority nationalities were relatively scarce (Clark, 1987b, p. 17). However, after 1949, these films became a concentrated and regular production category, assuming different names and approaches across various generations/phases of Chinese cinema.

During the Mao/socialist era's Third Generation cinema (1949-1976), these films were known as "minority nationality-themed films"[42] (*shaoshu minzu ticai dianying*). While some of these films have become memorable classics, such as *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo jinhua* 五朵金花, 1959) featuring the Bai nationality, *Third Sister Liu*

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[42] It should be noted here that there are other English terms/translations of the film genre, such as "ethnic minority(-themed) film" used by Zhang (2004, p. 208) and Yan (2020). The diversity of terms originates from the difficulty of seeking an exact English equivalent for the Chinese term *shaoshu minzu* (C. Berry, 2016, pp. 89-90).

(*Liu sanjie* 刘三姐, 1961) featuring the Zhuang nationality, *Surfs* (*Nongnu* 农奴, 1963) featuring Tibetans, and *Ashima* (*Ashima* 阿诗玛, 1964) featuring the Yi nationality, they were predominantly created by Han filmmakers. These films aimed to promote unity within the newly-established socialist nation, despite the internal ethnic and cultural differences between the Han majority nationality and the fifty-five minority nationalities[43]. By showcasing ethnic harmony, solidarity, and portraying the Han as liberators who freed minority nationalities from the shackles of slavery, feudalism, and ignorance, while simultaneously exoticising and eroticising them, minority nationality-themed films reinforced the central position of the Han in power relations with minority nationalities (Clark, 1987b, p. 20; Li Ershi 李二仕, 1999, pp. 80-7; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 180-4). Similar to how internal differences and tensions in gender were disregarded in the construction of a unified nation during the Third Generation era, ethnic diversity was also suppressed for the same purpose.

In the post-Mao era's Fourth and Fifth Generation cinema since the 1980s, these films were commonly referred to as "minority nationality films" (*shaoshu minzu dianying*). While Han filmmakers still dominated the production of such films, there emerged a group of minority nationality filmmakers who brought their unique identities and perspectives to the forefront. The shift to this new term, without the inclusion of "-themed", emphasised the filmmaker's minority nationality identity. These films also

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[43] China proclaims it is a unified multinational country, composed of precisely fifty-six officially recognised ethnonational groups/nationalities: the Han ethnic majority, which accounts for over ninety per cent of the population, and fifty-five minority nationalities who constitute the rest (Mullaney, 2011, p. 1).

expanded their messages beyond political education (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 181) to encompass cultural, economic, and ecological concerns (Yan, 2020, p. 2).

Some prominent Han filmmakers, including Fourth Generation director Zhang Nuanxin and Fifth Generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang, began using minority nationalities as a "cultural other" or a "constructing mirror" (Kwai-Cheung Lo, 2009, p. 235) for Han self-critique in their films[44] (Yau, 1989; Dru Curtis Gladney, 1994; Stephanie Donald, 1995; Zhang, 1997; Clark, 2005, pp. 106-21; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 184-9). This structure of self and Other, or internal orientalism[45] (Louisa Schein, 1997, 2000, p. 103) in the Han-minority relationship, underpinned the exploration of "primitive passions" Chow (1995, pp. 20-3) noted in other Fifth Generation films, specifically in their portrayal of women, which can be seen as a form of "autoethnography" (Chow, 1995, p. 38). Although Chow (1995, p. 21) identified Han women as the "primitive materials" in Chinese cinema, notably in the films featuring Gong Li and directed by Zhang Yimou, primitivism arguably extends across all nationalities in China (Yan, 2020, p. 3).

During the 1990s, film productions focusing on minority nationalities experienced a decline, partially due to China's shift from a planned economy to a market economy. State-owned studios received reduced government subsidies, impacting the production of these films (Rao Shuguang 饶曙光 et al., 2011, p. 397). However, since

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[44] For example, there is a structure of self and Other in Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchun ji* 青春祭, 1985) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (*Daoma zei* 盗马贼, 1986).
[45] In her discussion of what she calls "internal orientalism" in the PRC, Schein suggested the possibility that the "Orient" might orientalise.

the twenty-first century, there has been a revival of films centred around minority nationalities, thanks to significant funding expansion in the reformed Chinese film industry. Nevertheless, these films continue to occupy the margins of the Chinese film industry (Yan, 2020, p. 3). While many of these films are still created by well-known filmmakers from the majority Han nationality or foreign directors, such as Lu Chuan's 陆川 *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (*Kekexili* 可可西里, 2004), Fu Dongyu's 傅东育 *Phurbu and Tenzin*[46] (*Xizang Tiankong* 西藏天空, 2014), and French director Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Wolf Totem*[47] (*Lang tuteng* 狼图腾, 2015), there has been a notable rise in ethnic minority filmmakers who explore their own nationalities through film. Notably, Tibetan filmmakers like Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦 and Song Taijia 松太加 have emerged, making a significant milestone in Chinese film history (Dan Smyer Yu, 2014, p. 125; Françoise Robin, 2020).

In his influential exploration of defining minority nationality film, Wang Zhimin 王志敏 (1997, pp. 161-71) introduced a framework consisting of one "fundamental principle" and two "guarantees" to delineate Chinese minority nationality film. One of the guarantees is the "theme" (*ticai*), which revolves around minority nationalities. The other guarantee pertains to the "authors/filmmakers" (*zuozhe*), who possess a cultural identity rooted in minority nationalities. Wang argued that the filmmakers' minority nationality identity ensures an authentic portrayal of minority nationality

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[46] As Lu (2021) notes, the liberation of Tibet from serfdom remains the absolute baseline in any narrative of modern Tibetan history in China. *Phurbu and Tenzin* focuses on the evolving relationship between a young master, Tenzin, and his servant, Phurbu, over many years, from the preliberation era to the post-liberation period. While the theme of the film is about social and socialist change since the liberation of Tibet, the central position of the Han in their power relations with Tibetans is consolidated.

[47] This film will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

culture, which serves as the fundamental principle. However, Rao et al. (2011, pp. 372-5) question Wang's definition, suggesting that the filmmakers' minority nationality identity, whether acquired through birth or culture, should not be the sole criterion for evaluating these films. They contend that directors from diverse backgrounds, offering varied persepctives, contribute to the multifaceted nature of genre. While this argument of diversity is thought-provoking, it fails to address why films about minority nationalities in the twenty-first century created by non-minority nationality directors, continue to reinforce the central position of the Han and/or appropriate minority nationalities as targets for Han self-critique, mirroring the practices of their predecessors in the previous century.

For instance, in Lu Chuan's *Kekexili*, a predominantly Han perspective is established, shaping the narrative through the eyes of a Han policeman who disguises himself as a reporter named Gayu 尕玉. Gayu's identification with Beijing, the political and cultural centre of China, gives him the legitimacy to speak and document the story of local Tibetan vigilantes led by Ritai, as noted by Cui (2008, p. 155). Gayu uses his voice-over narration and photographs to unveil the environmental destruction in the remote Tibetan region of Kekexili.

While Gayu assumes the role of the authoritative narrator, the Tibetan[48] vigilantes are portrayed as marginalised subjects on the social-economic periphery, lacking

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[48] By birth or culture

government support[49]. This power dynamics between the Han centre and the Tibetan margin is reflected in the respective positions of Gayu and the Tibetan viligantes. The film culminates in Ritai losing his life in conflicts with poachers, but it concludes by highlighting the efforts of the Han-dominated central government to save Kekexili and protect the Tibetan antelope. Vanessa Frangville (2012, p. 68) suggests that this ending can be interpreted as a reaffirmation of a unified nation.

Furthermore, the film suggests that the root cause for the endangerment of Tibetan antelopes lies in the adoption of a market economy in China and its integration into the globalised capitalist consumer system. Essentially, the illegal poaching of antelopes is fueled by the escalating demands of global capitalism in post-socialist China. The peasant poachers, driven by economic destitution[50] and subject to social or institutional neglect, become involved in the antelope pelt business. This portrayal allows one to discern that Lu Chuan, a Han director, utilises his *Kekexili*, which centres around Tibetans, as a means to engage in introspection and self-critique regarding the adverse effects of Han-dominated modernisation.

In fact, even Rao et al. (2011, p. 373), despite raising concerns about Wang's framework, acknowledge that filmmakers from minority nationalities offer an

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[49] As volunteers working outside the official administration, the patrolling team has been short of money, personnel and weapons and has not been given legal status by the authorities. The patrollers do not have the power to arrest poachers but to confiscate the antelope pelts. Lu Chuan does not shy away from the uncomfortable fact that the volunteer patrol illegally sold recovered pelts to subsidies its operations. Lu's revelation of this fact reinforces the marginalised socioeconomic status of the patrollers.
[50] In a conversation between Gayu and the head of the peasant-poacher, Ma Zhanlin, the latter tells Gayu that he was once a shepherd but could not make a living after the grasslands turned into desert and the herds died of starvation.

"insider's perspective" that enable them to illuminate the nuances and intricacies of their own nationalities – an understanding that Han filmmakers may struggle to attain. Yan (2020, p. 141) further emphasises that apart from the filmmaker's minority nationality identity, the complex power dynamics and unique life experiences of dominant nationality filmamkers, such as the Han, make it challenging for them to fully comprehend. Consequently, to seek a more authentic portrayal of China's minority nationalities, one is inclined to follow Wang's (1997) framework and focus on films created by filmmakers from these minority backgrounds. Due to the fragmented and overlooked nature of minority nationalities, existing on the outskirts of rapidly industrialising China (Lo, 2009, p. 242), films that delve into minority nationalities naturally offer alternative perpectives on the nation. These films provide glimpses into the lives and experiences of those residing primarily outside the urban centres, presenting a distinct vision of China's modernisation[51].

2.3 The Transformation of Chinese National Cinema in the Twenty-First Century

Building upon the historical analysis of Chinese national cinema in the twentieth century, this section focuses on the transformation of Chinese cinema in the twenty-first century. It explores the coexistence of two distinct groups of directors: the "directors within the system" from the Fifth and New Force Generations, and the independent Sixth Generation directors. These directors collectively contribute to the on-screen portrayals of the Chinese nation in the present-day film industry.

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[51] China's modernisation is characterised by industrialisation, urbanisation, and internal migration of people from the countryside to cities (Tianyu Cao, 2005, pp. 1-15; Terry McGee, Chusheng Lin, & Mark Wang, 2007; Goodman, 2014).

2.3.1 New Force Generation/iGeneration: Commercial Filmmaking

Sometime in the first decade of the twenty-first century[52], when digital technology and its correlation with the internet made more dispersed modes of production, distribution and consumption possible, a new generation of young filmmakers emerged. The newcomers are called by Johnson, Wagner, Yu and Vulpiani (2014) "iGeneration", with the little "i" here denoting the "internet" and "individual", or by Chen Xuguang 陈旭光 (2021) as "New Force directors" (*xin liliang daoyan*), whose meaning echoes that of the "iGeneration". The so-called "New Force" or "iGeneration" have come of age when many filmmakers of the Sixth Generation and even the Fifth Generation are still active, so they continue to overlap with what Chinese film studies scholars call the "Sixth Generation". This also partly explains why the generation division of mainland Chinese cinema has not been formally continued after the Sixth Generation.

In 2010, in response to representative Sixth Generation director Wang Xiaoshuai's prediction that a Seventh Generation is not likely to form, his fellow director Lu Chuan 陆川 believed that the Seventh Generation had emerged and called himself a representative of the Seventh Generation. Although the Seventh Generation has not been widely recognised by academia or the industry, Lu Chuan had a point in distinguishing the emerging directors (regardless of whether or not there is a Seventh

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[52] As argued by Vulpiani (2014, p. 89), Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (*Ershsi cheng ji* 二十四城记, 2008) and Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan* 颐和园, 2006) represent the end of the Sixth Generation of directors as a distinct phase in mainland Chinese cinema. They are evidence of the transition to a new phase in cinematic practice.

Generation) from their Sixth Generation predecessors. Whereas the Sixth Generation were cultivated by international film festivals favouring art over commerce, the emerging directors have been cultivated by the domestic film market. While emerging directors like Lu Chuan have been looking for a balance between their artistic pursuits and market demands, the latter tends to be their priority.

Scholars such as Wagner, Yu and Vulpiani (2014, p. 16) and Chen (2021, pp. 15-23) acknowledge this collective characteristic of the group of the emerging directors. As this new group of directors is influenced by Chinese neoliberalism – an economic mode that mixes global capitalism with autocratic state control, they are, in many ways, a more pragmatic and commercial-oriented "generation". Compared with the auteur-minded Sixth Generation, who could not sustain their peripheral/non-mainstream art films against the commercial market, they are good at dealing with the contradictory relationship between market demands and artistic expression and turn themselves into what many Chinese film scholars, such as Li Lei 李磊 (2020), Chen (2020, 2021a, p. 12), Shen Zhaohui 申朝晖 (2021, pp. 92-4) call "auteurs/authors[53] within the system" (*tizhinei zuozhe*), whose films uphold the Party-state's mainstream ideologies while exhibiting consistent and distinctive cinematic styles.

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[53] It is important to note that in Chen's (2020) own English translation of the term, he uses "authors" instead of "auteurs" to describe the so-called "New Force directors". So despite slight differences in the word choice to translate *zuozhe* in the term, one argues that the focus here is on directors/filmmakers who work within the system, not outside.

2.3.2 Mainstream vs. Non-Mainstream Productions in the Chinese Film Industry

While art, politics, and commerce are intertwined everywhere in mainland Chinese cinema, as Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen (2010) suggest, the above surveying of the history of Chinese national cinema illustrates that cinema has been a product of shifting focus in China on politics (as in the cinema of the Third Generation of directors), art (as in the cinemas of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Generation), and commerce (as in the cinema of the New Force "Generation"). Since the new millennium, as China continued to develop and change, so too does its cinema. Compared with the last century, the Chinese film industry in the twenty-first century has become more diverse than ever, with three generations of directors (the Fifth, Sixth, and a newer force) competing to make a diverse range of films. While representative Fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, along with the "New Force" directors, have been dedicated to making mainstream commercial and/or politicised "main melody" films since the new century, many Sixth Generation directors, such as Jia Zhangke, continue to take up the mantle of making art, non-mainstream films.

With the growth of the Chinese economy[54] and its accelerated marketisation[55] in the twenty-first century, the film industry has become increasingly focused on making commercial films for domestic and international audiences. The filmmaking career of

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[54] China has been the second-largest economy in the world since 2010 (Justin McCurry & Julia Kollewe, 2011), overtaking Japan and ranking behind only the USA. China officially joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, demonstrating the country's importance to the global economy. Minqi Li (2008) goes as far as to argue that China's economic power is of such significance that it represents the end of the established capitalist powers and a new global order.

[55] According to Wendy Su (2016, p. 87), in the late 2000s, the Chinese state desired to promote cultural industries, such as the film industry, as an essential part of a "socialist market economy".

Feng Xiaogang[56] 冯小刚, starting in the mid-1990s, can be seen as a microcosm of the commercialisation of China's film industry. Feng Xiaogang entered the film industry during the 1990s when the Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation directors were dedicated to making art films[57]. Yet Feng did not elect to follow in the footsteps of these professionally trained directors who turned to international film festivals and/or independent filmmaking. He resurrected his directing career by segueing into commercial film production when art films and state-funded "main melody"[58] (*zhuxuanlv*) films were positioned at the top of a film production pyramid in the Chinese film industry. At the same time, commercial films comprised the weakest sector.

Feng explained his position distinguishing himself from the Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation directors in a speech delivered at Beijing Film Academy on 16 November 2000. In his words, "The Fifth Generation directors did not enter through the gates

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[56] Feng Xiaogang is renowned as a highly commercially successful filmmaker whose comedy films do consistently well at the box office from the late 1990s into the new century. Feng's 1997 comedy *The Dream Factory* (*Jiafang yifang* 甲方乙方) established him in an indigenous film genre emerging in mainland Chinese cinema called "New Year's celebration films" (*hesui pian*) (Shuyu Kong, 2003, 2007, p. 228; Zhang, 2004, p. 284; Jason McGrath, 2005, p. 90; Ying Zhu, 2010, p. 197; Rui Zhang, 2008; Yi Lu, 2022, p. 354). Ying Zhu (2007, pp. 43-64) called Feng's films "talk of the nation" for their ability to check the pulse of Chinese society. Rui Zhang (2008) and Yi Lu (2022) see the cinema of Feng as an alliance of politics, capital and art, in which the filmmaker works under political and economic pressures in a post-socialist state while still striving to create works with a personal socio-political agenda. In recent years, Feng has transitioned from solely making comedies to directing drama and period drama films such as *Aftershock* (*Tangshan da dizhen* 唐山大地震, 2010), *Back to 1942* (*Yi jiu si er* 一九四二, 2012), *Youth* (*Fanghua* 芳华, 2017).

[57] For example, the Fifth Generation Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng* 蓝风筝, 1993), Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), and Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1993), as well as the Sixth Generation Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (1993), Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (小武, 1997), and Jiang Wen's 姜文 *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile* 鬼子来了, 2000).

[58] According to Li Ning 李宁 (2020), the concept of "main-melody" was first proposed in 1987 during a national filmmaking conference. It served two aims: one was to prepare for the upcoming 40th anniversary of the PRC, and the other was to counter the commercial and entertainment waves of filmmaking at the time (Rao Shuguang 饶曙光 & Lan Jianhua 兰建华, 2019).

of the hall (aka the Chinese film tradition) but broke in from the windows. However, since they gained entry, they have now become guardians of the orthodoxy of the sacred hall (*baodian*) of Chinese film. The Sixth Generation then occupied another part of the sacred hall but did not come in through the doors or windows: they dug up from underground! So when I came, I found that I could not enter this heavily guarded sacred hall; even if I could, there was no longer any space for me inside. So I decided to build an outhouse instead. Since life in the outhouse is so exciting, even those who occupy the sacred hall want to come here now. Some have already popped their heads in."

Feng's self-consciousness about his position within the "power struggle" with the Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation directors in the 1990s Chinese film industry directly impacted the 1990s Chinese film industry. Specifically, Feng established an alternative film production practice different from previously politicised (as by the Third Generation of directors) or art oriented (as by the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Generation directors) ones, leading to the emergence of commercial blockbusters in the Chinese film industry. As Jason McGrath (2005, p. 96) observed, having achieved success within the mainland in the face of Hollywood competition[59], Feng's late 1990s

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[59] Before China entered into the WTO in 2001, in 1994, China, after more than forty years of resistance, opened its market to Hollywood film imports (Cui, 2003, p. 249; Zhang, 2004, p. 282; Wendy Su, 2016; Yi Lu, 2022, p. 354). Even though limited to ten films a year, the profit on these imports accounted for 70 percent of the entire market. To cope with the challenges brought by Hollywood imported blockbusters and the upcoming WTO entry, the state initiated a series of moves to promote the market-oriented reform and industrialisation of its national film industry in the new century, such as establishing state-controlled shareholding film conglomerates such as China Film Group Corporation (CFGC), inviting private and foreign capital into the film industry (Kong, 2007, p. 240; Hu, 2014, p. 255; Su, 2016, p. 87; Yanling Yang, 2016, p. 80).

comedy films represent a new model of Chinese national cinema that positions itself vis-à-vis Hollywood.

Only days after China acceded to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in December 2001, Feng's 2001 New Year comedy *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan* 大腕) was released and rewrote Chinese box office history (Kong, 2007, p. 229). Scholars such as Zhang (2004, p. 292) and Kong (2007, p. 233-5) saw the production of *Big Shot's Funeral* as fundamentally commercial, as evidenced by it being a Chinese-Hollywood co-production[60], as well as the product placement of various local and imported goods in the film. The commercial operation of Feng's *Big Shot's Funeral* clearly illustrates that the marketisation of China's film industry has accelerated since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the strengthened influence of globalisation. Commercial operations have started to dominate the Chinese film industry in the twenty-first century.

The growing trend of commercialisation in the Chinese film industry by the beginning of the new century also transformed the approach of the Fifth Generation directors formerly known for their art films, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. In 2002, Zhang Yimou's Mainland-Hong Kong co-production[61] *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄) soon

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[60] *Big Shot's Funeral* is a co-production between the Chinese producers, the state-controlled film conglomerate CFGC, the then newly established private domestic enterprise Huayi Brothers Taihe, and the Hollywood producer, Columbia Asia. Exploring the best way to profit from the enormous market in China, Columbia continued its cooperation with Feng in his 2003 New Year comedy *Cell Phone* (*Shouji* 手机).

[61] Zhang's *Hero* was a co-production of three parties: the mainland private capital of the New Picture Movie and Television Corporation owned by Zhang Weiping 张伟平 (who is closely connected to Zhang), Hong Kong Edko Films Ltd, which helped attract international funds, and partially state-sponsored by the national China Film Co-production Corporation (CFCC) (Fung & Chan, 2010, p. 198). It was the most expensive film produced in the Chinese film industry at the time.

broke the box office record set by *Big Shots Funeral* (RMB38 million)[62] in the domestic

market, claiming a record of RMB241.68 million (Zhang, 2004, p. 292; Berry &

Farquhar, 2006, p. 135). Zhang's *Hero* topped the 2002 annual Chinese box office and

set the record for the highest-grossing domestic film in China. Commonly considered

the first domestic blockbuster in Chinese film history, the film is seen as a pioneering

attempt to upgrade the commercial viability of the Chinese film industry. More than

this, *Hero* is seen as taking the Chinese film industry to new levels of international

competitiveness (Zhang, 2002, pp. 16-8; Julian Stringer & Qiong Yu, 2007; Anthony

Fung & Joseph M. Chan, 2010, pp. 198-9; Rosen, 2010, p. 47; Davis, 2014, p. 204).

Further, in the eyes of many scholars (Dai, 2006, pp. 159-93; Gary D. Rawnsley, 2010,

p. 13; Yiyan Wang, 2010, pp. 43-4; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 135), art is complicit

with politics in Zhang's positive[63] portrayal of the King of Qin, later the First Emperor,

when he united China. The political discourse in *Hero* is exceptionally transparent in

the King of Qin's vision of *tianxia* (literally, "all under heaven"), a phrase that appears

numerous times throughout the film. This vision of *tianxia* can be seen as a new

allegory of a unified China, which is also a symbolic affirmation of the modern,

territorial, and unified nation-state (i.e., PRC). Arguably, the premiere of *Hero* at the

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[62] From its premiere on 21 December 2001 to 31 January 2002, the nationwide box office record totalled RMB38 million (Deng Guanghui 邓光辉, 2002, pp. 24-6; Kong, 2007, p. 230).

[63] Ever since his conquest of the warring states to form the Qin dynasty, the King of Qin has been a byword for a tyrant in Chinese history as he achieved national unification through violence and repression. However, Zhang's *Hero* miraculously transformed the image of the tyrannical King of Qin into a national hero, legitimising his unification of ancient China. By way of contrast, two other films of the same story were made by Zhang's Fifth Generation contemporaries before the release of his *Hero*: *The Emperor's Shadow* (*Qin song* 秦颂, 1996), directed by Zhou Xiaowen 周晓文, and *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jingke ci qinwang* 荆轲刺秦王, 1998), directed by Chen Kaige. The premise of a ruthless First Emperor is not challenged in these films, even though they may attempt to offer psychological explanations for his psychopathy. *Hero* turned out to be the most commercially successful of the three films.

Great Hall of People in Tiananmen Square constituted the favour the state returned for Zhang's outstanding service to mainstream ideology since the late 1990s, with his *Not One Less* (*Yige dou buneng shao* 一个都不能少, 1999) and *The Road Home* (*Wo de fuqin muqin* 我的父亲母亲, 1999). His *Hero* illustrates the successful model of a commercial blockbuster, in the twenty-first-century Chinese film industry that embodies both commercial and political values, fulfilling the needs of both the market/nation-people and the state/nation-state.

Zhang was later commissioned to direct the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The surge of nationalist pride in the wake of Zhang's *Hero* and his spectacular opening ceremony for the 2008 Beijing Olympics that amazed the world, had long placed this once art house Fifth Generation auteur in a new alliance of commerce and politics. Following Zhang's transition from art to commerce was his Fifth Generation contemporary Chen Kaige, whose multiple films made in the 2000s, such as *The Promise* (*Wu ji* 无极, 2005), emulated the production mode (i.e., commercial blockbuster mode) of Zhang's *Hero* (Darrell William Davis, 2014, p. 203). Ying Zhu and Bruce Robinson (2010, p. 145) see the cinematic transition of these Fifth Generation auteurs as an example of Chinese cinema's modernisation, in their words, "the creative transition of a distinct group of filmmakers from emphasis on modernising the film text to emphasis on modernising the film economy."

According to scholars such as Zhang (2004, p. 24) and Rao and Lan (2019), as a concept first proposed in 1987, "main melody"[64] or "leitmotif" films (*zhuxuanlv dianying*) usually refer to those that use film as an art form to express the Party-state's mainstream ideologies such as socialist values and government policies, foster national identity and install nationalistic pride in the population. At the beginning of their emergence in the early 1990s, "main melody" films were produced with authority and seriousness, following an epic storytelling style and addressing "main-melody" themes, such as socialism, patriotism, and collectivism (Li Ning, 2020). They were transformed since the mid-1990s, combining "main melody" themes with entertainment ingredients. More than this, one finds that since the twenty-first century, the familiar boundaries – and contradictions – among art, politics, and commerce (Ying Zhu & Rosen, 2010) have begun to break down, with films previously designated as "main melody" films successfully finding ways to stimulate audience interest and become what Rosen (2012, p. 197) calls "main melody commercial blockbusters".

This new type of "main melody" film was best exemplified by Han Sanping 韩三平 and Huang Jianxin's[65] "founding trilogy": *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye* 建国大业, 2009), *The Founding of a Party* (*Jiandang weiye* 建党伟业, 2011), and *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun daye* 建军大业, 2017) as co-producers, and the more

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[64] Films designated as "main melody" in China are also called by scholars abroad, such as Matthew D. Johnson (2016), "propaganda" films.
[65] Huang is Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's Fifth Generation contemporary.

recent trilogy of "main melody" omnibus[66] films: *My People, My Country* (*Wo he wo de zuguo* 我和我的祖国, 2019), *My People, My Homeland* (*Wo he wo de jiaxiang* 我和我的家乡, 2020), *and My Country, My Parents* (*Wo he wo de fubei* 我和我的父辈, 2021). Han Sanping, the CEO of the biggest film group in China, the state-owned CFGC, openly noted the "need to make mainstream ideology mix well with commercial means" (Rosen, 2012, p. 198). These main melody commercial blockbusters largely bridged the gap between the politicised "main melody" films and commercial blockbusters.

As a result, an increasing number of Chinese film scholars have (re)named these main melody commercial blockbusters "new mainstream films" (*xin zhuliu dianying*) (Yin Hong, 2019; Chen, 2021a, p. 77-89, 2021b) or "new mainstream blockbusters" (*xin zhuliu dapian*) (Rao & Lan, 2019). Albeit slight differences in terminology, one can see that the new mainstream films dominate the Chinese film industry in the twenty-first century. While upholding the Party-state's mainstream ideologies, achieving wide popularity among Chinese audiences and the corresponding commercial success is the top objective of these mainstream films. In other words, mainstream films can be simply defined as films aimed at a mass market audience. Moreover, these films are typically made by what scholars call "auteurs within the system" (Li Lei, 2020; Chen, 2021a, p. 12; Shen, 2021, pp. 92-4), often the established Fifth and New Force generations of directors.

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[66] According to Yan Zhenhui (2022, p. 9), the omnibus or anthology film is a film that consists of multiple segments around the same theme directed by different directors. It is now a new strategy for Chinese main melody films in the new century (more precisely in the late 2010s).

The best examples of mainstream films in the current Chinese film industry are the highest-grossing films by box office revenue. One finds that the top ten all-time highest-grossing domestic films[67] are almost all directed by the "auteurs within the system", including the established Fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou (*Full River Red*) and Chen Kaige (*The Battle at Late Changjin*), and the New Force directors, such as Wu Jing (*Wolf Warrior 2*), Jiaozi/Yang Yu 杨宇 (*Ne Zha*), Guo Fan 郭帆 (*The Wandering Earth* franchise), and Chen Sicheng 陈思成 (*Detective Chinatown 3*). Apart from the established Fifth and New Force Generation of directors who constitute the driving force of the top ten highest box office grossers, another group of Hong Kong directors also contribute to this force, such as Hark Tsui 徐克 (*The Battle at Lake Changjin*) and Dante Lam 林超贤 (*The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *Operation Red Sea*).

One notes that Hong Kong directors have been increasingly contributing to mainstream production in the Chinese film industry since its return to China's sovereignty in 1997[68]. After Hong Kong's handover, the subsequent film policies have helped both mainland and Hong Kong filmmakers obtain more resources and channels in location shooting, casting, funding, and circulation beyond the confines

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[67] According to Endata and Maoyan Pro, the top ten all-time highest-grossing domestic films as of 2023 are *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Hi, Mom* (*Nihao, Li Huanying* 你好，李焕英, 2021), *Ne Zha* (*Nezha zhi motong jiangshi* 哪吒之魔童降世, 2019), *The Wandering Earth* (2019), *Full River Red* (2023), *Detective Chinatown 3* (*Tangren jie tan'an* 唐人街探案, 2022), *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022), *The Wandering Earth 2* (2023), and *Operation Red Sea* (*Honghai xingdong* 红海行动, 2018) by rank.

[68] Hong Kong, which became a British colony after the Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century, reverted to its "motherland" on 1 July 1997 and was once again part of China.

of either Hong Kong or the mainland. For example, since 2002, Hong Kong films have been excluded from the annual import quotas[69] of blockbusters and instead given access to the mainland market once certain provisions are met (Zhang, 2004, p. 295). The Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in 2003 triggered an increase in Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions (Gary Bettinson, 2015, p. 7). This transregional mode of film production in the form of Mainland-Hong Kong co-production[70] has been prevalent. Mainland director Zhang Yimou's Hong Kong-style martial art film *Hero* (2002) discussed above was one of the best outputs of such co-productions.

Many Hong Kong directors who have co-produced with the mainland in the post-handover era have become established with the Chinese film industry and have a strong track record of producing the so-called "new mainstream films". Also, since stories of Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions are required to relate to the mainland (see "Detailed Rules on Strengthening the Cooperation and Management of Film Industry between the Mainland and Hong Kong" [*guanyu jiaqiang neidi yu xianggang dianyingye hezuo guanli de shishi xize*] released in October 2003), the rise in these co-productions increases the number of films portraying the Chinese nation. For instance, Hong Kong director Peter Ho-sun Chan's 陈可辛 *American Dreams in China*

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[69] As China entered the WTO in 2001, its film industry is also required to globalise by importing a fixed number of foreign films. From importing 20 films annually, China increased quotas to 34 in early 2012 (Su, 2016, p. 102).

[70] Mainland-Hong Kong co-productions are typically funded by both mainland and Hong Kong-based production companies and are intended to appeal to audiences in both regions. This means they are often designed to have broad commercial appeal and may feature elements popular with the mainland and Hong Kong audiences. As these co-productions qualify officially as domestic films, they are subject to censorship by the Chinese government. This means they are often designed to uphold the Party-state's mainstream ideologies.

(*Zhongguo hehuo ren* 中国合伙人, 2013), projects a strong image of the Chinese nation, where dreams, whether Chinese dreams or American dreams, can be realised in the new century. It is unrealistic and counterproductive to Going to the West to fulfil their longings is unrealistic and counterproductive.

In the twenty-first century, the Chinese film industry has become more diverse, with a growing number of non-mainstream films being produced alongside mainstream films. While mainstream films continue to dominant the industry, the rise of online streaming platforms and government support have provided new avenues for independent[71] and art-house filmmakers to distribute their work and reach a wider audience (Patrick Frater, 2017). Unlike mainstream films, which are usually made by "directors within the system" and are driven by commercial and/or political considerations, non-mainstream films, on the other hand, are typically made by art-house directors and are driven by artistic expression rather than commercial success, aiming at a niche market rather than a mass market audience. These films often have a small budget and fewer resources, and does not conform to the Party-state's expectations for mainstream film production.

As non-mainstream film production is independent concerning mainstream filmmaking, it can also be seen as independent concerning the Party-state's

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[71] If in the USA, independent filmmaking refers to a level of independence from the Hollywood system, in China, independent filmmaking should be understood as independent concerning the state studio system rather than as a totally self-supporting practice, as the censorship system in China requires all films to be approved by the government before they could be released in cinemas. Furthermore, Hongwei Lu (2015, p. 175) argues that not only does independent filmmaking consist of independence from the state system of production, distribution, and exhibition, but, more important, it consists of an alternative cultural vision of engaging with taboos on contemporary social reality through exploring new artistic ways to represent them.

mainstream ideologies. In other words, non-mainstream films often provide an alternative cultural vision compared with mainstream films on the same subject matter. In Hongwei Lu's (2015, pp. 175-87) words, non-mainstream filmmaking in China provides "a grassroots" perspective. In the twenty-first Chinese film industry, whereas established Fifth and New Force generations of directors are the driving force of mainstream films, representative Sixth Generation directors take up the mantle of making non-mainstream art films. Among these Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦 are widely celebrated as the leading alternative to mainstream Chinese cinema (Z. Zhang, 2007, pp. 2-45; J. McGrath, 2007, pp. 81-114; Robert Barnett, 2015, pp. 119-62; Z. Zhang & Angela Zito, 2015, p. 5; Jiwei Xiao, 2019).

Overall, Chinese national cinema in the twenty-first century can be seen as being formed by a complex interplay between mainstream and non-mainstream productions, each contributing in their own way to the development and growth of the industry. Mainstream productions have helped to drive the growth of the industry with a greater focus on commercial success and have played a significant role in China's increasing global influence in film market. As noted by Leung and Lee (2019, p. 201), in spite of being a latecomer to commercial film, China has spearheaded its growth faster than the more established industries. Non-mainstream productions, on the other hand, have contributed to a more diverse and dynamic film culture in China, and have helped to promote new and innovative approaches to filmmaking.

Since the twenty-first century, the Chinese film industry has been dominated by the production of mainstream films that have proven to be particularly popular with Chinese audiences. In addition to their popularity with a mass market audience, mainstream films are usually made by the "auteurs within the system", upholding the Party-state's mainstream ideologies. As a result, mainstream films often provide a mainstream reflection of the nation that may be less likely to challenge established mainstream ideologies.

2.3.3 Summary and Reflection

The aforementioned historical analysis of Chinese cinema demonstrates the significant role of gender imagery in shaping the construction of the nation in Chinese cinema. Throughout the twentieth century, directors from different generations have contributed to the portrayal of gender in Chinese cinema. In the present-day Chinese film industry, two distinct groups of directors coexist: the independent Sixth Generation directors who produce art-house, non-mainstream films, and the "directors within the system" comprising the Fifth and New Force Generations, who create commercially-oriented mainstream films. These diverse directors collectively present on-screen portrayals of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century, employing a gendered lens. By examining a selection of films by representative directors from these two groups, this thesis seeks to address the research question (RQ1) concerning the portrayal of the images of the Chinese nation on screen in the twenty-first century by various directors.

2.4 Gender and Nation in Twentieth-Century Chinese Cinema

This section delves deeper into the intricate relationship between gender and the construction of the nation in twentieth-century Chinese cinema. It examines the privileged visibility granted to women in the context of nation-building, elucidating the evolving portrayals of female characters and their male counterparts across different generations. By exploring these portrayals, it sheds light on the intricacies of gender dynamics and their symbolic representations of the nation. From the Second to the Fifth Generation of directors, the narrative trope of female victimisation emerges as a powerful tool in reflecting the nation's struggles against internal and external forces throughout the twentieth century.

Engendering Chinese nationhood through a gendered discourse has been a strategy frequently used since early Chinese cinema (Lu, 1997; Cui, 2003; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 108-68). The above tracing of the history of Chinese cinema also shows that the construction of the image of the nation has been intimately bound to the portrayal of gender from the beginning. In other words, women and/or men in Chinese cinematic expression have often served as the visual tropes for the vision of the Chinese nation throughout the twentieth century. This section will elaborate on how directors of each generation of Chinese cinema, specifically from the Second Generation to the Fifth Generation, construct the image of the nation through their portrayals of women and men.

2.4.1 Gender and Nation in Second Generation Cinema

1930s Chinese cinema has demonstrated that the construction of the nation and nationhood has been intimately bonded to representations of women since early Chinese cinema and has set the tone for later Chinese cinema, despite distinctly variable images of women on the screen, such as Communist heroines in the Third Generation cinema, and objects and agents of desire in the Fifth Generation cinema. Looking back at 1930s Chinese cinema, one finds that it produced the first big Chinese film stars who are celebrated for their portrayals of women, such as Ruan Lingyu (starring in *The Goddess*, *The New Woman*), Zhou Xuan 周璇 (starring in *Street Angel*), and Hu Die 胡蝶 (Zhang, 2004, p. ix; Wicks, 2009, p. 397). Among these famous actresses, the real-world ever-suffering national icon Ruan Lingyu[72] and the most consistent cinematic image she portrayed – the suffering woman, is often seen by critics (e.g., Lu, 1997, p. 21; Cui, 2003, p. 33; Zhang, 2004, pp. 82-3; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 108; Kristine Harris, 2008, p. 128) as a symbol of the then Chinese nation itself, suffering under semi colonialism, semi feudalism, and Japanese invasion in the 1930s.

Suffering women such as the prostitute caught in between feudalism and imperialism or capitalism is a primary role that links women and the nation in 1930s Chinese

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[72] Born in 1910 in Shanghai to working-class Cantonese parents, Ruan committed suicide at age twenty-five in 1935 (Cheng, 1985; Harris, 1997, pp. 277-302; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 118; Yiman Wang, 2011, p. 250). During her ten-year film career, she portrayed various female roles in twenty-nine films (Cui, 2003, p. 274). Just as her character in her last film, *The New Woman* (1935), who is driven to suicide by press gossip, she committed suicide due to relentless media slander about her private life. The sensation was heightened because, in *The New Woman*, she played a regretful suicide whose dying cry was, "I want to live!" There were many such parallels between her real life and those of the characters she portrayed on screen.

cinema (Rey Chow, 1991, pp. 107-113 & 139-56; Cui, 2003, pp. 15-23; Zhang, 2004, p. 82-3; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 119-124). The prostitute, whom Shannon Bell (1994, p. 72) called "the other within the categorical other women", or Cui (2003, p. 15) called "the other of the oppressed other", embodies doubly deprivileged identities: a fallen whore compared to other women as a sexual commodity exchanged among men. Various famous actresses of 1930s Chinese cinema portrayed the role of the prostitute, which built the image of the nation.

Take one of Ruan's most famous roles as the title character in *The Goddess* (1934) as an example; she is a self-sacrificing prostitute mother whose screen image appears as a suffering victim. Being the devoted mother to a little boy ties into nationalism as her determination to pay his school fee is motivated by the hope that he will do great things for his country. Yet this also leads her to become a prostitute to raise the money to pay for the fees. Moreover, the imprisonment of Ruan's role after she kills the evil pimp near the end of the film, as argued by Zhang (1996, pp. 160-80), indicates that no hope of personal salvation could be offered to the prostitute. Such an image of the prostitute embodies an emblem of a humiliated and oppressive nation in the 1930s. Likewise, the image of a prostitute who loses her homeland and family (being an exile from north-eastern China) and life (urban evils murder her) in *Street Angel* (1937) was used to symbolise a miserable nation under Japanese aggression and class exploitation at the time (Cui, 2003, p. 18; Zhang, 2004, p. 83; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 83). These images of the prostitute in 1930s Chinese cinema parallel the fallen woman and the fallen nation, with the women characters' tragic end echoing that of 1930s China.

In another classic leftist film, *The New Woman* (1935), Ruan portrayed a modern or new woman, characterised by her profession as a teacher/writer and her individuality as she seeks an independent life, who is forced to be a prostitute. However, even a modern, independent woman who opposes the power of ancient feudalism, a metaphor for China as a modern nation-state in the 1930s, cannot escape economic pressure or capitalism. She is forced to become as a sexual commodity and dies in an unfeeling society. This image of the (forced) prostitute again symbolises the then-humiliated and oppressive Chinese nation.

In her analysis of *The New Woman* and Ruan's suicide that succeeded it, Harris (1997, p. 279) commented: "The film and the suicide expose Chinese popular culture at a moment of crisis over the degree to which women would be agents, symbols, or victims of modernity." Her comment emphasises that contradictory roles for women converge in Ruan. This range of otherwise contradictory roles in one female figure, often conflating within one film, represents an image of the Chinese nation under ongoing struggle of imperialist invasion and feudalism' shackles at the same time in the 1930s. Images of suffering women were again projected as metaphors of a suffering China in the second golden age of 1940s cinema, as illustrated by the sacrificing and suffering female protagonist who undergoes traumatic experiences throughout the war in *The Spring River Flows East* (1947) (Cui, 2003, pp. 24-6; Zhang, 2004, pp. 100-1) and the female protagonist who lives "without hope" in *Spring in a Small Town* (1948) (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 76, 88).

In addition, images of male characters also function to symbolise the nation. Still, unlike the female characters, who remain oppressive, suffering figures, they are cast as active agents and/or national heroes (Cui, 2003, pp. 25-6; Zhang, 2004, p. 68; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 86, 201), such as road workers who build a highway to help the army to get to the front and fight the Japanese in *Big Road* (Dalu 大路, 1934), intellectuals who join the Chinese resistance against the Japanese invaders in *Children of Troubled Times* (1935), and soldiers who fight the war between China and Japan *The Spring River Flows East* (1947). Here one can see the early development of onscreen male characters as active agents, becoming a fixture in the Third Generation cinema. A stark gender dichotomy appears in their respective associations with the Chinese nation. While the spiritual health (i.e., suffering) of the nation is represented as a feminine process through the figure of the suffering woman (Rey Chow, 1991, pp. 107-113; Pickowicz, 1991; Zhang, 1994), the formation of the nation is represented as a masculine activity (Cui, 2003, p. 25).

2.4.2 Gender and Nation in Third Generation Cinema

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, images of gender were no less visible and crucial in Chinese cinema for the sake of socialist nation-building. Often, female characters are depicted as victims of feudal and class oppression who are transformed into beneficiaries of national liberation and emancipated communist heroines through salvation and guidance from the Communist Party authority figures (Marchetti, 1997, p. 60; Lu, 1997, p. 21; Cui, 2003, p. 83; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 115; Lu, 2021). These Party figures that guide these women are usually males who represent active agents of revolutionary change and communism.

In this respect, the woman is subordinated first to the patriarchal tradition, then to the communist patriarchal collective. In this respect, as Cui (2003, p. 90) indicated, "one might take the party as the symbolic father, while woman its symbolic daughter." By emphasising her status as the "oppressed class sister", communist proletarian discourse legitimises women's emancipation. These images of the male and the female are most vividly portrayed in the most prominent Third Generation director Xie Jin's classic revolutionary films, such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) and *Two Stage Sisters* (1964) (Marchetti, 1997, pp. 59-80; Cui, 2003, pp. 79-95; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 113-8). For instance, in *The Red Detachment of Women*, while the female protagonist, Qionghua 琼花, is a victim of cruel feudal oppression, her male counterpart and the male protagonist, Hong Changqing 洪常青, is a Party representative who liberates Qionghua from slavery and leads her to revolution.

It is worth noting that the thematic music that initiates and ends *The Red Detachment of Women* links the red female soldiers like Qionghua with a legendary female figure in Chinese history, who is also a soldier – Hua Mulan 花木兰 – as a model to follow. Hua Mulan originally came from the *Song of Mulan* (*Mulan shi* 木兰诗), written and circulated during the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589). The narrative folk song depicts the story of a woman soldier/warrior who takes her father's place in the army dressed as a male soldier.

Scholars such as Berry and Farquhar (2006, pp. 112-3) and Jinhua Li (2016, p. 41) point out that Mulan is arguably the most envisioned and mediated female figure when approaching the image of woman as the narrative of the nation in Chinese film history. While numerous revisions have shaped the form and content of the story of Mulan (e.g., *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), directed by Second Generation filmmaker Bu Wancang), each revision represents the figure of Mulan from a more or less different perspective and accordingly projects a different image of the Chinese nation through this legendary Chinese female warrior. While the original narrative enacts a daughter's filial piety to her father and the family, the cinematic remake of the story in 1956, *Hua Mulan* 花木兰, directed by Liu Guoquan 刘国权 and Zhang Xinshi 张新实, generates a socialist encounter.

Specifically, the importance of filial piety is not diminished in the 1956 Mulan film, but it can be legitimately deferred when the nation calls upon an individual. The tension between loyalty to the nation and filial piety is also resolved early in the film. When her parents see her off, Mulan comforts them: "I hope I will win the battle. *After* I return home from defeating the enemy, I will perform my filial piety to you." Mulan's usage of the word "after" here reveals that performing her loyalty to the nation is more important than her filial piety to her parents. The priority given to performing loyalty to the nation displaces the dominance of filial piety.

Once Mulan has persuaded her parents that she can pass for a man to join the army, the film provides a solution for her un-filial departure from home. Mulan's father nods approvingly on hearing Mulan's declaration that her filial service to her parents

will be delayed until after her national duties are achieved. Mulan's elder sister reassures Mulan that she will perform filial responsibilities and care for the family. After twelve years of military service, Mulan, already a general, affirms that she cannot return home and perform her filial piety until victory is secured. She does not resent the hardship and sacrifice this resolve entails. The 1956 film version portrays Mulan as a patriotic daughter to her country and then a filial daughter to her parents by expressly advocating the value of serving the nation and sacrificing with a delayed performance of filial duties. Instead of portraying Mulan who fights for the nation as an extension of her father and her family in the 1939 film, Mulan in the 1956 film fights as an extension of the state.

Further, in this socialist representation of Mulan, her transvestism is a prerequisite to her ability to act in the public sphere. "Recognition of [Mulan's] success depends upon suppression of her feminine identity under the soldierly codes of dress and behavior", as Esther Yau (1990, p. 225) indicated, "she receives praise precisely because she succeeds in denying her female self when necessary." Later in *Hua Mulan* (1956), Mulan's performance as a disguised male military leader has so impressed her commander-in-chief that he seeks Mulan as a "son-in-law" for his daughter. Social recognition, in this sense, depends on a woman's sacrifice of her female sexuality and subjectivity.

The process of desexualising the female body in socialist representation of women, such as Mulan in *Hua Mulan* and Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women*, reflects the gender condition in Maoist China and the cinematic formula that

dominates film production in the Third Generation cinema. Such an image of women as sexless heroines is also illustrated in Xie Jin's another famed revolutionary film, *Two Stage Sisters* (1964). The female protagonist of the film, Chunhua 春花, is a formerly child bride who is on the run from an arranged marriage and later becomes an actress in Shaoxing opera after taking refuge with a travelling opera troupe. While abused and oppressed in the "old society" of pre-1949 China, she has transformed, liberated, and empowered herself by performing progressive programs (Lu Xun 鲁迅's *The New Year Sacrifice*) and revolutionary operas (the by-then popular legend of *The White-haired Girl*).

In the final scene of the film, Chunhua tells her stage sister to "perform a lifetime of revolutionary operas" together[73]. In this transfer from oppression to empowerment, Chunhua becomes what Dai (1993, p. 215) put as "the good daughter of the Party". Therefore, one can discern that the Communist heroine becomes a consistent image for women characters in constructing the image of the nation in the Third Generation socialist cinema. In the Second Generation leftist cinema, one female character encompasses a variety of contradictory roles, who is, as Harris (1997, p. 279) described, simultaneously "agents, symbols, or victims of modernity". In the third Generation cinema, one finds that such mutually incompatible roles in one female

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[73] According to Zhang (2004, pp. 215-6), Xie Jin's original plan was to conclude *Two Stage Sisters* with the following dialogue:
Yuehong (Chunhua's stage sister): "From now on, I'll be a clean person and perform seriously."
Chunhua (pauses momentarily): "But to be what kind of person? And to perform what kind of play?"
But under political pressure, the completed film ends with Chunhua's advice that they remould themselves and perform only revolutionary operas.

character are decisively condensed into Harris's "symbols of modernity", who represent a Maoist China characterised by patriotic nationalism and/or communism.

Further, as Cui (2003, p. xxiii) noted, the transformation matrix from the oppressed female into the revolutionary heroine requires that the woman rejects her gender identity and submits to a gender-neutral, collective entity. In this discourse, communism replaces her gender identity with a political mask. And women's newly found freedom from feudal and class oppression is followed by integration into a new social order, what Judith Stacey (1983) saw as a "socialist patriarchy". In this social order, the liberation of women is concurrent with a process of gender erasure, which denies the gender difference between women and men. Whereas female characters in the Second Generation cinema are often involved in complicated romantic and sexual entanglements, female characters in the Third Generation cinema usually eschew romantic situations for chaste political passion. Even if these revolutionary heroines and their male counterparts are depicted to fully possess newly empowered femininities and masculinities, sexuality itself is minimised and elided.

2.4.3 Gender and Nation in Fourth and Fifth Generation cinema

Once again, in the Fourth Generation cinema, the image of the suffering woman, who had often gone through deprivation in the Cultural Revolution, was utilised as a signifier for the nation in the post-Mao era/postsocialist era (Dai, 1995; Lu, 1997, p. 8; Cui, 2003). For example, women are the deprived subjects and unattainable love objects of men in their sorrowful love stories in Yang Yanjin 杨延晋's *Narrow Street* (*Xiaojie* 小街, 1980), and Huang Jianzhong's *As-You-Wish* (*Ru Yi* 如意, 1982), directed

by. They are the victims of ignorance and the sacrificial offerings of civilisation or historical development in Teng Wenji's 滕文骥 *The Village in the City* (*Dushili de cunzhuang* 都市里的村庄, 1982), Hu Bingliu 胡炳榴's *A Country Wife* (*Xiangyin* 乡音, 1983), and Wu Tianming's *Old Well* (*Laojing* 老井, 1985). They are also the child brides who are married to toddler boys and bring sexual tension when coming of age in Huang Jianzhong's *Good Woman* (*Liangjia funv* 良家妇女, 1985), and Xie Fei's *A Girl from Hunan* (*Xiangnv Xiaoxiao* 湘女潇潇, 1986). Following Dai's view, these images of women are appropriated to represent the desire of the male directors and the suppression of their desire.

Like the Fourth Generation cinema, the construction of the nation in the Fifth Generation cinema is also often achieved via portraying women and their male counterparts. One can even find a continuation between the images of women and men concerning the nation portrayed by these two generations of directors. Of the many talents to emerge among the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yimou is arguably the most significant and versatile, with international awards for acting, cinematography, and direction. Zhang Yimou's best-known films with Gong Li, the female lead from the start of his directorial career and a visual icon that bodily illustrates the image of Chinese women, are exemplary cases in portraying women for projections of the nation. Specifically, Zhang's renderings of the woman who signifies the nation repeat a trope of a socially oppressed yet rebellious young woman in pre-1949 rural China[74], persistent from his first film with Gong Li, *Red Sorghum*, through *Ju Dou*, *Raise the*

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[74] The only exception is *To Live*, although its story starts in the 1940s but spans several decades.

Red Lantern, *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju daguansi* 秋菊打官司, 1992), *To Live* (*Huozhe* 活着, 1993), all the way to his last one with Gong as his lead, *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao* 摇啊摇，摇到外婆桥, 1995).

For example, in *Red Sorghum*, Gong's character, Jiu'er 九儿, is sold by her poor father into marrying an old man with leprosy. Yet she rebels against her fate and rejects her father to his face, shouting, "You are not my father!" In *Ju Dou*, Gong's character, Judou 菊豆, is sold as a wife to an old, impotent cloth dyer who sexually tortures her. Judou rebels against the sexual oppression forced upon her to engage in sex with her aged husband's adoptive nephew and give birth to the child of her infidelity. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Gong's character, Songlian 颂莲, is sold to become the fourth concubine of a wealthy aged man. Songlian rebels against the patriarchal line and feigns pregnancy, attempting to garner most of her husband's favour and time. In *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Gong's character, Qiu Ju, whose husband is kicked in the groin by the village head. Despite her pregnancy, she rebels against the patriarchal and bureaucratic system and finds justice for her husband. In *To Live*, Gong's character, Jiazhen 家珍, is married to a compulsive gambler who gambles away all his possessions. Despite being pregnant with her husband's child, Jiazhen rebels against him, leaves him and takes their daughter away. In *Shanghai Triad*, the last collaboration between Zhang and Gong in the 1990s, Gong's character, Xiao Jinbao 小金宝, is the mistress of an old triad boss. Xiao Jinbao rebels against her destiny of being a mistress and carries on an affair with the boss's number two man.

One can see a continuation of using the trope of a socially oppressed yet rebellious female figure in constructing the image of the nation from the Third Generation cinema. Like Gong's characters, as illustrated above, female characters in the Third Generation films such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961) and *Two Stage Sisters* (1964) are also seen resisting or running away from arranged marriages and rebelling against their fate. Yet in both generations of cinema, the screen image of the woman often appeared as an oppressed other to be saved by her male counterpart.

In contrast to Zhang's sensual female characters, played by Gong, are their male counterparts. They are either rendered castrated, such as the unwanted husband in *Red Sorghum*, the impotent elderly husband and psychically and socially emasculated nephew in *Ju Dou*, the husband whose phallus and testicles are injured in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the incapable husband and father to save his wife and children in *To Live*, or remain marginal in the mise-en-scene, such as the master whose presence is concealed from the screen in *Raise the Red Lantern*. As E. Ann Kaplan (1991, p. 153) pointed out in her discussion of the Fifth Generation cinema, "State communism, in demanding male submission to the Law of the Father with little possibility for obtaining at least some parity with the Father position (as in free-enterprise capitalism), may produce men psychically damaged in deeper ways even than women." In this sense, portrayals of men in the Fifth Generation cinema can be seen as a confirmation of castrated male sexuality under a repressive social system.

Lu (1997, p. 22) saw the rediscovery of gender differences in Zhang Yimou's films "the process of rediscovering individuality, subjectivity, and sexuality". Yet no matter how powerfully Zhang's female character is framed in the foreground, she is not a subject nor an agent of change but remains a suffering beauty. For instance, Gong's characters in Zhang's "allegorical red trilogy" either die, as in *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, or go insane, as in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Moreover, Dai (1995, pp. 265-6) and Cui (2012, p. 499) see the suffering female image in male-directed Fourth and Fifth Generation films as a signifier of history's, precisely that of the Cultural Revolution, expropriation of men, especially those who work as cultural producers like directors. The suffering female image is employed to signify the internal "lack" experienced by the deprived male protagonist (Dai, 1995, p. 265) and, at the same time, recover "a repressed masculinity" of the male directors (Cui, 2012, p. 499). In Dai's (1995, p. 266) words, women's images are used once again to "pay back a debt owed to history on behalf of the male world … that bear no relationship with the actual living conditions of real women".

2.4.4 Summary and Reflection

The historical review presented above examines gender portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema throughout the twentieth century, highlighting the privileged visibility granted to women in relation to nation-building. Male directors, from the Second Generation to the Fifth Generation, have often appropriated the paradigm of female victimisation for their critical discourse. During the Second Generation, the portrayal of women who were victims of oppression, particularly prostitutes trapped between feudalism and imperialism, played a crucial role in connecting the

experiences of women with the broader narrative of the nation. They symbolised the humiliation and oppression experienced by the Chinese nation during that period.

In the Third Generation films, female characters were frequently portrayed as victims of feudal and class oppression but transformed into empowered communist heroines under the guidance of male Communist Party figures. The representation of women in these films involved the desexualisation of the female body and the suppression of feminine identity for social recognition, reflecting the dominant cinematic formula of the era. Collectively, the depiction of revolutionary heroines and their male counterparts in Third Generation cinema cultivates a gender-neutral portrayal of a socialist collective nation.

In the films of the Fourth and Fifth Generation, a post-Mao China was depicted through the portrayal of women enduring suffering and men experiencing symbolic castration. These female characters rebelled against their predetermined fate and bravely confronted patriarchal and oppressive systems. However, they often faced tragic outcomes. Meanwhile, male characters in these films were marginalised or symbolically castrated, representing the psychological harm inflicted by a repressive social order. This historical overview serves as a foundation for comparing portrayals in twenty-first-century cinema and contributes to addressing the research question of whether there are notable similarities and differences in gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation on screen in the new century (RQ3).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This final section of the literature review chapter focuses on the development of the theoretical framework that underpins this research. It discusses the key theoretical concepts and models employed in analysing gender and nation in Chinese cinema. By drawing upon relevant theoretical perspectives, this section establishes the foundation for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data collected in this study.

A theoretical framework refers to the overaching theoretical perspective or set of concepts that guide the research and provide a framework for understanding and interpreting the subject matter (Shona McCombes, 2020). It establishes the theoretical underpinnings and conceptual lenses through which researchers can examine the research problem. The theoretical framework plays a crucial role in situating the research within pertinent theoretical debates and concepts. It provides a theoretical lens through which the researcher analyses and interprets the data and findings. This section aims to draw upon existing concepts and models from relevant fields of study to develop a framework that is tailored to the specific needs of this research.

2.5.1 Theoretical Concepts: Gender and Nation in Chinese Cinema

As this research examines the construction of the nation in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema through gender portrayals, it is imperative to recognise and address the dynamic theoretical concepts intertwined with this subject. It is crucial not to overlook the significance and complexity of this endeavour, but instead, to engage

with the evolving theoretical landscape surrouding it. As the introduction chapter has provide a concise overview of how the key concepts of gender and nation are employed in this study, this section aims to elucidate the intricacies surrouding the utilisation of these terms within the realm of Chinese cinema.

Nation

Before exploring the role of gender portrayals in shaping the nation in twenty-first century Chinese cinema (RQ1), it is essential to address a distinctive complexity inherent in Chinese cinema - the absence of an exact equivalent to the English term "nation" in the Chinese language. Homi K. Bhabha (1990, p. 297), in his work *Nation and Narration*, noted that conceiving the nation as a collective agency creates a division between the people as both subjects and objects within the discourse that represents them. Bhabha's insights prompt a differentiation between the nation as a subject or agency and the nation as an object. In the context Chinese cinema, this differentiation can be understood as the distinction between the nation-state (agency) and the nation-people (object).

Scholars specialising in Chinese cinema, including Lu (1997, 2021), Zhang (2002, 2004), and Berry and Farquhar (2006), widely aknowledged the interdepedence and reciprocal influence between the nation-state (*guojia*) and the nation-people (*minzu*) in shaping the concept of the nation. Consequently, examining the portrayal of the nation on the Chinese screen necessitates considering both the representation of the nation for the nation-state and the representation of the nation for the nation-people. The political system, administrative apparatus, and cultural policies of the

101

state contribute to the formation of the perspective of the nation-state, which prioritises official voices. Typically, the image of the nation for the nation-state is crafted by "directors within the system", such as the Fifth and New Force Generation directors. These directors collaborate with state-owned production companies and serve as spokespersons[75] for the Chinese state, promote its narratives, values, and ideologies. Their films, being mainstream within the industry, align with the state's agenda of nation-building, presenting an image of the nation that supports the state's vision.

On the other hand, the perspective of the nation-people represents the lived experiences, concerns, and aspirations of ordinary Chinese individuals, prioritising grassroots and unofficial voices. The image of the nation for the nation-people is often constructed by independent directors who operate outside the confines of the mainstream system, notably the Sixth Generation directors. These filmmakers rely on independent funding and production methods, seeking alternative avenues for financing such as international co-productions, grants, or private investments. This grants them greater creative freedom and autonomy to explore themes and stories

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[75] It is important to note that not all mainstream directors in China can be categorised as the state's spokespeople, or representatives of the state, and there are instances where their films may push boundaries or subtly challenge certain aspects of the status quo. For instance, Wen Muye 文牧野, a representative mainstream, New Force generation of director, made *Dying to Survive* (*Wo bushi yaoshen* 我不是药神, 2018) which sparked debate about the cost of healthcare in China. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang 李克强 cited the film in an appeal to regulators to "speed up price cuts for cancer drugs" and "reduce the burden on families" (Christian Shepherd & Pei Li, 2018). However, on a broader scale, mainstream directors who work within the system tend to construct an image of the nation that aligns with the nation-state's preferred narratives and values, presenting a vision that supports and reinforces the state's agenda.

that may not align with the priorities or restrictions of mainstream studios. Their

works, being non-mainstream within the industry, present an alternative portrayal of

the nation that extends beyond dominant state-driven narratives. These films

resonate with the experiences, concerns, and aspirations of everyday Chinese people

and empower grassroots voices. By providing such representations, they enable the

nation-people to encounter reflections of their own lives on screen.

Despite facing challenges such as limited production and distribution opportunities,

as well as state censorship[76], independent filmmakers possess the ability to shape an

image of the nation that reflects the perspectives of the nation-people through their

films. Their capacity is influenced by their unique artistic visions. Through bold

experimentation with form and style, filmmakers of the Sixth Generation establish a

distinct cinematic voice that sets them apart from mainstream cinema, providing a

counterpoint to dominant narratives. They often present alternative interpretations

of social issues and marginalised communities within Chinese society, which may be

inadequately represented or overlooked by mainstream channels.

The films of the Sixth Generation employ subtle techniques to convey social

commentary and critique societal issues. Despite the potential for censorship, they

skillfully embed such commentary within their narratives, symbols, and imagery.

Through metaphorical storytelling or symbolism, they indirectly address sensitive or

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[76] China's *Film Administration Regulations*, issued by the State Council in 2001 and implemented since February 1, 2002, oversee a range of activities concerning film production, import, export, distribution, and projection within the country (Zhongguo zhengfu wang, 2005). These regulations establish a licensing system and enforce film censorship, with Article 25 of the censorship and film content regulations specifying prohibited content.

controversial topics, allowing spectators to decipher hidden meanings and engage in critical thinking. By offering these alternative viewpoints, which may challenge the dominant narrative, they contribute to a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the nation and its people.

As a result, the portrayal of the nation on screen in China has become an ongoing project of contestation. Mainstream films depict the nation from the perspective of the nation-state, emphasising official representations, while non-mainstream films present the nation from the perspective of the nation-people, focusing on the experiences and aspirations of ordinary individuals. These two perspectives compete for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the nation, jointly contributing to a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of the nation's image.

Gender

Scholars such as Ann Anagnost (1997, p. 2) and Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 6) highlighted the crucial role of narration in the existence of the nation. In Chinese cinema, gender assumes a prominent position in the portrayal of the nation. The connection between gender and the construction of the nation in cinema has often been explored through the portrayal of mothers and their symbolic significance for the nation (Rosie Thomas, 1989; Berry and Farquhar, 2006, p. 110). However, an examination of Chinese cinema reveals a different narrative. The literature review conducted above demonstrates that dominant images of Chinese women representing the nation in twentieth-century Chinese cinema extend beyond traditional domestic roles and highlight their presence in public spaces, even when

they are married and mothers. Female roles in Chinese cinema transcend conventional gender tropes by portraying women as active agents in public spheres rather than confining them solely to the home as mothers.

Chinese cinema of the twentieth century has established a model of Chinese womanhood within the national discourse, diverging from the dominant portrayal of the maternal figure found in other national cinemas, such as Indian cinema. Instead of the mother figure, it is the daughter figure who leaves home and engages in public spaces that has become a role model for modern Chinese women, aligning with the construction of the modern Chinese nation in Chinese cinema. Cinematic heroines have emerged as warriors, exemplified by iconic characters such as Hua Mulan in films like in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) and *Hua Mulan* (1956), as well as revolutionary and labour heroines in films produced by directors from the Third to Fifth Generation. These portrayals serve as a reminder that the daughter figure has long been an aspirational role model for Chinese women in public spaces. It is worth noting that male directors, from the Second Generation to the Fifth Generation, have often appropriated the paradigm of female victimisation for their critical discourse. This prompts further exploration of the relationship between women and the nation, as well as the specific aspects of women that symbolise the nation, in the context of twenty-first-century Chinese cinema.

While gender portrayals in twentieth-century Chinese cinema emphasised the privileged visibility given to women in the nation-building process, traditional/Confucian codes, such as filial piety (*xiao*), brotherhood (*yi*), and loyalty

(*zhong*), were employed to depict Chinese masculinities and establish connections between individual men and the nation. These traditional codes are considered integral to Chinese masculinities and were upheld as a means to preserve the nation's values and traditions (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 138-44). Notably, male characters in the films of the Third Generation directors were often depicted as strong and heroic, while in the films of the Fourth and Fifth Generation directors, they were marginalised or symbolically castrated, representing the psychological harm inflicted by a repressive social order during the Mao era. This prompts further exploration of the relationship between men and the nation, as well as the specific aspects of men that symbolise the nation, in the context of twenty-first-century Chinese cinema.

2.5.2 Theoretical Model: Gender-as-Nation
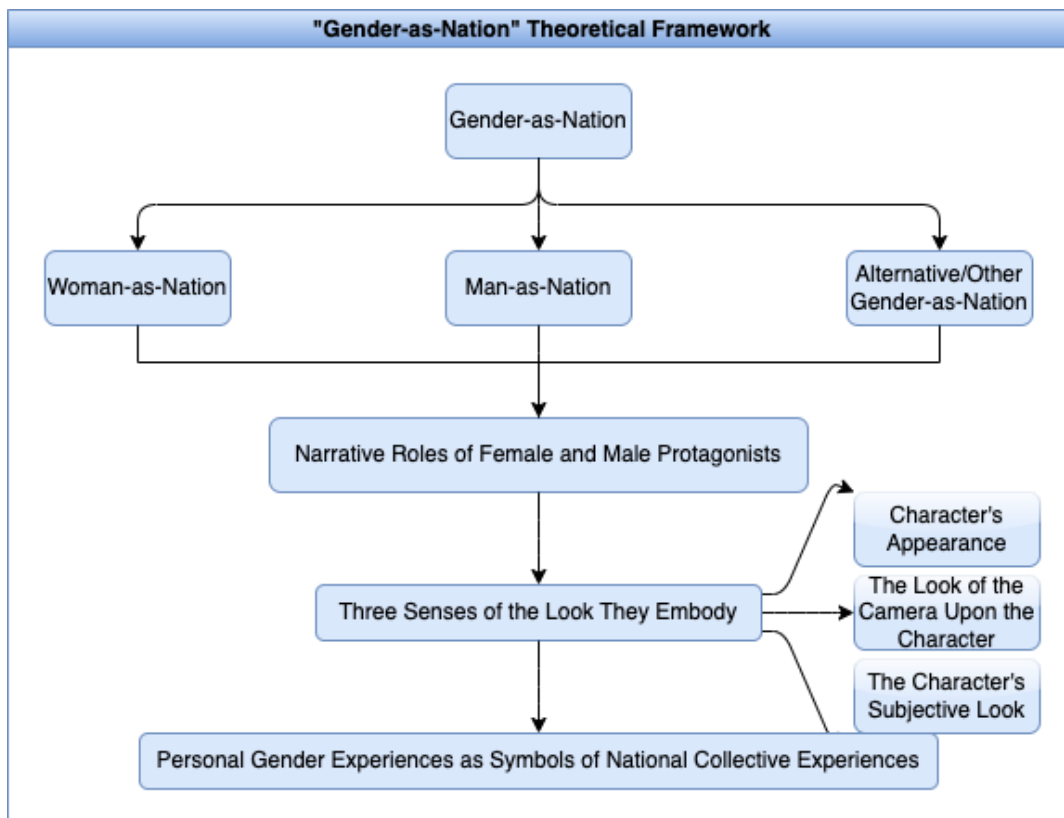
FIGURE 2.1 Theoretical Framework of "Gender-as-Nation" (Meng, 2023).

As illustrated in Figure 2.1 above, this thesis introduces "gender-as-nation" as its foundational theoretical framework. This framework posits that men and women, along with their gender roles, power dynamics, and their gendered social and cultural experiences within Chinese cinema, symbolically embody the traits, values, and challenges associated with the nation. The development of this theoretical framework takes inspiration from two well-established theoretical frameworks used in previous scholarly works: "woman-as-nation" (Cui, 2003[77]; Berry and Farquhar, 2006[78], pp. 108-34; Lu, 2021, pp. 55-74) and "man-as-nation" (Berry and Farquhar, 2006, pp. 135-68; Hu and Guan, 2021; Lu, 2021, pp. 97-114). In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, numerous examples are provided to illustrate how the experiences of women and men in films symbolically represent the experiences of the nation during their respective time periods.

While the concept of gender is understood in a binary sense within the context of this thesis, encompassing individuals who are biologically male and female in alignment with contemporary Chinese societal norms and how gender is depicted in Chinese cinema, it is crucial to acknowledge that gender is a multifaceted and intricate

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[77] The "woman-as-nation" theoretical framework, as proposed by Cui in her book *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (2003), recognises the complex and multifaceted portrayal of women in Chinese cinema. This framework views women as visual and discursive signs contributing to the construction of national identity, offering a lens through which researchers can analyse how Chinese cinema employs female characters to convey ideas about the nation, its identity, and its evolution.

[78] In their book *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), Berry and Farquhar argued that the predominant portrayals of Chinese women and men in cinema each play a role in shaping distinct configurations of the nation. The "woman-as-nation" framework, as discussed by them, explores how female characters in Chinese cinema often play specific narrative roles and embody symbolic elements within the story. The narrative role of women is closely tied to the nation's broader narrative. It introduces the concept of the "three senses of the look", which are used to analyse the portrayal of women in Chinese cinema. "Man-as-nation" delves into how the qualities associated with male characters, namely loyalty, filiality, and brotherhood, reflect or challenge the prevailing ideals of the nation.

concept that includes various gender identities beyond the binary system, such as transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer. Therefore, this overarching or meta concept of "gender-as-nation" can be subdivided into at least three sub-concepts, specifically "woman-as-nation", "man-as-nation", and "alternative/other gender-as-nation" – the latter representing all other gender identities that do not conform to the traditional male-female binary.

In the context of this thesis, male and female protagonists, their gender roles, as well as their gendered social and cultural experiences within Chinese cinema, are scrutinised and assessed through the narrative roles of these protagonists and the three senses of the look they convey. Precisely, the exploration of these three senses of the look, which these men and women often engage in within their gender relations, enriches their respective narrative roles. This enriching process signifies the symbolic representation of their gender roles and gender dynamics in society. Together, the personal gender experiences of male and female protagonists in film serve as symbolic representations embodying the collective national experiences, thereby encapsulating the essence of "gender-as-nation".

It is worth noting that the "gender-as-nation" model proposed within the context of Chinese cinema appears to be applicable in the field of Chinese television as well. In his book, *Televising Chineseness: Gender, Nation, and Subjectivity* (2022), Geng Song also implicates this symbolic representation of the nation, or what he often

interchangebly calls "Chineseness", through gender images. Song analyses[79] how individual cosmopolitanism[80] and post-socialist aspirations are projected onto particular figures of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Chinese television. Specifically, Song demonstrates how the figure of the "bossy CEO", often from the business elite or another professional class, is frequently paired with a contrasting female love interest who is cute but less socially refined. She often comes from a humble background, and her upward social mobility through her relationship with the masculinist CEO drives the main plots of these popular TV dramas. This gender imaginary of capitalist cosmopolitan fusion masculinity not only enables a certain female agency but ultimately leads to female domestication. This stereotypical image and discourse on gender relations, according to Song (2022, p. 12), "legitimize and enhance male dominance in society, which in turn symbolically buttresses the patriarchal power of the state".

Song enhances the study of gender ideology with a Foucauldian analysis of "governmentality"[81] and "technology of the self" in contemporary China. He references Xi Jinping's discourse of the Chinese Dream, the mixed mode of governance that displaces state authoritarianism, and the cultivation of consumers' individualism and autonomy. In essence, Song's theoretical foundation for examinning the relationship between gender and nation is based on Foucault's

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[79] Song's methodolody in his study differs from that of this research. He conducted interview-based ethnography and reception studies, whereas this study adopts textual analysis.

[80] During the reform and opening era of the 1980s and the early 1990s under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, which emphasised China's engagement with global capitalism, there was also a deliberate cultivation of individualism and cosmopolitanism among consumers.

[81] Foucault's concept of "governmentality" serves as a vital analytical tool for exploring how the exercise of power through the self-disciplining of individuals (Michel Foucault, 1978).

"governmentality" theory, which explores the role of cultural governance through television in contemporary China.

China provides a complex and contested case study of how the relationship between the state and the individual operates in a non-liberal context. On the one hand, there is little doubt that the Chinese state has no intention of retreating from its people's lives, particularly in terms of cultural and intellectual control. On the other hand, parallel to the privatisation and marketisation of state-owned enterprises is the party-state's increasing interest in and appropriation of strategies and discourses that correspond in many regards to the "neoliberal" trend in the West for managing, controlling, and educating the Chinese population. At the centre of the discourses and strategies mobilised by the government during this process is the creation of "desiring subjects" in a consumerist context (Rofel, 2007). Without emphasising rights or liberties, Chinese governmentality involves both a "facilitative" dimension, where free individuals pursue their own interests, and an "authoritarian" dimension, which produces controllable citizens who are "both loyal to the Party and useful for the market" (Song, 2022, p. 5).

Song's theoretical foundation for examining the nation through gender images, borrowing from Foucault's theory of "governmentality" and arguing that Chinese governmentality involves both a "facilitative" and "authoritarian" dimension, resonates with the understanding and logic of the concept of the nation in this thesis. Here, the nation is seen as an intersectional identity encompassing both the state and its people. Mainstream films depict the nation from the perspective of the

nation-state, emphasising official representations, while non-mainstream films present the nation from the perspective of the nation-people, focusing on the experiences and aspirations of ordinary individuals. These two perspectives compete for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the nation, jointly contributing to a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of the nation.

Scholars have increasingly focused on the gendered nature of nation-building, examining how gender norms, roles, and expectations shape the construction of national identity (see Partha Chatterjee, 1993; Gisela Brinker-Gabler & Sidonie Smith, 1997; Nira Yuval-Davis, 1997; Joane Nagel, 1998). A prevailing argument suggests that women are metaphorically linked to an essential and timeless national identity, often represented through the role of motherhood. Yuval-Davis (1997, p. 45) argued in *Gender and Nation* that women bear the symbolic representation of collective identity and honour, becoming associated with the embodiment of the collective spirit. The connection between women, children, and war is emphasised, with men assumed to go to war on behalf of women and children.

The notion of patriotic masculinity, where men are seen as active agents in preserving the nation's existence while women are associated with nurturing and preserving cultural traditions, is a discourse shared not only in the context of non-Western nations but also in Western countries. Chatterjee (1993, pp. 116-57) observed in *The Nation and Its Fragments* how male nationalists in late-nineteenth-century Bengal appropriated elements of Western modernity in their fight against colonialism, while women were increasingly confined to domestic roles, symbolising the spiritual and

cultural essence of the nation. Brinker-Gabler and Smith (1997, p. 12) noted in *Writing New Identities: Gender, Nation, and Immigration in Contemporary Europe* that the nation-building process is often depicted as a masculine endeavour, with the land itself being feminised and described as the "motherland" once the nation is established.

Scholars such as Chatterjee (1993), Brinker-Gabler and Smith (1997), Yuval-Davis (1997), and John Hoffman (2001) highlighted that state sovereignty is predominantly constructed in a male-oriented manner. Hoffman (2001, p. 9) suggested that states are governed by men, and patriarchy[82] itself arose as a product of state formation. In the Chinese context, the term *zuguo* 祖国, which denotes the nation to which one owes allegiance, already carries a male gender connotation as it translates to "ancestral land" and reflects a patriarchal lineage.

The above scholars' conceptualisations of the relationship between gender and nation reveal that regardless of how the nation is gendered, the influence of gender norms, roles, and expectations on shaping the construction of national identity is evident. Both women and men actively engage with and navigate these gendered constructs, playing a crucial role in the ongoing process of nation-building. Through their participation and negotiation within these gender frameworks, women and men

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[82] According to Yuval-Davis (1997, pp. 7-8), the notion of patriarchy is complex and problematic as it encompassess different forms that operate within various social domains. In the Chinese context, the patriarchal Confucian tradition assigns men the responsibility for the external realm while women are expected to oversee domestic affairs. Women's value is often measured by their roles as wives and mothers, placing those who deviate from traditional expectations in a position of challenging societal norms (Ji Yingchun, 2015, 2016).

significantly contribute to the formation of the nation, highlighting the dynamic relationship between both genders in shaping the collective identity and overall character of the nation.

Previous scholarly work on gender and nation in Chinese cinema has utilised two distinct frameworks: woman-as-nation and man-as-nation. Scholars such as Cui (2003), Williams (2004), Berry and Farquhar (2006, pp. 108-68), Hu and Guan (2021), and Lu (2021) have employed these frameworks to explore the intricate relationships between gender and national identity. In these frameworks, gender is recognised as more than just a biological or social category; it is considered a fundamental element of national representation and identity. The portrayal of gender roles and representations in Chinese cinema is intricately linked to the construction of national identity and the promotion of cultural values and traditions. Specifically, the framework of woman-as-nation, observed in twentieth-century Chinese cinema, depicts female characters who endure suffering and repression, symbolising the struggles of the Chinese nation against external forces and internal conflicts.

It is crucial to acknowledge that in the analysis of gender and nation, the examination of gendered counterpart is inherent, regardless of whether the focus is on women or men. This analysis delves into the gender relations and power dynamics between counterparts, even in films featuring exclusively female or male protagonists. The representations of these characters are discussed in relation to their gender roles and the prevailing power dynamics between men and women within society.

To fully comprehend the intricate relationship between gender and the nation on screen, the author proposes the concept of gender-as-nation, which integrates and expands upon the existing frameworks of woman-as-nation and man-as-nation. This inclusive framework encompasses women, men, and their gender relations, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their respective gender roles and the power dynamic that shape their interactions.

The establishment of the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation in this section lays the foundation for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the collected data in this study. It sets the stage for a thorough exploration of gender and its role in shaping the nation in Chinese cinema. By adopting a tripartite framework that simultaneously examines women, men, and their gender relations, this thesis aims to uncover the complexities of how the construction of the nation through gender unfolds in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema, aligning with RQ1.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The preceding chapter established the theoretical framework that serves as the guiding lens for this research, offering the theoretical perspective and concepts. This chapter focuses on the methodology utilised in this study, providing a detailed explanation of the methods and procedures employed to conduct the research. While the theoretical framework shapes the researcher's lens for examining the subject matter, the methodology elucidates the practical steps taken to gather and analyse the data.

Before delving into the specifics of the applied methodology, it is important to provide a broader context for the study in terms of basic research categories. This research follows a qualitative approach and is situated within the constructivist paradigm, focusing on the field of film studies with a particular emphasis on gender and nation in cinema. The study examines gender portrayals from a binary male and female perspective, using film texts as the primary sources of analysis. Building upon the analytic framework developed by Berry and Farquhar (2006), the author further refines and adapts it for the specific purposes of this thesis. The analytic grounding for the textual analysis includes both narrative analysis, exploring the narrative roles of female and male protagonists, and cinematic language analysis, which involves examining the "three senses of the look" encompassing the character's appearance, the camera's look upon him/her, and his/her subjective look.

The following sections delve into the methodologies employed to address the research questions posed by the author. In response to the question of how the images of the Chinese nation are portrayed on screen in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender, as presented by various directors (RQ1), Section 3.1 of this chapter provides a detailed explanation of the selection criteria used for specific directors and their films. These directors represent both non-mainstream and mainstream perspectives, collectively contributing to a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of the nation on screen in the twenty-first century. Similarly, in addressing how these gendered portrayals are constructed through the narrative roles of female and male protagonists and the three senses of the look they embody (RQ2), Section 3.2 presents an in-depth account of the analytic grounding employed for conducting textual analysis in this research.

3.1 Choice of Directors and Films

This section aims to provide a rationale for the selection of directors and their respective films, with the objective of exploring the portrayal of the nation in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender. Specifically, it will elucidate the reasons for choosing independent Sixth Generation directors Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan as representatives of alternative and non-mainstream portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema. Additionally, it will provide an explanation for the inclusion of directors who are considered to be "working within the system", namely Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou and New Force Generation director Wu Jing, as representatives of mainstream portrayals of the nation in Chinese cinema.

3.1.1 Socio-Political Contexts for Sixth Generation Non-Mainstream Films in 21st-Century China

The production of non-mainstream films by Sixth Generation directors, including notable figures such as Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, in twenty-first-century China is significantly influenced by the socio-political environment in the country. The evolution of demographics and the emergence of social issues and disparities are key factors shaping the social context for the production of non-mainstream films in contemporary China. The country's demographic landscape has undergone rapid transformations since the era of Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening-up", primarily driven by urbanisation[83] and migration trends, which have left a profound impact on society. Often labeled as the "urban generation" (Z. Zhang, 2007), Sixth Generation directors have come of age in contemporary urban China, directly experiencing its dynamics.

These directors frequently capture the repercussions of these societal shifts, bringing to the fore the challenges faced by migrant workers and the sense of disconnection

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[83] Urbanisation in China is an ongoing and pervasive process that has been at the forefront of the country's development for several decades. This urbanisation gained momentum during the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, particularly through the Reform and Opening-up policy. This policy not only attracted foreign investments but also led to the establishment of special economic zones, which in turn spurred the growth of coastal cities. In the 1980s, as China transitioned to a market-oriented economy, there was a significant upswing in urbanisation. During this period, millions of rural migrants relocated from the countryside to urban areas, seeking employment opportunities for varying durations (Goodman, 2014, pp. 2, 3, 6). China's urbanisation rate continued its rapid ascent throughout the 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and persists today (Goodman, 2014, pp. 44, 107; Li Hou, 2021, p. xix; Keyu Jin, 2023, p. 167; Jesse Rodenbiker, 2023, pp. 7, 82; Stevan Harrell, 2023, p. 1). The government played a pivotal role in this process by making substantial investments in infrastructure, housing, and transportation, further incentivising urbanisation. Since 2013, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, urbanisation has remained a central policy focus in China, with an aim to increase the urbanisation rate and enhance the living standards of urban residents (Goodman, 2014, pp. 169, 177; Rodenbiker, pp. 7-8). This approach also addresses the challenges related to rural migrants' access to social services within cities.

experienced when navigating the crossroads of tradition and modernity. They consistently delve into prevalent social issues and inequalities in contemporary Chinese society, shedding light on topics relevant to the postsocialist era, including economic disparities, environmental degradation, and other consequences of rapid development and modernisation.

While Sixth Generation filmmakers producing art house non-mainstream films may encounter censorship challenges, the early twenty-first century witnessed a more lenient attitude toward these directors, partially due to the inauguration of a new generation of leadership during Hu Jintao's era (2003-2013) (Lu, 2021, p. 121). Their films could openly circulate in legitimate markets during this period. However, in the second decade of the century, control and censorship over the media, including media, intensified[84], especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping[85] (2003-present) (Lu, 2021, p. 12; Song, 2022, p. 4). Xi's era has marked a period of reinforced ideological[86] control.

Lu (2021, p.12) characterises this heightened ideological control under Xi as "walling", a term that descirbes the selective and restrictive flow of information,

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[84] For instance, the Annual Chinese Indepent Film Festival (*Zhongguo duli yingxiang niandu zhan* 中国独立影像年度展) had been hosted in the city of Nanjing since 2003. However, the prevailing climate of increased media control has rendered the festival unsustainable, leading to its discontinuation in 2019 after 14 successful years.

[85] At the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October 2017, President Xi emphasised the party's renewed involvement in cultural governance. Under Xi's administration, there has been an encouragement of producing films that promote patriotic and nationalistic themes. However, this emphasis has restricted the space for non-mainstream films that explore controversial themes or offer critical or alternative perspectives.

[86] As noted by Song (2022), the prevailing portrayals of women in twenty-first-century Chinese television align with Xi's Chinese Dream ethos.

ideas, and ideology. This serves as a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual mechamism in nation-building. In this political environment, some formerly independent Sixth Generation directors have resorted to self-censorship, limiting their creativity and artistic freedom to avoid conflicts with the authorities[87]. According to Chen (2021), the ability to self-censor and strike a balance between art-house aspirations and economic necessities distinguishes the Sixth Generation from filmmakers in the New Force Generation, such as Diao Yinan 刁亦男 and Bi Gan 毕赣, who focus on making art films.

Consequently, filmmakers, particularly those engaged in the creation of art and non-mainstream films addressing sensitive social issues, face increasing challenges in navigating censorship and state scrutiny in recent years. On the other hand, the production of mainstream commercial blockbusters, commissioned by the state and produced by major film conglomerates in China, has emerged as the dominant trend in the film market. In contrast to non-mainstream films, which provide alternative depictions of the nation, these mainstream productions aim to present an officially endorsed and mainstream vision of the nation in the contemporary era.

3.1.2 Jia Zhangke

Chapter Four centres on Jia Zhangke, an independent Sixth Generation director whose feature films provide a non-mainstream and alternative portrayal of the

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[87] As per Chinese film critics Mu Weier 木卫二 and film scholar Wang Yao 王垚, the concludion of Sixth Generation director Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Long My Son* (*Dijiu tianchang* 地久天长, 2019) can be interpreted as the director's act of self-censorship.

Chinese nation in the twenty-first century. Jia Zhangke (born 1970) has emerged as a leading figure among the Sixth Generation directors, receiving critical acclaim both domestically and internationally. His career spans the transition of China from the late twentieth century to the first two decades of the new millennium, solidifying his his role as one of the most significant chroniclers of contemporary China in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema (C. Berry, 2008, p. 250; Qi Wang, 2014, p. 96; Jia Zhangke, 2018; Cecília Mello, 2019; Dai Jinhua, 2020; Xiaoping Wang, 2020; Lu, 2021; M. Berry, 2022). Through Jia Zhangke's films, one can gain valuable insights into the image of China during this era.

Jia's artistic style in filmmaking is highly distinctive, characterised by a unique blend of documentary realism and fictional storytelling. Qi Wang (2014, p. 96) identifies Jia as a director who employs a "subjective metanarrative vision", allowing spectators to engage with cinematic representations of the past and present through conscious subject positions. Jia himself values the film medium for its ability to capture the authenticity of the real world, including that of China (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 69). Wang further observes that Jia's camera maintains a delicate balance, being both unobtrusive and attentive, anonymous yet aware, which positions the spectator in a sensitive stance to simultaneously witness and experience cinematic interventions within the context of the real historical world.

In constrast to the prevailing trend among Chinese filmmakers in the twenty-first century, including the younger New Force Generation and esteemed predecessors like Fifth Generation directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, whose *Yellow Earth*

influenced Jia's cinematic journey (Jia Zhangke, 2017; M. Berry, 2022, p. 168), Jia has

steadfastly pursed the creation of independent, non-mainstream films. Challenging

the dominant narrative of mainstream cinema that often presents a commercially

successful image of China for the nation-state, Jia remains committed to crafting films

that uphold an unwavering artistic vision and provoke profound questions for the

people of the nation/nation-people. In doing so, he offers an alternative portrayal of

the nation, diverging from the conventional norms and expectations. His works depict

ordinary Chinese people entangled in the tumultuous transition from a socialist

planned economy to a capitalist market economy, as China integrates itself into the

global economy during the era of accelerated globalisation. Despite scholars like M.

Berry (2022, p. 8) and Xie Xiaoxia 谢晓霞 (2009) labeling Jia's protagonists

"marginal", Jia himself disagrees with this characterisation. In his view, the challenges

faced by his characters resonate with the majority of Chinese people, who form the

core and mainstream of Chinese society (Shaoyi Sun & Li Xun, 2008, p. 94).

While some directors approach each film as an independent, stand-alone story, there

are others who intentionally explore the intertextual connections between their

films. Jia belongs to the latter group of directors, whose films often unveil subtle

moments of connection and dialogue with one another[88] (Mello, 2019; Wang, 2020;

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[88] An obvious intertextual connection can be seen between Jia's 2002 film *Unknown Pleasures* and *Ash Is Purest White* made 16 years later. According to Jia, as he never really developed the particular story line of Qiao Qiao and her gangster boyfriend from *Unknown Pleasures*, he decided to change the male and female protagonists' names in *Ash Is Purest White* to match the two lead characters (Qiao Qiao and Bin) in *Unknown Pleasures* (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 138). A further intertextual connection can also be seen between Jia's 2006 film *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*, for the male protagonist's name in *Ash Is Purest White*, Bin, reminds one of Shen Hong's husband Guo Bin in *Still Life*. This intertextual connection, as Jia explains, is drawn because he never really cleared up the narrative line in *Still Life* where Hong seeks her husband.

M. Berry, 2022). Therefore, to truly comprehend Jia's (alternative) portrayal of the Chinese nation, it is imperative to examine his body of work as a collective entity, forming one of the most coherent and influential cinematic statements about the nation.

3.1.3 Wanma Caidan

Chapter Five highlights Wanma Caidan as an influential minority nationality director from the independent Sixth Generation, whose feature films provide a non-mainstream and alternative portrayal of the Chinese nation and its minority nationalities in the twenty-first century. Wanma Caidan (1969-2023) stands out as a notable director representing the Tibetan minority nationality, akin to Jia Zhangke's role in Chinese cinema. Wanma Caidan's films offer a departure from the established production categories that have traditionally portrayed Chinese minority nationalities, instead striving to construct an authentic cinematic representation specifically focused on the Tibetan regions within the broader Chinese nation.

Padma tshe brtan པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན། is the Tibetan name of Wanma Caidan[89], the pioneering filmmaker and prominent figure among minority nationality directors in China[90] (Li Ren 李韧, 2005; Cui Weiping 崔卫平, 2006; Yu, 2014, p. 125; C. Berry, 2016, p. 89; Gong Yan 龚艳, 2017, p. 1; Yan, 2020, p. 122; Lu, 2021). Born in Amdo 安多[91], the

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[89] According to Wanma Caidan, Tibetans do not have surnames, so this chapter will address his full name throughout (Wanma Caidan & Tao Tao 陶淘, 2020).

[90] Wanma Caidan's important role in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema can be seen from a whole issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (volume 10, issue 2, 2016) edited by Kwai-Cheung Lo and Jessica Wai Yee Yeung devoted to Wanma Caidan and his films.

[91] Although not inside the more well-known Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, Amdo is one of the three main regions in the larger Tibetan cultural territory in China, which exceeds the TAR and

Tibetan region of Qinghai 青海 province, Wanma Caidan was raised in a culturally diverse environment that encompassed both his native Tibetan heritage and the influence of Han culture[92] (Gong Yan, 2017, p. 1; Wanma Caidan & Gong Yan, 2017, p. 8; Wanma Caidan & Shen Xiaoping 沈晓平, 2023). Prior to becoming the first Tibetan graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, he was an accomplished fiction writer and literary translator, exhibiting remarkable bilingual proficiency in both the Tibetan language and Mandarin.

Since transitoning to film directing, he has consistently produced works in the Tibetan language[93] that depict the realities of Tibetan life in the Amdo region, where he spent his formative years. Wanma Caidan himself refers to his films as "*zangdi* 藏地 (the Tibetan areas) films", which signify their focus on Tibetan areas (Wanma Caidan & Shen, 2023). Unlike mainstream films centred around China's minority nationalities, including Tibetans, which have predominantly been shaped by state control over the past several decades, Wanma Caidan's *zangdi* films deviate from this framework.

Indeed, Wanma Caidan's films portraying the Tibetan areas have garnered significant attention and critical acclaim both domestically and internationally. These non-mainstream works have been recognised by scholars as part of the "New Tibetan

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includes the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in other provinces of China such as Qinghai (see French Tibetan studies professor Françoise Robin, 2020).

[92] According to Wanma Caidan, he was a cinephile growing up, and like most urban Chinese people his age such as Jia Zhangke, he was influenced by Chinese films such as the scar films and revolutionary films directed by Han directors of earlier generations at that time (Wanma Caidan & Liu Jiayin, 2015, p. 134; Wanma Caidan & Zhu Pengjie, 2015, p. 80).

[93] It should be noted that out of Wanma Caidan's eight feature films to date, there is one exception made in Mandarin and adapted from a novella written by a Han writer, Wang Shiyue 王十月, that is, *Flares Wafting in 1983* (2008).

Cinema"[94] (Yu, 2014, p. 129) or characterised as a Tibetan "minor cinema" (Frangville, 2016; Lu, 2021). They present an alternative perspective on the nation and, extending beyond the Tibetan community alone, as Wanma Caidan describes it, encompassing the Chinese people as a whole (Wanma Caidan & Shen, 2023).

According to C. Berry (2016), Wanma Caidan's films can be contextualised within the global road movie genre, which raises profound questions about society and an individual's connection to it. In Wanma Caidan's case, his films specifically delve into Tibetan society within the broader context of China, exploring the intricate relationship between individual Tibetans and their society. These cinematic narratives provide a unique lens throuch which to examine the dynamics, challenges, and aspirations of Tibetan individuals within the larger framework of the Chinese nation. By presenting this alternative perspective and shedding light on Tibetan society's intricacies, Wanma Caidan's films contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in the Chinese nation and its diverse cultural landscape. They offer a platform for dialogue and reflection on the multifaceted relationships between individuals belong to minority nationalities, the societies of these minority nationalities, and the overarching concept of national identity, enriching our comprehension of the diverse experiences and perspectives within contemporary China.

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[94] New Tibetan Cinema connotes Tibetan-language films directed by Tibetans, not by the state or non-Tibetan filmmakers.

While Jia Zhangke's films create an interconnected cinematic universe, Wanman Caidan's works often exist as independent and self-contained entities. As a result, in Chapter Five, the focus will shift from analysing the director's entire body of work collectively to concentrate on a specific film, *Tharlo* (*Taluo* 塔洛, 2016), as a compelling case study. This selection allows for a more targeted examination of Wanma Caidan's portrayal of the nation in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender, considering the temporal setting and thematic relevance of the film within his body of work. Through an in-depth exploration of *Tharlo* as a case study, one can gain profound insights into how Wanma Caidan explores and represents the nation in the contemporary era, with a specific emphasis on gender dynamics.

3.1.4 "Directors within the System": Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou

Chapter Six focuses on Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou as exemplary "directors within the system" who present mainstream portrayals of the Chinese nation through gender in the twenty-first century. Wu Jing, a prominent filmmaker associated with the New Force Generation, has gained recognition for his action-oriented films. His contributions to the Chinese film industry include directing or starring in several of the highest-grossing domestic films, such as directing *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), and featuring in fanchises like *The Battle of Lake Changjin* (2021 & 2022) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019 & 2023).

Wu Jing's cinematic works often revolve around heroic and patriotic narratives that strike a chord with the wider Chinese audiences. These films uphold traditional gender roles by portraying male protagonists as strong, courageous, and devoted to

defending the nation. Such portrayals align with traditional/Confucian ideals of masculinity and national pride, catering to the expectations and aspirations of the state.

On the other hand, Zhang Yimou, a prominent figure among the Fifth Generation directors, has garnered international acclaim and is widely recognised as a distinguished filmmaker representing China. Over the course of his extensive career spanning several decades, his films have been characterised by a distinct artistic style and a profound examination of Chinese history, culture, and society. His early works, dating back to the late 1980s, were renowned for their artistic sensibilities and sensitivity to sociopolitical issues. However, in the twenty-first century, his films shifted focus towards themes of national identity and patriotism, resonating with diverse Chinese audiences and the state. This trajectory firmly established Zhang Yimou as a filmmaker operating within the mainstream realm of Chinese cinema. By portraying the nation through the lens of gender, his films offer a valuable contribution to understanding the intricate connections between gender and national identity.

Both Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou have showcased their ability to navigate the Chinese film industry and operate within the boundaries set by the authorities, making them representative "directors within the system". Their selection as such allows for a comprehensive exploration of how gender is portrayed in mainstream Chinese cinema and its contribution to the construction of the nation. Among their numeous blockbuster creations in the twenty-first century, Chapter Six will specifically examine

Wolf Warrior 2, directed and starred by Wu Jing, which earned him recognition, as well as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *The Flowers of War* (2011. Zhang's *Hero* holds a pivotal position in Chinese film history as the inaugural blockbuster, shaping the contemporary cinematic landscape and significantly influencing the portrayal of the nation on screen in the twenty-first century. Building upon *Hero*'s legacy from the first decade, *The Flowers of War* established new standards in the second decade. Through these films, Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou provide distinct perspectives on the interplay of gender roles, dynamics, and the construction of national identity and pride.

3.2 Analytic Grounding for Textual Analysis

In the field of cinema studies, textual analysis can be understood as encompassing two main aspects: narrative analysis and film language analysis (see Bordwell et al., 2020; Richard Barsam & Dave Monahan, 2019). Narrative analysis focuses on examining the structure, content, and development of the narrative in a film. It involves analysing the storytelling techniques, plot structure, character development, themes, and symbolic elements within the narrative. Narrative analysis explores how the story is constructed, the relationships between characters, the conflicts and resolutions, and the overall narrative arc. It seeks to understand the narrative choices made by the filmmaker and how they contribute to the film's meaning and impact.

On the other hand, film language analysis involves examining the specific techniques and elements used in the visual and auditory language of film to convey meaning and evoke emotions. It includes analysing elements such as cinematography, mise-en-

scène, editing, and sound design. Film language analysis explores how camera angles, lighting, color palettes, framing, shot composition, editing patterns, sound design, and other cinematic techniques contribute to the narrative, enhance the storytelling, create mood and atmosphere, and evoke specific emotional responses in the spectator. It examines how the formal elements of film are employed to convey themes, symbols, and visual motifs, and to shape the overall aesthetic and sensory experience of the film.

By combining narrative analysis and film language analysis, textual analysis provides a comprehensive approach to understanding and interpreting films. It considers both the narrative structure and the audiovisual elements of a film to uncover the filmmaker's intentions, artistic choices, and the ways in which meaning is constructed and communicated to the spectator. In the specific context of this research, which seeks to explore the portrayal of the Chinese nation in the early twenty-first century through the lens of gender, encompassing women, men, and their gender relations as depicted by various directors, textual analysis serves as the chosen methodology for examination and interpretation.

Berry and Farquhar's book, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), provides an exploration of the portrayal of Chinese women in relation to the concept of the nation in cinema. Berry and Farquhar (2006, pp. 108-34) developed an analytic framework that focuses on two key factors: the woman's narrative role, which falls under the category of narrative analysis, and the cinematic trope known as the "three senses of the look", which pertains to film language analysis. It is worth noting that

Lu's analytic framework, as discussed in his book *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (2021), aligns with the approach taken by Berry and Farquhar fifteen years earlier. Lu's framework incorporates characterisation, a form of narrative analysis, and cinematography, a form of film language analysis, as two essential factors to comprehend the portrayal of gender in relation to the notion of the nation in Chinese cinema. While Lu's framework may not be as extensively elaborated as Berry and Farquhar's, it serves to demonstrate the continued relevance and significance of their framework in analysing gender portrayals in relation to the idea of the nation in Chinese cinema, which is the central objective of this thesis.

Furthermore, Cui's book *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (2003) raises the important question of how the cinematic apparatus and spectators should look at Chinese women on screen. This inquiry introduces the concept of the look[95], which resonates with Berry and Farquhar's framework of the "three senses of the look", albeit not as explicitly elaborated. As the concept of the look holds central significance in Cui's analytic framework when investigating the portrayal of Chinese women in relation to the idea of nation in cinema, it validates the practicality of utilising Berry and Farquhar's "three senses of the look" to examine how gender is depicted in relation to the nation within Chinese cinema.

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[95] The concept of the look or gaze holds a prominent position in the field of cinema studies, particularly in the exploration of gender representation in cinema. At the core of this discussion lies Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the male gaze directed towards the female body, which has garnered significant attention and scholarly analysis (see Mary Ann Doane, 1982; Ma Junxiang, 1990; D. N. Rodowick, 1991; Chow, 1995; Elizabeth Cowie, 1997, pp. 168-221; Maggie Humm, 1997; Cui, 2003, Pamela Church Gibson, 2004; Annette Kuhn & Guy Westwell, 2020, 374-5).

Recognising its significance and practicality, this research adopts the framework proposed by Berry and Farquhar (2006) to analyse the construction of portrayals of the Chinese nation in the early twenty-first century through the lens of gender. Although originally focused on female characters, it is posited that Berry and Farquhar's framework also serves as a valuable tool for analysing the portrayal of male characters and their contribution to shaping the national image in Chinese cinema. Consequently, their framework will be employed to explore the narrative roles of both female and male protagonists and examine the three senses of the look they embody.

The cinematic system of the three senses of the look plays a pivotal role in enriching the narrative roles of female and male characters and capturing the intricate dynamics of gender within films. Through integrating the analysis of the narrative role and the three senses of the look, a comprehensive understanding will be gained regarding the portrayal of gender, encompassing women, men, and gender relations, and how these portrayals are intricately intertwined with the concept of the nation. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the complexities of gender representation in Chinese cinema. It sheds light on the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics within the cinematic context, enriching one's understanding of interconnectedness between gender and national identity in film.

3.2.1 Narrative Role

The narrative role of a character, as a component of narrative analysis, refers to the function and significance of a character within the overarching storyline of a film. It serves as a fundamental element in understanding the narrative structure and character dynamics. Within Berry and Farquhar's (2006) framework, the analysis of the narrative role focuses on how female characters contribute to the development of the narrative, exploration of themes, and the overall portrayal of gender and the nation. By analysing the narrative role of female characters, one can gain insights into their agency, relationship with her male counterparts, and their impact on the thematic and symbolic elements of the film. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of how the portrayal of women in Chinese cinema, as reflections of their societal roles in reality, intersects with broader notions of the nation and its depiction. In essence, analysing the narrative role of both female and male characters directly contribute to their symbolic meaning in relation to the nation, exemplifying the concept of gender-as-nation, which serves as the theoretical framework of this research, encompassing both woman-as-nation and man-as-nation.

According to Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 110), Chinese women in twentieth-century Chinese cinema were portrayed in various narrative roles such as martial arts fighters, businesswomen, labour heroines in factories and fields, guerilla fighters, and CCP cadres. These roles represented women as active participants in public and professional life on China's big screens, challenging the traditional image of women confined to the domestic sphere. Instead of the traditional mother figure, the unmarried daughter figure emerged as a narrative role model aligned with the

Chinese conceptions of the nation during the twentieth century (Berry and Farquhar, 2006, p. 112).

In different ways, female roles in earlier generations of Chinese cinema, including the Second, Fourth, and Fifth Generations, exhibited variations of the daughter figure archetype. Berry and Farquhar viewed these figures as symbolic representations of the Chinese nation. However, their characterisation of the daughter figure as "unmarried" is misleading and subject to debate. Throughout twentieth-century Chinese cinema, many female characters who symbolise the nation are depicted as both actively participating in public life and being married and having children. For instance, Ruan Lingyu's roles in films by Second Generation directors like *The Goddess* (1934) and *The New Woman* (1935), female protagonists in the films of Fourth Generation directors and the pioneering women's films in Chinese film history, such as *Woman, Demon, Human*, as well as Gong Li's roles in various films directed by Fifth Generation filmmaker Zhang Yimou, including *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Judou* (1990), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), and *To Live* (1994). Even if some of these characters may experience failed romantic relationships that result in them being "unmarried" or, more accurately, having been married before, their roles as mothers and their responsibilities towards their children should not be overlooked.

One possible reason for Berry and Farquhar's emphasis on the "unmarried" status of the daughter figure and their simultaneous disregard for the role of motherhood may be to highlight Chinese women's active engagement in the male-dominated public space rather than their roles within the traditionally associated domestic sphere as

married women and mothers. Instead of solely focusing on the unmarried status and overlooking the motherhood role, it is argued that attention should be directed towards the relative youth, rebelliousness, and gender dynamics between female characters and their male counterparts. By considering these aspects, a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative roles of women in Chinese cinema can be achieved. Berry and Farquhar's use of the daughter figure, which sets it apart from the mother figure, underscores the young age of these female characters, and in that sense, their terminology is valid. However, relying solely on the daughter figure to encapsulate female roles throughout twentieth-century Chinese cinema is inadequate.

One important aspect that distinguishes the daughter figure from the mother figure, as acknowledged by Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 125) themselves, is the daughter's rebellious nature, resisting her family's efforts to determine her future. In fact, the young woman who defies her family's arrangements, particularly in terms of arranged marriages, has been a common representation of China as a nation rejecting elements of its past in the pursuit of modernisation throughout twentieth-century Chinese cinema. Notable examples include Ruan Lingyu's role in *The New Woman*, Gong Li's role in *Red Sorghum*, and many female roles depicted in Third Generation cinema like *Two Stage Sisters* (1964), as well as in Fourth Generation cinema with films such as *Good Woman* (1985) and *A Girl from Hunan* (1986). Therefore, it is proposed to use the rebellious daughter figure as summary of the narrative role model representing the nation in twentieth-century Chinese cinema. Consequently, this thesis aims to investigate whether the narrative role model of the rebellious

daughter figure, who actively participate in public and professional life, continues to be cited and reiterated in the construction of the nation in the twenty-first century.

3.2.2 Three Senses of the Look

Berry and Farquhar's framework goes beyond examining the narrative role of women in Chinese cinema. It introduces the concept of the "three senses of the look" to analyse how female character are visually perceived with the cinematic context. This concept builds upon Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential theory of the "male gaze", which she introduced in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey argued that mainstream Hollywood cinema predominantly represents women thorugh a male gaze, objectifying and sexualising female characters from a heterosexual male perspective. This male gaze operates in two primary ways: first, as a source of visual pleasure[96] for male spectators[97] who identify with male characters and view women as objects of sexual desire; second, as a means to reinforce patriarchal power dynamics by depicting women as passive recipients of male desire, while male characters are active viewers of the look and take on active roles in propelling the narrative.

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[96] Mulvey recognised a range of techniques used to evoke visual pleasure, such as framing female characters in a manner that highlight their physical attractiveness, utilising camera angles and movement to accentuate their bodies, objectifying them through close-ups and visual attention, and capturing the male character's gaze upon the female body. In this process, the spectator aligns their gaze with that of the camera and identifies with the male character in the narrative.

[97] It is worth mentioning that in her 1975 article, Mulvey did not directly address the issue of the (heterosexual) female spectator. However, in a later essay titled "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*", Mulvey (1981) reflected on the limitations of her earlier argument regarding the "male gaze" and acknowledged the significance of considering the role of the female spectator in her theory. She proposed that female spectators could assume two potential positions in relation to the male gaze: either a masochistic identification with the female object of desire, which ultimately proves self-defeating, or an identification with men as active spectators who derive pleasure from the text, thereby resistsing or challenging the male gaze.

Although Mulvey's "male gaze" theory has been subject to critique and revision over time, it remains a significant framework for examining the representation of gender in cinema. Scholars have extended the application of this theory beyond Hollywood, analysing a diverse range of films, including those from Chinese cinema (see Cui, 2003; Williams, 2004; Berry & Farquhar, 2006). Importantly, Mulvey's theory draws attention to gender relations within the cinematic system of the look. It emphasises that the concept of the look in cinema studies should be examined in relation to the dynamics between female and male characters, rather than isolating any one party.

Berry and Farquhar's framework of the "three senses of the look" introduces three crucial perspectives or senses that enhance one's understanding of the act of looking. The first sense explores the physical appearance of women or how they look before others, including their costumes. Thee second sense focuses on the look of the camera upon the woman, exploring how the camera looks at the woman. This includes the camera's direct look upon the woman's face in the close-ups, without the mediation of relay characters. The third sense delves into the woman's subjective viewpoint as she looks at others and the world, often portrayed through flashbacks of the past and visions of the future. It is worth noting that Berry and Farquhar's concept of the subjective look aligns with the widely employed notion of point of view[98] shots in the field of cinema studies.

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[98] A point of view shot is a cinematic technique that captures what a character sess from their perspectives. It is typically employed by situating the shot between a scene showing the character looking at the object of their focus and a subsequent shot depicting the character's reaction (Joseph V. Mascelli, 1998, p. 22; Barsam & Monahan, 2019, p. 451; Bordwell et al., 2020, p. G-3).

Significantly, the second and third senses of the look within Berry and Farquhar's framework incorporate Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, characterised by the involvement of male characters and the exchange of looks between male and female characters, often depicted through the shot-reverse-shot[99] structure. Through this structure, power dynamics and relationships between characters, including gender relations, are effectively conveyed. As a result, the cinematic system of the three senses of the look encourages an exploration of gender dynamics, highlighting the interplay between female and male characters.

It is essential to recognise that analysing the portrayal of female characters using this cinematic system of the look inherently involves examining their interactions with their male counterparts. For instance, in the second sense of the look, when the camera looks at the woman, it typically adopts the perspective of her male counterpart. This perspective suggests that the camera's look upon the woman can also be understood as the subjective look of the male character. Similarly, the third sense of the look, which presents the woman's subjective look, can be seen as the camer's look upon her male counterpart, aligning with the woman's perspective.

In essence, while Berry and Farquhar's cinematic system of the three senses of the look was originally proposed to analyse the construction of the portrayal of a Chinese

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[99] The shot-reverse-shot is a commonly used filmmaking structure that portrayals conversations or interactions between two or more characters, particularly in dialogue or romantic scenes (Bordwell et al., 2020, pp. 233-6; Cui, 2003, pp. 162-3). This structure follows a consistent pattern: the first shot captures one character looking at the other character(s) and/or speaking, while the second shot presents the latter reacting and/or listening (a reverse shot). This alternating pattern continues throughout the conversation or interaction, creating a back-and-forth sequence between the characters.

woman on screen. However, it is important to acknowledge that this cinematic system can also be applied to explore the portrayal of a Chinese man. Within this framework, the three senses of the look encompass the man's appearance, the camera's look upon the man, and his subjective look. Consequently, their framework facilitates an examination of both genders, recognising the simultaneous analysis of female characters and their male counterparts. This interconnected examination enables a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between female and male characters, thereby enhancing the original framework's significance and expanding the scope of gender analysis beyond female characters.

Further, Berry and Farquhar's "three senses of the look" framework provides a valuable tool for critically analysing how films can either perpetuate or challenge gender norms and power dynamics. The concept of the look revolves around how characters look at each other, possessing the ability to create and reinforce gender stereotypes and power dynamics. One prominent example is the male gaze, where the camera focuses on a woman's body from a male perspective, often leading to the objectification of women and the perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes. Conversely, an alternative perspective can be achieved by shifting the camera's focus to men's bodies and emotions from a female perspective, effectively challenging traditional gender norms and empower female characters.

In summary, the developed analytic grounding, which includes the narrative role and the three senses of the look, will serve as a guide the textual analysis of gendered portrayals of the nation in the upcoming content chapters (Chapters 4-6). These

chapters aim to investigate the research question of how the images of the Chinese nation are portrayed on screen in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender, examining the representations of women, men, and their gender relations as presented by selected directors (RQ1). By employing the analytic framework, the chapters will delve into the construction of these gendered portrayals of the nation, examining the narrative roles of female and male protagonists, as well as the three senses of the look they embody, thus adressing RQ2. Through this approach, each chapter will provide valuable insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema.

Chapter 4 Jia Zhangke's Portrayal of the Nation through Zhao Tao and Her Male Counterpart: Revealing a Multifaceted China in Transformation

4.1 Introduction

"It is through the perspective of *jianghu* and those people who live amid that world that we can better understand how age and society have been constructed" (Jia Zhangke & M. Berry, 2022, p. 136).

Jia Zhangke's cinematic aesthetics have been deeply influenced by the enduring impact of the *jianghu*[100] 江湖 (in Jia's description) genre, also known as Hong Kong[101] *wuxia* (aka martial arts) or gangster films. This influence is evident throughout Jia's body of work, from his debut feature-length fiction film *Xiao Wu* (1997) to *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and his most recent work, *Ash Is Purest White* (2018) (Mello, 2019; Lu, 2021; Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 134). For Jia, the concept of *jianghu* represents a Chinese society amidst significant social and economic transformations (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 135). Through the perspective of characters living in the *jianghu*, Jia explores the construction of the Chinese nation in the era of these characters.

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[100] *Jianghu* (literally the "rivers and lakes") is traditionally a space well-known to Chinese martial arts films in which martial knights-errant devote themselves to the eradication of evil and the protection of the innocent (Stephen Teo, 2009, p. 7).

[101] Hong Kongers such as cinematographer Yu Likwai, who has served as cinematographer for almost all of Jia's feature films, and producers Chow Keung and Li Kitming are Jia's long-standing and crucial collaborations that make up the core of his creative team (Mello, 2019, p. 60; M. Berry, 2022, p. 4).

Love and relationships between male and female characters play a central role in Jia's body of work[102] and are of particular significance in his portrayal of the nation. According to Jia, ordinary people form the nation, and the question of whether they can be the "masters of the nation" is closely tied to their ability to control and resolve their emotional challenges (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 98). This thematic exploration of love and relationships, especially between male and female characters, remains consistent throughout Jia's films.

In his book, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation*, Lu (2021) asserts that men take central roles in Jia's films and explores the connection between the portrayal of male characters and the construction of the modern Chinese nation. However, it is worth noting that Jia himself does not make a significant distinction between male and female characters, as he clarifies in his interview with M. Berry (2022, p. 131). Even in films where male characters take a relatively central role, such as *Xiao Wu*, titled after the male protagonist, or *A Touch of Sin*, which features three male protagonists in three out of four separate stories, their portrayals are intricately linked to their relationships with female counterparts, albeit in cameo appearances. Therefore, focusing solely on male characters and masculinity, as Lu (2021) does, is insufficient when investigating Jia's construction of the Chinese nation in his films.

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[102] Jia's nine feature films to date include *Xiao Wu* (小武, 1997), *Platform* (*Zhantai* 站台, 2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao* 任逍遥, 2002), *The World* (*Shijie* 世界, 2004), *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人, 2006), *24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji* 二十四城记, 2008), *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhuding* 天注定, 2013), *Mountains May Depart* (*Shanhe guren* 山河故人, 2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (*Jianghu ernv* 江湖儿女, 2018).

In fact, the majority of Jia's films revolve around female protagonists, most notably portrayed by Zhao Tao 赵涛[103]. Similar to the collaborative relationship between Gong Li and Zhang Yimou during the late twentieth century, Zhao Tao has emerged as the foremost female protagonist and has assumed significant roles in almost all of Jia's feature films. From *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), *Mountains May Depart* (2015) to *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), with the exception of *Xiao Wu* (1997), which falls outside the scope of this thesis, Zhao Tao has consistently portrayed central characters in Jia's cinematic oeuvre. These female characters, portrayed by Zhao Tao, together with their male counterparts, offer a portrayal of ordinary Chinese people in Jia's films, forming an integrated image of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century[104].

As outlined in the Methodology chapter, to fully grasp Jia's portrayal of the Chinese nation through gender, it is crucial to examine his body of work collectively, as it presents one of the most powerful and consistent cinematic statements on the nation. Jia's films, interconnected by the presence of Zhao Tao and various other elements such as themes, settings, and cinematography, engage in a meaningful

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[103] Zhao Tao eventually became Jia's wife in 2011 (Mello, 2019, pp. 7-8; M. Berry, 2022, p. 5). According to Jia, throughout his consistent collaboration with Zhao Tao, she often provided advice representing a woman's unique perspective (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 101), which helped him sharpen his representation of Chinese women.

[104] The only exception of all these films starring Zhao Tao is *Platform* (2000), in which the story is set in the 1980s, and the nation her character signifies is accordingly of the 1980s, not of the twenty-first century.

dialogue with one another (Mello, 2019; Wang, 2020; M. Berry, 2022). Therefore, this chapter aims to analyse the intertextual connections between Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts, examining their role in constructing the image of the nation across Jia's entire filmography, rather than focusing on a few individual films.

In particular, the analytic framework developed by Berry and Farquhar (2006) will be utilised to examine how Zhao Tao's characters contribute to the construction of specific images of the nation, with a focus on woman-as-nation (Zhao Tao-as-nation). This analysis will consider the narrative roles and the three senses of the look associated with Zhao Tao's characters, revealing their impact on shaping the representation of the nation. Simultaneously, the male counterparts in relation to the nation (man-as-nation) will be examined through their interactions with Zhao Tao's characters. By considering both woman-as-nation and man-as-nation, the significance of gender-as-nation in Jia's films will be elucidated, highlighting how gender images contribute to the construction of the image of the nation.

Collectively, Zhao Tao's characters symbolise a Chinese nation that embraces its traditional and socialist legacy, upholding spiritual and moral values. In contrast, their male counterparts represent a nation driven by modernisation and materialism, often at the expanse of moral values. Through the portrayals of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts, a two-dimensional image of the Chinese nation in the early twenty-first century emerges - one that combines the embrace of a traditional

and socialist legacy with the pursuit of modernisation and materialism, leading to the erosion of spiritual values.

Following this introduction, the chapter will be devided into six sections:

4.2 Exploring the Narrative Roles of Zhao Tao's Characters and Their Male Counterparts

4.3 Discussing the Gender-as-Nation Significance through Narrative Roles: Unveiling the Two-Dimensional Portrait of the Nation

4.4 Exploring the Three Senses of the look in the Portrayal of the Female Prostitute/Sexual Object in Mainland Chinese Cinema History

4.5 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Zhao Tao's Characters

4.6 Disccussing the Significance of the Three Senses of the Look in Presenting the Transformative Portrait of the Nation

4.7 Conclusion

4.2 Exploring the Narrative Roles of Zhao Tao's Characters and Their Male Counterparts

In this section, it is through Jia's seven[105] films made and set in the twenty-first century, where Zhao Tao is the female protagonist, that her image, in terms of the narrative role will be examined. When asked about his design of female protagonists in his films, Jia explains there is a commonality that ties all of those female

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[105] These seven films are *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018).

protagonists together: they are all from the north, for Zhao Tao is a northern girl, and she is good at portraying women from north China (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 131). While this is an accurate yet simple answer, further examination reveals that Zhao Tao's character repeats a trope across Jia's films. Zhao Tao's roles follow the lineage of women's roles throughout twentieth-century mainland Chinese cinema who signify the nation but are not maternal keepers of the hearth; instead, they appear as agents of public and professional life. In other words, the narrative role model of the daughter figure prevalent in twentieth century Chinese cinema is cited in Jia's constructions of the nation in the twenty-first century.

However, such a daughter figure is no longer rebellious in rejecting elements of the nation's past. Instead, the daughter figure portrayed by Zhao Tao in each film speaks to a longing nostalgia toward the socialist legacy. In narrative terms, this represents a reversal of the structure of the rebellious daughter figure. Instead of rebelling against her family as a signifier of China as a nation rejecting elements of its past, she accepts the socialist past and embraces its legacy.

It is not surprising that in her debut role in Jia's *Platform* (2000), set in the "long decade" of the 1980s (from 1978 to 1990), which is in the wake of the Maoist/socialist era, Zhao Tao's character, Yin Ruijuan 尹瑞娟, accepts the socialist past and embraces its legacy. At the beginning of the film, set in 1978, Ruijuan is a young performer in an official/state-owned *wengongtuan*, or song-and-dance troupe, where she performs state-approved materials with her male counterpart, Cui

Mingliang 崔明亮, in Jia's hometown of Fenyang, a town[106] in Shanxi province. The design of the narrative role of Ruijuan and Mingliang as members of a song-and-dance-trope is of particular significance. For Jia, despite being the lowest on the rung of the so-called cultural workers, transformations of these cultural workers reflect the changes taking place in the cultural sphere throughout China in the 1980s, which was full of unprecedented openness and freedom in the early days of the Reform Era to oppression towards the late 1980s.

As they faced a massive societal change in the 1980s, transitioning from the socialist to the postsocialist era, Mingliang left their hometown and performed more pop works inspired by international figures throughout China as a touring troupe that is no longer state-owned. Still, Ruijuan chose to stay behind in Fenyang and be a tax collector at the local tax bureau. Here, Ruijuan's choice to continue working for the government instead of leaving Fenyang to experience the tide of social change in the postsocialist era illustrates her embracement of the socialist legacy.

Moreover, by the end of the film, set in 1990, Mingliang eventually returns to Fenyang after years on the road, reunites with Ruijuan, and marries her. According to Jia himself, through the transformations of Mingliang, one could gain a perspective on China in transition in the 1980s (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 55). Men like Mingliang, whose youthful fire and idealism of the early 1980s gradually died off as he settled into middle age, his eventual return to family in the late 1980s epitomises the nation

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[106] In Jia's description, a town is "a bridge between the countryside and the cities" (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 20). Growing up in a town like Fenyang provided Jia with a unique perspective from which he could understand China's rural and urban culture.

in the early 1990s (before the twenty-first century) that returned to its traditional social order of the socialist era.

Further, in her next role in *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), set at the turn of the twenty-first century Zhao Tao's character, Qiao Qiao 巧巧, also embraces conservative tradition, which can be seen as signifying a socialist legacy. Compared with Ruijuan in *Platform*, Qiao Qiao in *Unknown Pleasures* is set one generation younger than Ruijuan, who works as a model in another small city in Shanxi province, Datong. According to Jia, Qiao Qiao is created to reflect the modern Chinese woman who struggles between conservative tradition, or the socialist legacy, and modernity at the turn of the twenty-first century (New Yorker Films, 2006).

Qiao Qiao stands out in a city like Datong, through her stage profession and through how she looks before others. In the bus stop scene, after a violent confrontation with her gangster boyfriend, Qiao San 乔三, Qiao Qiao takes off her wig. For the first time, one sees her actual appearance. Her usual eccentric appearance allows her to conceal her true, more conservative nature, which she is embarrassed by. Also, Qiao Qiao often does what she wants with contempt for the norm. Yet she cannot come to terms with her relationship with Qiao San because she cannot reconcile her hidden conservatism with the idea of being the unfaithful mistress.

Zhao Tao's role in *24 City* (2008) is another illustration of Jia's portrayal of woman-as-nation that speaks to a longing nostalgia toward the socialist legacy. Like *Still Life*

(2006), which depicts the drowning of the entire city of Fengjie, Jia's *24 City* is another portrait of disappearance and a nostalgic look back at the state-owned factory system of socialist China. As Corey Kai Nelson Schultz (2018, p. 34) observes: "The film creates 'portraits in performance' and 'memories in performance' which use history, memory, and emotion to construct a felt history of the worker class on the eve of its extinction. This creates a structure of feeling that ultimately commemorates and elegizes this group's irrevocable decline and disappearance in the Reform era, and mourns the class by placing it in the past."

According to Jia, the Chinese economy transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy when he made *24 City* (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 118). During the age of the planned economy, in big-scale factories like the one he shot the film at (Factory 420), it was not just workers but their families who relied on the factory to take care of every aspect of their lives for decades. According to one real-life worker at the factory interviewed in the film (Song Weidong 宋卫东), being a worker of a state-owned factory was a desirable job in the good old days of socialism, because workers and their families enjoyed privileges that were given to people of many other occupations.

Factories like the one in the film that produced engines for the Chinese air force were the product of a so-called Third Line Construction Project (*sanxian gongcheng* or

sanxian jianshe)[107]. Once the sudden shift to a market economy started, the factory

must be financially accountable itself, and the job security and financial well-being of

these socialist workers were longer guaranteed. Under the market economy of the

postsocialist era, many factories like the one in *24 City* were shut down, and the

socialist workers were forced to leave. This had a lot to do with the arisen real estate

market in the age of the market economy. Lu (2021) sees real estate enterprise that

takes over the old factory site as if capitalism is taking over socialism. The factory in

the film that was once a typical product of a socialist planned economy in the heyday

of socialism and is now a disappeared victim of the capitalist real estate economy of

today can be seen as a site representing a China in transition from the socialist to the

postsocialist/capitalist era.

Zhao Tao's character in *24 City*, Nana 娜娜, is a young personal shopper born in

Chengdu in the reform, or postsocialist, era (1982). Nana's parents used to work at

the state-owned factory Factory 420 in the socialist era. In the film, although Nana

appears modern in her fashionable clothes, she respects the socialist legacy of her

parent's generation. She proudly declares, "I'm the daughter of a worker" (fig. 4.1).

Nana's image of embracing the socialist legacy is also constructed concerning Berry

and Farquhar's (2006) various senses of the look. This topic of how Zhao Tao's image

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[107] The Third Line Construction Project was a national government plan implemented in 1964 in
response to escalating tensions brought on by the Vietnam War, American military activities near the
South China Sea, and a small-scale armed skirmish with the Soviet Union. It was aimed at expanding
the infrastructure in China's less populated inland regions to bolster national defence, science and
technology, industry, power, and transportation. It originated with the Chinese military and ended up
impacting thirteen provinces and autonomous regions in central and western China from 1964 until
1980, resulting in the creation of thousands of factories, the relocation of millions of people, and a
fundamental shift in the priorities of national development (M. Berry, 2022, p. 202).

is constructed concerning the look will be analysed in detail in the next section of the chapter, under "various senses of the look of Zhao Tao's roles".

FIGURE 4.1 "I'm the daughter of a worker," Nana proudly declares at the end of *24 City* (2008).

Apart from embracing the socialist legacy, when Zhao Tao's characters engage in romantic relationships with her male counterpart(s), they struggle with their relationships and are often estranged or even abandoned, as their nostalgia toward the socialist legacy and moral values conflict with the men's pursuit of materialism and capitalism at the cost of moral deterioration. This image of an estranged or abandoned woman is illustrated clearly in Jia's subsequent films such as *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018).

In *The World*, Zhao Tao plays Zhao Xiaotao 赵小桃, a migrant worker from Shanxi province who works as a dancer/performer at the Beijing World Park, where all the world's famous tourist sites are collected and built in miniature. Xiaotao struggles with her relationship with a fellow migrant from her home province of Shanxi, Cheng Taisheng 成太生, who is now a security guard at the park. According to Jia himself, *The World* captures a China at the turn of the twenty-first century (around 2003), when young people started to find themselves living amid two different worlds – the new virtual world in the age of postsocialism/capitalism and globalism, and the old real world (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, pp. 90-1). One finds that the gap between these two different worlds is represented in the film as the profound disconnect between the glossy and glamorous global tourist destinations built at the park, which are "fake"/"virtual", and the isolated, exploited lives of the migrant workers like Xiaotao who work there, which are "real". As M. Berry (2022, p. 6) comments, "Through this radical juxtaposition of opulent spaces and disenfranchised workers, *The World* unveils its scathing critique of globalism, its meditation on the place of the simulacrum in postmodern society, and a desperate vision of alienation in postsocialist China."

In the film, this disconnect between the glamorous globalisation and capitalism that is all too "fake" and the "real" isolation and exploitation experienced by the migrant workers is best exemplified by the estranged relationship between Xiaotao and Taisheng. While both are migrants working at the World Park in Beijing, they have different pursuits. Xiaotao, who wants to do her job well and is faithful to Taisheng

has good moral values, but Taisheng has an excessive pursuit of materialism. Behind

Xiaotao's back, he becomes attracted to a wealthy businesswoman and pursues her.

Regarding the narrative role, Zhao Tao's character in *The World* repeats a trope

hackneyed in Jia's previous films. The woman who embraces moral values can be

seen as a signifier of China as a nation accepting elements of the socialist legacy in

modernisation in the postsocialist era. When Xiaotao is estranged in her relationship

with Taisheng, who longs for materialism and capitalism, one notices Jia's nostalgic

vision of the nation, whose socialist legacy is being estranged at the turn of the

twenty-first century.

Like her role in *The World*, Zhao Tao's character in *Still Life*, Shen Hong 沈红, is also

estranged from her lover, in this case, her husband. Looking at *The World* and *Still

Life* side by side creates a powerful juxtaposition. These two films reveal two

completely different worlds, the former an artificial yet gaudy global city, and the

latter an ancient Chinese historical city in the Three Gorges area, Fengjie 奉节, in

ruins and on the verge of being submerged. According to Jia, it was within that kind

of environment that he stood amid the ruins reflecting on what a single individual

can do when confronted with such monumental changes (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 97).

Whereas no individual may have any power over whether or not Fengjie will be

flooded, it makes Jia contemplate if an individual can control his/her own issues, such

as who s/he loves. As a result, Jia creates two unconnected central characters (Zhao

Tao's character and another male character played by Han Sanming[108]) in *Still Life*
who come from Shanxi province to Fengjie to resolve a relationship problem with
their respective spouse.

Shen Hong is a nurse trying to seek her husband, Guo Bin 郭斌, with whom she has
lost contact for two years since he left their home in Shanxi. Guo Bin is now in charge
of the local demolition team in Fengjie through his extramarital affair with a
successful businesswoman. Shen Hong wants to terminate her marriage that has long
been devoid of any love, yet it proves difficult for her to search for Guo Bin in Fengjie,
which is about to be inundated and demolished for the most part. In other words, it
is out of the backdrop of the massive destruction of Fengjie that Shen Hong emerges.

In terms of narrative role, Zhao Tao's character repeats a trope in *The World* and *Still
Life*, where she plays a woman in the first decade of twenty-first-century China with
good moral values, estranged by a man who pursues materialism and capitalism at
the cost of losing moral values. Yet in both cases, there still leaves hope, albeit faint,
that the woman and the man who alienates her might reunite. In other words, the
woman is estranged yet not entirely abandoned by her lover.

In Jia's two most recent films made in and cover the second decade of the twenty-
first century, *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), however,

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[108] Han Sanming is Jia's cousin from Fenyang, who first appeared in *Platform* and has worked with
Jia repeatedly over the years, such as in *The World* and *Still Life*. Han Sanming, Zhao Tao, and Wang
Hongwei, the latter is originally Jia's classmate at the Beijing Film Academy, have constantly
appeared in his films for over two decades.

this alienation between Zhao Tao's character and her male counterpart is further enhanced. Most of Jia's films before the twenty-first century's second decade take place over a compact timeline. *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White* feature bold timelines that cover a broad period. The former spans 1999 until 2025[109], and the latter spans 2001 until 2018. In each case, Zhao Tao's character is ultimately abandoned by her male counterpart(s) over time.

Called *Jianghu ernv* in Chinese, literally translated "Sons and Daughters of *Jianghu*", *Ash Is Purest White* directly references *jianghu* ("the land of rivers and lakes"). This central notion of *jianghu* that has been emphasised throughout Jia's oeuvre, from *Xiao Wu*, to *Unknown Pleasures*, *Still Life*, *A Touch of Sin*, all the way up to *Ash Is Purest White*. The term traditionally refers to the realm outside mainstream society, a sort of fictional underworld, where heroes and villains roam according to their codes of righteousness, which has been the setting for countless *wuxia*/martial arts stories from *The Water Margin*[110] (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传) to the modern *wuxia* novels of Jin Yong 金庸 (Mello, 2019, p. 160; M. Berry, 2022, p. 8). *Jianghu* can also point to social bonding centred around male codes of brotherhood and loyalty, and is often displayed in modern martial arts and gangster films (C. Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 138). For Jia, *jianghu* represents a Chinese society amid times of rapid social transformation, and it is through the perspective of his characters who live amid

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[109] *Mountains May Depart* is the only film of Jia's body of work that delves into the future.
[110] *The Water Margin* is a classic Ming Dynasty novel.

jianghu that one can get a clearer understanding of how the Chinese nation in the era of the characters has been constructed (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 135).

While inspired by the 1980s gangster/*jianghu* films of John Woo[111], Jia reinterprets the Hong Kong-style *jianghu* genre in a mainland Chinese setting of the twenty-first century and even offers what M. Berry (2022, p. 8) thinks of as a deconstruction of the genre. As Lu (2021) observes, the imitation and recycling of Hong Kong-style gangster male characters in a mainland Chinese setting have been a constant and crucial strategy in Jia's films, which has helped Jia create and finesse mood, psychology, and social ambience characteristic of the people of a nation undergoing rapid social transformation. Whereas *jianghu* is usually positioned as a world of male-centred bounding and misogyny throughout Chinese literature and film – from the 108 heroes in *The Water Margin* (also translated as All Men Are Brothers), through the masculine martial arts cinema of Chang Cheh in the 1970s, to the manly gangster films of John Woo in the 1980s, Jia looks at both male and female characters as equal representations of the *jianghu* world (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 146). Further examination reveals that Jia reconstructs his vision of *jianghu* – traditionally a man's world - with a strong female protagonist. Jia's reinterpretation of the *jianghu* genre is illustrated clearly in his design of Zhao Tao's role in *Ash Is Purest White*.

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[111] John Woo 吴宇森 transposed the *wuxia* universe of *jianghu* to 1980s Hong Kong in his highly influential gangster films (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 152-8). Jia Zhangke has been a fan of John Woo from the outset, referencing his films *A Better Tomorrow 1* (*Yingxiong bense 1* 英雄本色 1, 1986), *A Better Tomorrow 2* (*Yingxiong bense 2* 英雄本色 2, 1987) and *The Killer* (*Diexue shuangxiong* 喋血双雄, 1989) and over and over again (Jia, 2017, 2018; Mello, 2019; Lu, 2021; M. Berry, 2022).

In her role in *Ash Is Purest White*, for example, Zhao Tao's character, Qiao Qiao 巧巧,
experiences ups and downs amid the social order of *jianghu* Jia projects between
2001 and 2018, during which China's economic and social development goes into
high gear. According to Jia, *Ash Is Purest White* explores how traditional views of
morality and gender relations change in their *jianghu* throughout this unprecedented
economic transformation (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 190). At the beginning of the film,
set in 2001, Qiao Qiao hangs out with Bin, a mob boss with a lot of power in Datong.
After Bin's boss is murdered, Qiao Qiao suggests they run away from the power and
get married, but Bin is not interested. One night a group of gangsters attack Bin,
claiming to dethrone him. Qiao Qiao saves Bin's life by grabbing his handgun and
firing two warning shots into the air, which scare off the attackers. She also takes the
blame for Bin by repeatedly claiming herself as the owner of the gun even if the police
tell her that it is an illegal gun. She ends up spending five years in prison for illegally
owning a gun, but Bin does not visit her once.

After Qiao Qiao is released, she finds that society is undergoing tremendous change,
in which her genuine emotion for Bin seems to be the only thing that has not changed.
She tries to call him but can never seem to get in touch. Even when she travels to
Fengjie where Bin, who has had a new girlfriend, is living, he deliberately hides from
her. When she finally manages to meet him, he says he has no place in his life for her
anymore. Learning that Bin is a changed man who has lost traditional values in a
relationship, such as fraternity and loyalty, Qiao Qiao makes her way back to Datong
alone.

As Bin begins to change, so does Qiao Qiao. Eventually, Bin grows weaker but Qiao Qiao becomes stronger, even more powerful than he was, even in his prime. By the end of the film, set in the present (2018), Qiao Qiao, now the owner of a gambling parlour, gets a call from Bin, and when she picks him up, she finds him using a wheelchair. He tells her that he had a stroke from drinking too much, and she finds a doctor to help rehabilitate him. But when he can walk again, he sneaks out of Qiao Qiao's building with just a brief voicemail to say he has left.

One finds that amid the social order of *jianghu* that Jia projects in *Ash Is Purest White*, men like Bin lose their way more easily than women like Qiao Qiao. Over time, Bin's classical values, such as friendship, fraternity and loyalty, have overtaken by materialism, capitalism, money, and profit. Qiao Qiao, on the other hand, who maintains all of those values like fraternity and loyalty, and can remain loyal to her past relationship with Bin, is ultimately abandoned by him. As Jia comments on his design of this strong female protagonist, "All of the good things seem to be somehow be sealed in the past. Perhaps Qiao Qiao is one of the few people who is hanging on to something from the past for us" (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 152).

Amid times of rapid social transformation, while women like Qiao Qiao hold onto the legacy of China's past, which places great emphasis on traditional values of morality around which Chinese people have constructed their relationships, classical values in a relationship are breaking down and beginning to disappear in men like Bin.

Together they, women/the so-called "daughters" like Qiao Qiao and men/"sons" like
Bin, constitute Jia's vision of *jianghu* in *Ash Is Purest White* (whose Chinese title is
translated "Sons and Daughters of *Jianghu*"). This image of the *jianghu* can be seen
as the image of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century; in Jia's owns words,
"it is through the perspective of *jianghu* and those people who live amid that world
that we are able to get a clearer understanding of how age and society have been
constructed" (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 136).

One can see the early development of the above image of a strong yet abandoned
woman in *Mountains May Depart*, a film made before *Ash Is Purest White* and Jia's
other film that spans an extended period. By including a section of the narrative set
in the future, the film is Jia's first attempt to imagine a "future tense" of China in his
work. In her role in *Mountains May Depart*, Zhao Tao's character, Shen Tao 沈涛,
experiences ups and downs across three discrete episodes and periods: beginning in
1999, continuing in 2014, and ending in the near-future year of 2025. In 1999, Tao
was a singer and dance instructor in her hometown, Fenyang. She is faced with two
suitors who have been her bosom friends since childhood: one is Zhang Jinsheng 张
晋生, an opportunistic entrepreneur, or in Peter Bradshaw's (2015) words, "one of
China's breed of pushy entrepreneurs", who owns a gas station and whose gleaming
Volkswagen sedan serves as a symbol of his wealth; and the other is Liangzi 梁子, a
humble mineworker of limited means but a good heart, who works at a local state-
owned coal mine that Jinsheng will soon buy when it is privatised. Weighing up the
attention of the two men and their social roles, Tao pragmatically chooses the

entrepreneur Jinsheng over the mineworker Liangzi, and bears the former a son, Zhang Daole 张到乐.

In the present (2014), Tao has become a woman entrepreneur herself, running a prosperous gas station in Fenyang. Yet she has been separated from Jinsheng, who has left Fenyang and become a big-wheeling industrialist in Shanghai, where he has taken their seven-year-old son to live with him and remarried. Tao reunites with Daole once when her father passes away, and the juvenile boy returns to Fenyang to attend his grandfather's funeral. In the future year 2025, Peter (Jinsheng) and Dollar (Daole) have relocated to Australia. Tao, who still stays in Fenyang, is ultimately abandoned by both her ex-husband and son – with her son having lost all contact with her, and any reunion between them is not seen in the film's ending.

Tao's continued alienation from the men in her life is illustrated clearly by carefully considering the frame size. In the film, each period of the diegetic time is carefully composed by Jia and his cinematographer Yu Likwai to acquire a different frame size. To illustrate the extent of alienation between Tao and the men, the screen's aspect ratio is slightly wider in each successive segment. The frame expands from the 4:3 (1.33:1) aspect ratio during the first part to the standard widescreen format (1.85:1) in the second part and finally to the anamorphic widescreen format (2.39:1) in the third part (Declan McGrath, 2016, p. 34; Scott Foundas, 2015; Mello, 2019, pp. 72-3). As the frame grows more expansive, the distance between the family members within the frame likewise grows greater, both geographically and emotionally.

There is nothing new in this image of divided families as metaphors for a divided
nation in the history of Chinese cinema. In as early as the Second Generation cinema
of the 1930s and 1940s, film after film presented pictures of divided families and
homes across a divided nation, including *Big Road* (1934), *Street Angel* (1937), *The
Spring River Flows East* (1947), *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), and *Crows and
Sparrows* (1949). Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 82) noted that these Second
Generation films about divided families merge together as a common signifier of
China as a nation, divided by factors such as imperialism and war. While Jia cites the
trope of the divided family as a metaphor for a divided nation in *Mountains May
Depart*, the divided family of Tao signifies a nation that is divided or continues to tear
itself apart by rapid social transformation and globalisation. Indeed, the title of the
film, "Mountains May Depart"[112], speaks of instability and loss. Alongside Tao's words
to her son when they part, "nobody can be with you all through life, we're fated to
be apart", this further emphasises the image of a divided nation. As Mello (2019, p.
77) notes, Tao's asseveration here, together with the film's title, suggests a harbinger
of separation, both of a mother from her son and of a nation where mountains are
departing.

Amid times of rapid social transformation and globalisation, Tao's family falls apart,
or more precisely, Tao is abandoned by her ex-husband and son in her family. Unlike

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[112] The film's title, "Mountains May Depart", comes from the Chinese aphorism, "It is possible to
change mountains and rivers, but harder to change human nature" (*Shanhe yigai, benxing nanyi*
山河易改，本性难移).

the men who abandon her for pursuing materialism and capitalism (or, for that matter, Westernisation) at the cost of moral deterioration and broken human relationships, Tao holds onto the legacy of China's past which places great emphasis on traditional views of morality and relationships. During Daole's visit, Tao is upset after seeing how her ex-husband has encouraged him to be obsessed with Western culture and lifestyle. Feeling what little influence Chinese culture still holds over her son, Tao tries to show him more of Fenyang and Chinese tradition. Before sending him back to Shanghai, Tao makes Chinese dumplings for him. Seeing Daole enjoy eating the dumplings as a gesture of embracing Chinese tradition, Tao smiles with relief.

Also, Tao's close relationship with her father and her raging evocation of grief at his death reveals that she values her natal family. In narrative terms, this represents a reversal of the structure of the rebellious daughter figure that was hackneyed in twentieth-century Chinese cinema by Jia's (Sixth Generation) predecessors. Instead of rejecting her natal family and rebelling against it as a signifier of China as a nation rejecting elements of its past, Tao embraces her natal family and traditional views of morality and relationships. This image of the woman who embraces the legacy of China's past is a hackneyed signifier of China as a nation that speaks to a longing nostalgia toward its socialist legacy in Jia's previous films.

4.3 Discussing the Gender-as-Nation Significance through Narrative Roles: Unveiling the Two-Dimensional Portrait of the Nation

Applying the theoretical framework of this thesis of gender-as-nation, comprising both woman-as-nation and man-as-nation, which together construct an integrated vision of the nation through images of the woman and her male counterpart, the above section analysing how the narrative roles of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts construct their respective images opens the issue of what Zhao Tao's characters, or the women, and her male counterparts, or the men, symbolise regarding the nation. First, in looking at her roles in Jia's oeuvre to date as a whole, instead of the "mother figure" who is confined in the domestic space, they are all portrayed as active agents in the public space as role models fit for the construction of the rapidly developing Chinese nation in the twenty-first century, albeit married and/or having children. This is a continuity of woman-as-nation representations throughout twentieth-century Chinese cinema by Jia's predecessor generations of directors, portraying women as the "daughter figure" who actively engages in the public space (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 112).

While Zhao Tao's characters are portrayed as active agents in the public space as role models fit for the construction of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century, one finds another consistent cinematic statement of these women created by Jia. They all embrace the legacy of China's past. Also, looking at Jia's films collectively as this chapter does, M. Berry (2022) offers a clue about the specific period of China's past that Zhao Tao's characters embrace, its socialist past. As M. Berry (2022, p. 11) writes:

"Equally remarkable as the characters and places he [Jia] depicts in his body of work is the cinematic form he appropriates; content to settle into the uncomfortable space between, allowing his camera to linger on the unsettling space of transition itself. This in-between space speaks to a longing nostalgia toward the socialist world being abandoned while projecting an uneasiness about the uncertain future rapidly rising up to take its place."

Therefore, the image of the woman who embraces the legacy of China's past (specifically the socialist past), or Zhao Tao-as-China symbolises a nation that speaks to a longing nostalgia toward and embraces the socialist legacy in the postsocialist/capitalist era of the twenty-first century. In narrative terms, this represents a reversal of the structure of the rebellious daughter figure that was hackneyed in twentieth-century Chinese cinema by Jia's predecessors. Instead of rejecting her natal family and rebelling against it as a signifier of China as a nation rejecting elements of its past, the female protagonist, played by Zhao Tao, embraces her natal family of the socialist era, as in *24 City* (2008) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and traditional (compared with the more modern twenty-first-century) views of morality and relationships, as in *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018).

Zhao Tao's characters collectively signify a twenty-first-century China which embraces its socialist legacy with good spiritual and moral values. Put simply, Zhao Tao-as-China signifies a spiritually rich China. At the same time, her male

counterparts together symbolise a China which pursues materialism and capitalism at the cost of losing moral values, such as in *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). In other words, man-as-China signifies a spiritually poor China. The images of Zhao Tao's characters and her male counterparts construct a two-dimensional vision of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century: embracing its socialist legacy while pursuing materialism and capitalism at the cost of losing spiritual values.

Moreover, one finds that gender relations between Zhao Tao's character and her male counterpart repeat a trope in Jia's oeuvre, in which the woman is either estranged or abandoned by her male partner. As Zhao Tao's characters, who signify a spiritually rich China, are often estranged from their male counterparts, who represent a spiritually poor China, in their relationships, one can discern the very reason behind the falling apart between Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts, that is, the perseverance and loss of spiritual values. Specifically, Zhao Tao's character is estranged yet not entirely abandoned by her male partner in Jia's films made and set in the first decade of the twenty-first century, such as *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006). In other words, there still leaves hope, albeit faint, that the woman and the man who alienates her might reunite. However, this alienation between the woman and the man is further enhanced in Jia's films made and set in the twenty-first century's second decade, such as *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). While Zhao Tao's characters consistently preserve good spiritual values throughout the two decades of the twenty-first century, the further

alienation between them and their male counterparts owes to the men's more vigorous pursuit of materialism at the cost of more loss of spiritual values when China's economic and social development goes into a higher gear in the second decade compared with the first decade.

4.4 Exploring the Three Senses of the look in the Portrayal of the Female Prostitute/Sexual Object in Mainland Chinese Cinema History

In the history of mainland Chinese cinema, numerous films have featured female prostitutes or sexual objects as woman-as-nation representations since the early part of the twentieth century. This section will revisit some of the most classic figures of the female prostitute throughout twentieth-century Chinese cinema to better illustrate the function of Berry and Farquhar's three senses of the look in analysing the image of the woman and its association with the construction of the nation. At the same time, it will also provide a premise to make some meaningful comparisons between the figure of the sexual object portrayed in twentieth-century Chinese cinema by Jia's predecessors and by Jia in the twenty-first century.

The figure of the female prostitute or sexual object has been a common signifier of the Chinese nation and Chinese modernity. For example, the prostitute is the primary role that links women and the nation in 1930s Chinese cinema (Rey Chow, 1991, pp. 107-113 & 139-56; Cui, 2003, p. 15-23; Zhang, 2004, p. 82-3; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 119-124). In *The Goddess* (1934), Ruan Lingyu portrayed one of the most memorable Chinese prostitutes ever. In the film, Ruan's character is forced to

become a prostitute to raise the school fee for her son. In *The New Woman* (1935), Ruan portrayed a modern or new woman working as a teacher/writer. However, this modern woman still cannot escape economic pressure and is forced to be a sexual commodity. Critics (e.g., Lu, 1997, p. 21; Cui, 2003, p. 33; Zhang, 2004, pp. 82-3; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 108; Kristine Harris, 2008, p. 128) widely see the images of the prostitutes Ruan portrayed as symbols of the then humiliated and oppressed Chinese nation.

The prostitute, whom Cui (2003, p. 15) called "the other of the oppressed other", embodies doubly deprivileged identities: a fallen whore compared to other women as a sexual commodity exchanged among men. Here Cui acutely pointed out the characteristics of the prostitute, that the woman is seen as a sexual commodity or object for men. If one draws on Cui's definition of the prostitute, like Ruan, in her best-known films with Zhang Yimou, such as *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *Shanghai Triad* (1995), Gong Li also portrayed several classic Chinese "sexual objects" in the history of Chinese cinema. Although these roles she played are not exactly prostitutes, they are all treated as sexual objects by the men in the films. The portrayal of Gong as the sexual object in Zhang's films cites, albeit in a distinct and novel manner, the extensive historical legacy discussed in the Literature Review of women as empathetic characters and struggling victims who serve as symbolic representations of a nation grappling with suffering and adversity. While Ruan Lingyu-as-China symbolises a humiliated and oppressed nation under both imperialist invasion and the shackles of feudalism, the images of the sexual objects

Gong Li portrayed or Gong Li-as-China are seen by critics as a symbol of a suffering and struggling nation submitting to global postcoloniality (Zhang Yiwu 张颐武, 1993; Wang Yichuan 王一川, 1998; Ying Hu, 1999, pp. 257-82), or protesting against neocolonialism (Chow, 1995, pp. 162-72) or its rulers (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 124-129).

Further, the figure of the prostitute portrayed by Ruan or the figure of the sexual object portrayed by Gong, albeit in different ways, is the main protagonist in the films and carries the primary spectatorial involvement. The woman they respectively portrayed can be seen as the object of Mulvey's male gaze. At the same time, Ruan's or Gong's character directly engages in the look structure of Berry and Farquhar's understanding of woman-as-nation in Chinese cinema.

Suppose one applies Berry and Farquhar's three senses of the look to analyse how the image of the prostitute portrayed by Ruan and the image of the sexual object portrayed by Gong is repectively constructed. First, regarding the look as physical appearance or how the woman looks before others, when Ruan plays a prostitute, as in *The Goddess*, or a wannabe modern woman author, as in *The New Woman*, in each case, she appears on screen wearing form-fitting, slit-to-the-thigh *qipao* (also known as cheogsam) dresses made of shimmering silk, which makes her appearance fetishised. According to Antonia Finnane (1999, pp. 18-20), *qipao* is a nationalistic garment designed in reaction to Westernisation as a form of modern indegenous dress, and at the same time, it is intended to emphasise female sexuality. In Ruan's

case, her appearance in *qipao* constructs an image of a woman being the libidinal
object oppressed and humiliated by male villains in the films. Such a female image
carries particular connotations associated with the nation, symbolising a humiliated
and oppressive nation under imperialist invasion and feudalism's shackles.

As Ruan's character in *The Goddess* encompasses two contradictory roles, namely a
self-sacrificing mother and a prostitute, her appearance differs between these two
roles. Although Ruan consistently wears *qipao* in the film, her *qipao* worn as a mother
is dark and plain, drawing no libidinal attention to her body. She only wears a more
glamorous *qipao* when her role is switched to a prostitute. As Cui (2003, p. 15)
commented in her analysis of *The Goddess*, while the heart of a virtuous mother is
revealed, her prostitute body is displayed to expose social indignity. In the film, the
prostitute's body is emphasised by Ruan dressing a more glamorous *qipao*. This logic
of organising the look as appearance can also be found in *The New Woman*, in which
Ruan wears dark and plain *qipao* when she plays the role of an abandoned mother to
her sick daughter. But when she is in a more glamourous *qipao*, she becomes the
libidinal object of the male villain in the film, and this libidinal objectification also
indicates her tragic destiny. She is forced into becoming a "slave for one night" and
prostitute herself, and this time, her *qipao* is lit in such a way as to shine.

Turning to the look as appearance in the construction of the image of the sexual
object portrayed by Gong, there is no doubt that the sexualised bodies of Gong's
characters in Zhang's films are more emphasised by clothing and the presence of

male relays of the camera's look upon the woman (this latter point will be elaborated later in the section) than those of Ruan's characters. One notices that Gong's characters in Zhang's films almost all embody visible female sexuality - a signifier of male desire. The only exceptions are Gong's roles in *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *To Live* (1993), where she plays a pregnant mother. As Zhang himself directly commented on his usage of women in his films, including *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, where Gong plays the sexual object, in an interview with Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1993, p. 300), "What I want to express is the Chinese people's oppression and confinement, which has been going on for thousands of years. Women express this more clearly on their bodies because they bear a heavier burden than men."

Here, Zhang makes the female body a narrative site for his projection of national trauma and collective memory in his films. For instance, it is the young sensual body of the woman where manhood is recentred in *Red Sorghum* (1987). As Yi Zheng (1997, p. 350) commented, the male lead is reborn as a crude but real man and a mischievous hero whose manhood is regenerated and sublimated by his ravishing Gong's character, Jiu'er. In *Ju Dou*, Judou's body becomes the object of her sexually impotent husband's display of power and the nephew's sexual desire. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Gong's character, Songlian, is also represented as an object of the primarily invisible master's libido.

Second, regarding the look as the look of the camera upon the woman, one finds that a range of structures of the look contributes to the constructions of the image of the

prostitute portrayed by Ruan and the image of the sexual object portrayed by Gong

on screen. These include Mulvey's libidinal structure of the gaze mediated by male

characters. For example, the libidinal gaze of Ruan's unwanted admirer in *The New

Woman* on her shapely leg in shimmering silk stockings exposed by the design of her

qipao and her high-heeled shoes constructs Ruan's image as a sexual object.

However, Mulvey's libidinal gaze mediated by male characters can be seen as

downplayed in the Second Generation films featuring Ruan, who plays the prostitute.

As suggested by scholars such as Berry and Farquhar (2006, pp. 121-2) and Lu (2021),

it is, in fact, the camera's direct look upon her face in the close-ups, unmediated by

male or other relay characters, that functions as the particular cinematic trope

associated with Ruan.

A persuasive example of the camera's direct look upon her face in the close-ups

occurs at the end of *The New Woman*, in which Ruan's character sits up in bed and

regretfully cries out to the camera before she dies, "I want to live, I want revenge", a

phrase that is superimposed over her image. Here it is almost as though she sees the

spectator directly. Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 124) saw Ruan's character in *The New

Woman* as an embodiment of a Chinese nation that cannot act now. Still, at the same

time, she serves as a channel for expressing and articulating hopes for the future

agency.

It is not surprising that Ruan is most famous for such a direct look on her face, as the

films where she plays the prostitute (i.e., *The Goddess* and *The New Woman*) are

silent films. Jia Zhangke also feels that it is Ruan's performance in those close-up shots of her that makes her "the single greatest actress in Chinese cinema"; for him, "the emotion that she can convey through her eyes is so compelling and moving" (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 167). When Ruan plays the forced prostitute who is also the self-sacrificing mother of her child in *The Goddess* and *The New Woman*, she moves through a variety of emotions from joy when she interacts with her child to tragedy when she works as a prostitute, so her expressive face registers numerous intense and fleeting emotions in the switching of these two contradictory roles. Lu (2021) reads the close-up of Ruan's face that simultaneously expresses contradictory feelings as the revelation of the contradictions of modernity in China at that time (i.e., the 1930s).

In addition, Ruan's character's submission to patriarchy and male authority is unmistakably captured in the look of the camera upon her. For example, when the camera looks at her, there is a somewhat symbolic shot of Ruan's character holding her small son from under the legs and crotch of the boss, a husky thug who has taken control of her life because he once "saved" her from a police sweep. The male domination of the livelihood of Ruan's character is graphically brought forth to the spectator. In a later scene, she is seen during the trial for her boss's murder, being held in custody with two male guards standing beside her. The camera's direct look upon her face in the close-up becomes arresting as her gaze looks directly onto the eyes of the male judges, leaving a profound impression. In this powerful moment, it

almost feels as if she is holding the entire patriarchal society accountable for the

tragic circumstances of her life.

The close-ups of Ruan's face, as Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 122) argued, do not

render libidinal objectification. Instead, they arouse empathy. As the face is

instrumental in conveying the emotions of characters, the camera's look directed at

her face allows the spectator to immerse themselves in her emotions and empathise

with her struggles. It is through the camera's direct look upon her face in the close-

ups (fig. 4.2) that spectators often come to identify with her plight, especially

considering that the narrative frequently concludes with a tragic outcome. Therefore,

empathy is privileged over libidinal objectification by the direct look of the camera

upon Ruan's face in the close-ups. In cinematic terms, this represents a shift from

Mulvey's libidinal structure. What is replaced here is another cinematic structure that

moves the spectator away from simply objectifying the female character and toward

an empathetic engagement based on her suffering.

FIGURE 4.2 An evocative close-up of Ruan Lingyu's expressive face in *The Goddess* (*1934*).

Scholars noted a structure of the look as the camera's look upon the woman that opposes sexuality and libidinality to patriotism, nationalism, and revolution in both the Second and Third Generation cinemas (C. Berry, 1988; Ma Junxiang 马军骧, 1990, pp. 24-5; Harris, 1997, p. 279; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, pp. 125-7). In other words, in earlier generations of directors' portrayals of women who symbolise the nation, visible female sexuality and Mulvey's libidinal gaze mediated by male characters are suppressed. However, when turning to the look as the look of the camera in the construction of the image of the sexual object portrayed by Gong, one finds that (Fifth Generation) Zhang's construction of the female image is significantly different from those female images constructed by previous generations of directors. When the camera looks at Gong, her sexually seductive female body proactively directs the male gaze to be looked at.

Yet further analysis reveals that the image of the sexual object portrayed by Gong in Zhang's films is constructed not only as the object of the male gaze but also as the agent (Farquhar, 1993, p. 73; Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, 1991-92, pp. 2-10; Chow, 1995, pp. 166-70; Lu, 1997, p. 120; Cui, 2003, p. xxi). Taking the camera's look upon Gong's character, Judou, in a scene from *Ju Dou* as an example, the nephew's constant peering at Judou through a peephole reminds the spectator of the voyeuristic structure of Mulvey. Still, Judou responds directly to the male gaze with her battered and bruised body when the camera looks at her. Accordingly, the camera's look upon her denies the visual pleasure to the male voyeur and protests against the male gaze, leaving the male with psychological torment. Here, Judou's exposure to the nephew undercuts his voyeurism and disputes her status as the object of the male gaze.

In addition, one finds that when Judou looks back in this same scene, the direct look of the camera upon her face in the close-up arouses empathy (fig. 4.3), like close-ups of Ruan's face. When the nephew looks at her tragic face, he comes to feel with her emotions and identifies with her plight. In her book, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema*, Mary Ann Doane (2021, p. 21) puts it, "The [close-up of the] face carries a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory significations – modernity, timelessness, clarity, illegibility, objecthood, excessive subjectivity – but its ubiquity and semiotic centrality in modernity are linked specifically to the vicissitudes of female sexuality, its lure and threat."

Judou's exposure, as illustrated above, and the close-up of her face undercut the
nephew's voyeurism and dispute her status as the object of the male gaze. Instead,
empathy is privileged over libidinal objectification. In cinematic terms, again, this
represents a shift from Mulvey's libidinal structure. Therefore, Zhang's construction
of the image of the sexual object portrayed by Gong can be seen as a citation of the
cinematic structure deployed to construct the image of the prostitute portrayed by
Ruan in the films of Second Generation directors, privileging empathy over libidinal
objectification through close-ups of the woman's face.

FIGURE 4.3 The poignant close-up of Gong Li's tearful and sorrowful expression in
Ju Dou **(1990).**

Third, when considering the look as the woman's subjective look upon others and the
world, it becomes evident that the character of the (forced) prostitute portrayed by
Ruan in *The New Woman* exhibits a compelling subjective look of her own. The direct

look of the camera upon Ruan's face in the close-ups evokes empathy, as previously discussed, thus it is not surprising that her character possesses an empathetic subjective look. As highlighted by Harris (1997, p. 280), the new woman portrayed by Ruan and two other female characters in *The New Woman* possess a narratorial knowledge within the film and take the initiative in most of the subjective point-of-view shots and flashbacks. Ruan's character, with the presence of subjective looks through flashbacks and her poignant close-ups, facilitates a process of self-criticism that gives rise to a delicate balance between catharsis and didacticism. This tension between emotional release and moral instruction is a characteristic often found in left-wing Chinese cinema of the 1930s (Harris, 1997, p. 282).

In *The New Woman*, there is a pivotal scene where Ruan's admirer takes her to a nightclub. During the journey, she reminisces sadly about how she was introduced to him by her school principal, who emphasised his importance as a patron of the school and suggested she should be friendly towards him. These momeries are portrayed through flashbacks, shown within the frame of the car she is looking out of, illustrating her subjective look.

Upon reaching the nightclub, a Western woman performs an erotic and exotic show. While Ruan's admirer is enthralled, she reacts with horror. From Ruan's point of view, the woman in chains appears submissive and degraded. As she watches the woman's performance, Ruan's imagination is triggered, and she begins to identify herself with

the woman in chains. Disturbed by the idea of being reduced to a mere object of desire and a plaything for men, Ruan's character stands up from the table and flees.

This scene effectively highlights Ruan's emphathetic subjective look through the use of flashbacks and imagined sequences of the future. When combined with the previous two senses of the look, Ruan's subjective look here conveys the image of a suffering woman, vulnerable, passive, violated, and tragic. Through this portrayal, Ruan's character symbolises the struggles and hardships faced by the Chinese nation during that time.

When examining the subjective look as a crucial element in the construction of Gong's character as the sexual object, there exists a scholarly debate on this matter. Some scholars argue that Gong's characters in Zhang's films are presented as possessors or agents of desire, which challenges Mulvey's concept of the male gaze (Yuejin Wang, 1991, pp. 80-103; Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p. 126). For instance, in the opening scenes of *Red Sorghum*, subjective shots of Gong's character, Jiu'er, peeking out at the sweating and naked backs of the men carrying her bridal sedan, including her future husband, convey her desire. In reading this subjective look of the woman in *Red Sorghum*, Wang (1991) interpreted the subjective look of Jiu'er as a manifestatioin of her desiring gaze, celebrating it as a symbol of female sexual liberation within Chinese patriarchal culture. From this perspective, the male sedan carriers become objects of the female desiring gaze.

However, the viewpoint has been challenged by Yau (1989, pp. 6-21) and Chow
(1995). Chow argued that the visual gestures of women in films like *Ju Dou* are not
critical and performative acts of self-subalternision and self-exoticisation on the part
of the "Ju Dous", but rather tactical gestures employed by Fifth Generation male
filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou, to reimagine their primitive "alterity". Yau (1989)
contended that such representations crafted by male filmmakers should be
understood as part of a male fantasy of a willing and active female sexual partner,
serving to restore male potency.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that in scenes depicting interactions between the
woman and her male counterpart, the woman's subjective look can be perceived as
a reverse shot of the camera's look upon the man. The woman's subjective look or
the reverse shot that captures the male character's perspective as he engages with
the woman proves to be a powerful cinematic device for capturing the intricate
dynamics and relationships between male and female characters. In *Ju Dou*, for
example, the subsequent reverse shot featuring Gong's male counterpart
experiencing psychological torment serves to further accentuate the tragedy
endured by Gong's character (fig. 4.4).

**FIGURE 4.4 A reverse shot capturing Gong's male counterpart empathising with her
situation.**

The preceding analysis of Ruan's portrayal as a prostitute by a Second Generation
director and Gong's depiction as a sexual object by a Fifth Generation director
illustrates that the three senses of the look Ruan and Gong involve with challenge
and recast Mulvey's libidinal structure of the gaze. In contrast to the objectification
of the sexual object, twentieth-century Chinese cinema presents an alternative
cinematic structure that prompts a compassionate connection with the woman,
centring on her experiences of suffering. This cinematic structure prioritises empathy
over the libidinal objectification of the sexual object portrayed on screen.

Further, the analysis of these portrayals of women on the Chinese screen can be
effectively explored through the lens of Berry and Farquhar's three senses of the look.
In terms of their narrative roles as prostitutes and sexual objects, Ruan-as-China and

178

Gong-and-China symbolise a nation grappling with suffering and adversity, both internally and externally, during the twentieth century. Rather than being portrayed solely as objects of the libidinal gaze, directors from previous generations of twentieth-century Chinese cinema employed cinematic techniques to enrich the depiction of these female characters, presenting them as victims who evoke empathy. Therefore, in addition to their narrative roles, the three senses of the look serve as a cinematic tool that illuminates the construction of woman-as-nation through specific cinematic structures and techniques.

4.5 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Zhao Tao's Characters

Like the woman-as-China portrayed in the films of his previous generations of directors, Jia's constructions of Zhao Tao-as-China in his films can also be seen to be constructed concerning Berry and Farquhar's three senses of the look. First, regarding the appearance of Zhao Tao's characters in his films, Jia presents a more moving and realistic image (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 56). In her debut role in Jia's *Platform*, for example, Zhao Tao wears the old clothes of Jia's older sister from the era that the film depicts (i.e., the 1980s) to truly capture the authenticity of that era. Starting from that first film with Jia together, the appearance of her subsequent roles all follow this idea of looking authentic, both in terms of the occupation of her role and the exact period she is positioned in. In fact, according to Jia, one of the reasons that make Zhao Tao such a unique actress is her exceptional attention to the appearance of her roles (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, pp. 101-2).

One example is when Zhao Tao was playing in *Still Life*, she kept asking the makeup artist to "add more sweat" because she felt that she needed more perspiration on her face to capture that sense of extreme humidity of the environment (i.e., Fengjie) she is positioned in. Another example is when she portrays characters who cover a broad historical period, such as in *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White*, she pays careful attention to the different appearances of the younger and older iterations of her characters. Zhao Tao was susceptible to portraying the marks left by time imprinted on her characters' faces. She worked closely with the makeup artist, lighting designer and cinematographer to ensure the proper skin effect she wanted. So regarding the appearance of her roles, Zhao Tao is sensitive about how the woman looks before others to reveal reality convincingly.

The design of the appearance of Zhao Tao's character in *A Touch of Sin*[113] is the only time that Jia drew inspiration from the *wuxia*/martial arts film genre, as the film was heavily influenced by the genre of martial arts, especially the classic novel *The Water*

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[113] In *A Touch of Sin*, Jia documented four stories about desperate individuals who ultimately resort to violence and death to fight against unrighteousness, based on a series of real-life news reports. Coal miner Dahai 大海 takes matters into his own hands to fight corruption and redress social injustice in his village in Shanxi province by shooting the officials dead. San'er 三儿 is a filial son and loving father in his home village in Chongqing, but he lives a life of robbery and murder. Xiaohui 小辉 is a migrant worker from Hunan province who works in a factory in Dongguan, Guangdong province. Zhao Tao's character is the only female of the four individuals portrayed in the film. All these four protagonists who resort to violence and death are individuals with underprivileged social roles, or in Lu's (2021) view, they are from the disadvantaged working class. Together their stories speak to the plight and living conditions of all ordinary Chinese people regardless of who they are. For Jia, the film provides a panoramic perspective on the Chinese nation, taking his viewer from the northernmost areas of Shanxi, through Chongqing and Hubei, to the southernmost areas in Guangzhou (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 123). Whereas Jia provides a somewhat hazy description here regarding the vision *A Touch of Sin* projects concerning the nation, one can still speculate that the film reflects the escalating tensions and social problems in contemporary China.

Margin[114] (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 63, 69 & 127). Zhao Tao's character in the film, Xiao Yu 小玉, is a young receptionist at a spa in Hubei province. According to Jia, Xiao Yu is designed following the female martial arts heroines in the films of King Hu[115] and, at the same time, inspired by Lin Chong 林冲[116]. While Lin Chong is an exemplary hero in the *jianghu* of Liangshan in *The Water Margin* who fights for and upholds injustice in his manner, Xiao Yu in *A Touch of Sin* is like a modern heroine of *jianghu* who rights wrongs and combats evils, calling for a return of the spirit of chivalry that is prevalent in the *jianghu* where Lin Chong lives amid. One night at her workplace, when harassed and assaulted by two men as if she is a prostitute, Xiao Yu fights back against one of the men who attempts to rape her and kills him with a fruit knife.

The appearance and costume of Xiao Yu are designed to construct her image as a female heroine or knight-errant who possesses the spirit of chivalry like Lin Chong. According to Jia, the red pants that Xiao Yu wears are directly referenced from the

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[114] All four main characters in *A Touch of Sin* have reference points from the protagonists in *The Water Margin* (Mello, 2019, p. 161; Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 127).

[115] King Hu (Hu Jinquan 胡金铨) is best known for directing various *wuxia* films in the 1960s and 1970s in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Hu's *wuxia* films frequently featured strong female protagonists, such as "Golden Swallow" Zheng (Cheng Peipei) in *Come Drink with Me* (1966), and the female knight-errant Yang Huizhen (Hsu Feng) in *A Touch of Zen* (*Xianv* 侠女, 1971). The English title of *A Touch of Sin* is also clearly inspired by the latter film.

[116] Lin Chong is a character from *The Water Margin*. He was a skilled martial artist and a law-abiding instructor of the Chinese imperial guards when the son of a powerful official attempted to steal his wife. This plot led to Lin Chong's unjust arrest and exile. Eventually, Lin Chong joined the 108 heroes of the *jianghu* of Liangshan and became one of their leaders. Lin Chong's story has been famous in numerous forms, also appearing in several traditional Chinese operas, including *Lin Chong Fleeing by Night* (*Lin Chong yeben* 林冲夜奔). In the first segment of *A Touch of Sin*, Dahai ponders his next move regarding corrupted officials and businessmen and watches a performance of *Lin Chong Fleeing by Night*. Also, according to Jia, his design of the two protagonists (Hong and Sanming) in *Still Life* is in some ways very similar to Lin Chong (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 128). In the story of *Lin Chong Fleeing by Night*, Lin Chong had to resolve a problem that impacted his survival, for his characters Hong and Sanming had to fix a long-standing emotional problem with their respective relationships.

costume of Lin Chong (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 127). One notes that the red pants, and her strikingly high ponytail that resembles the female knights-errant in King Hu's martial arts films, which Mello (2019, p. 162) sees as lending her a tall, heroic allure, emphasise Xiao Yu's image as a chivalrous female heroine with a strong moral spirit. Whereas the attempted rapist claims, "I can do whatever I want with money", Xiao Yu is determined not to sell her body for money.

Xiao Yu's image is also constructed concerning the look of the camera upon her and her subjective look. Like how the camera looks at the figure of the prostitute or sexual object played by Ruan Lingyu and Gong Li (as discussed in the previous section), Mulvey's libidinal structure of the gaze mediated by male characters is not absent when the camera looks at Xiao Yu here. Although she works as a receptionist and her appearance is in no way as glamourised and sexualised as the masseuses who also provide sexual services at the spa, the two men see her as *xiaojie* 小姐, a colloquialism for "prostitute" in Chinese. However, the libidinal look is not the key cinematic trope here. Instead, the key trope is the protesting look.

The intensity of the look is accentuated by a long shot of the camera's look upon Xiao Yu, lasting nearly one minute. This shot encompasses a series of repetitive actions between Xiao Yu and one of the men, whrein she fearlessly stands up against the assailant each time she is pushed back onto the sofa (a total of seven times). Additionally, she defiantly raises her head and locks eyes with the attacker (a total of twenty times) as he repeatedly strikes her with a bundle of cash (a total of sixteen

times), while she reacts with a sense of despair. Similar to the camera's direct look

upon the roles of Ruan and Gong as the sexual object, conveyed through intense

emotions in the close-ups of their faces, the long shot is followed by several close-

ups of Xiao Yu's face. The primary objective is to highlight the protesting look, as

these close-ups vividly capture her emotions of defiant resistance (fig. 4.5).
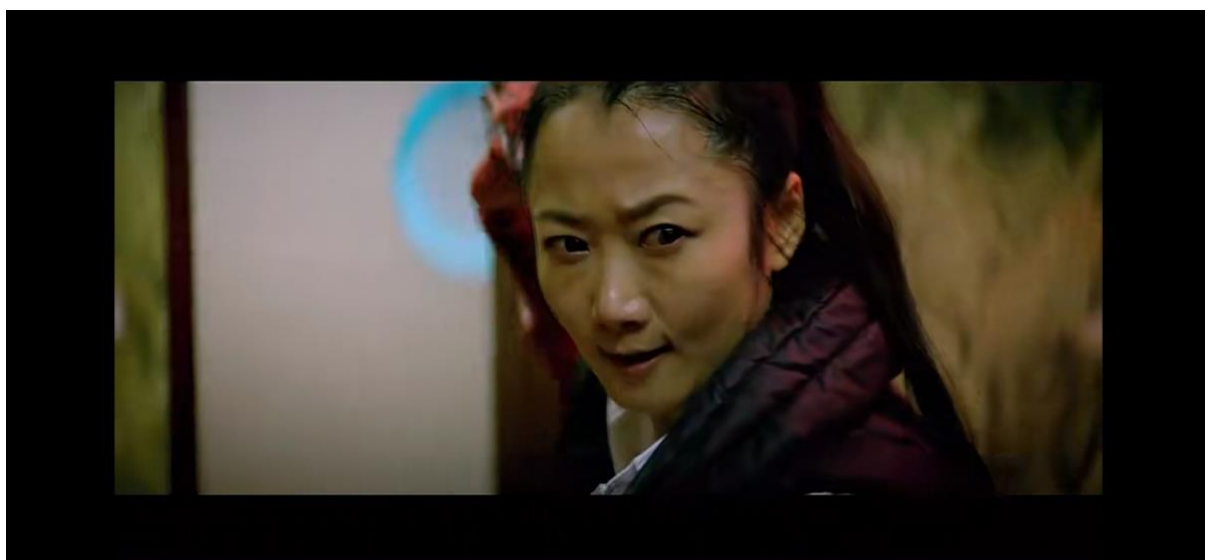
FIGURE 4.5 A close-up of Zhao Tao's face captures a powerful emotion of defiance.

The protesting look of Xiao Yu is further strengthened by a reverse shot capturing the

reaction of her male counterpart. Following the assault, Xiao Yu retaliates by wielding

a fruit knife and slashing the man's body. From her perspective, the camera's look

captures the man's terrified reaction as he looks at the bleeding wound on his chest

and takes a step back (fig. 4.5). This transition from the subjective look of Xiao Yu

then returns to the camera's direct look upon her, capturing her expression of

vengeance. Simultaneously, she executes her final act by slashing the man's eyes.

FIGURE 4.5 From Zhao's perspective: the man reacts in terror as he presses on his bleeding wound.

In addition, in the final scene of *A Touch of Sin*, which is considered one of the most potent moments in Jia's oeuvre by scholars such as Mello (2019, p. 166) and Lu (2021), Xiao Yu moves through a crowd standing in front of an open stage by the city walls of a city in Shanxi and stops by to watch an operatic performance of *The Story of Su San* (*Su San qijie* 苏三起解). Set in Shanxi, this traditional Chinese opera is about the unjust accusation of an innocent prostitute, Su San, also known as Yu Tangchun 玉堂春, for murder. Zhao Tao's character, Xiao Yu, is called after Yu Tangchun in the opera, and in this final scene, she finally "meets" her namesake.

Here the camera directly looks upon Xiao Yu's pensive face in the close-up as she looks at the performance, which reveals her empathy with Yu Tangchun on the stage, who sings: "He brands me, Su San, as a murderer, I cannot defend myself, I am forced

to confess, my tears flow." A subjective look of Xiao Yu then reveals her perspective, in which Su San onstage is kneeling and facing the crowd, including Xiao Yu, with the county magistrate sitting at a high table behind her. A close-up of Xiao Yu's face follows after watching the magistrate repeatedly yelling at Su San, asking her: "Do you admit your sin (*Ni ke zhi zui* 你可知罪)?" Again, this close-up of Xiao Yu's pensive face reveals her complete empathy and identification with the unjustly accused prostitute onstage.

Like the direct look upon Ruan Lingyu and Gong Li's faces in the close-ups, as discussed in the previous section, emphasise a structure privileging empathy over libidinal objectification, the close-ups of Zhao Tao's face here also indicate a structure that moves the spectator away from simply objectifying the figure of the once-forced prostitute, instead, toward an empathetic engagement with her. But more importantly, when Xiao Yu reappears at the end of the film, one learns that she walks free from killing the assailant after being mistaken as a prostitute[117]. Her destiny differs from that of the prostitute played by Ruan, who is imprisoned for killing the evil in *The Goddess*. Therefore, the once-forced prostitute can be seen as set free. In this sense, combined with her subjective look observing how Su San onstage is charged guilty of murder, the structure privileging empathy as shown by the direct look upon her face in the close-ups can instead be seen as arousing sympathy toward

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[117] Xiao Yu's segment in the film is based on the Deng Yujiao 邓玉娇 incident, which took place in 2009. Following a groundswell of public protests and online petitions, prosecutors dropped murder charges, granted Deng bail, and charged her with a lesser offence of "intentional assault". She was found guilty but did not receive a sentence due to her mental state.

Su San, and female prostitutes in Chinese film history alike, such as Ruan's character in *The Goddess*, who fail to be set free, at least through their own effort.

Xiao Yu's sympathy towards historic female prostitutes like Su San, who were unable to protest against patriarchal oppression, emphasises her image as a strong woman. She stands apart from figures like Su San, demonstrating her strength by protesting against her male attacker alone[118]. Moreover, from Xiao Yu's perspective, she witnesses Su San's male counterpart, the magistrate, displaying patronising superiority by condescendingly yelling at her. In contrast, Xiao Yu observes how her male counterpart, the attacker, exhibiting terror as he walks backwards after she confronts him. These stark contrasts highlight that, instead of relying on the empathetic look used to construct the weak and victimised images of Ruan and Gong's characters in the twentieth century by Jia's predecessors, it is the protesting look, as discussed earlier, that serves as the central trope of cinematic structure in establishing the strong image of Zhao Tao's character in the twenty-first century by Jia.

In addition, Jia likes to test the boundaries between fiction films and documentaries in his films, and no film provided a better example than *24 City*. Turning to the topic of the camera's look and the woman's subjective look in portraying Zhao Tao's

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[118] Ruan's characters in *The Goddess* and *The New Woman* fail to be set free from the patriarchs. Gong's characters in Zhang's films share the same destinies. For example, her characters in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* remain trapped in the patriarchal line. Even if the woman succeeds in being liberated from the feudal patriarchs, she does not achieve this alone but by seeking another male sexual partner to help her, as in *Red Sorghum*.

character, Nana, in the film, Mulvey's libidinal structure of the gaze characterised by male relays and shot-reverse-shot structures is almost absent because she appears as the only subject being documented/observed. At the same time, the male lovers in her life are only mentioned in her response to the interviewer, without any real interaction with them.

Although the appearance of Nana is glamourised and modern in some sense, this is not the key trope here. When she is introduced to the spectator in the first place, there is a scene of her applying lip gloss in front of a mirror before leaving home, yet the colour of the lip gloss is very light, even to be distinguished from her natural lip colour. Her relatively modern and fashionable outfit is also there to illustrate her occupation. As a personal shopper hired to buy trendy clothes for rich women, she needs to be looked fashionable before others.

Also, in *24 City*, the narrative trajectory tends to evoke a nostalgic look back at the socialist factory system of China. The look of the camera upon Nana engaged and directed towards her surroundings. This cinematic structure prompts the spectator to focus on the environment rather than indulging in an erotic gaze on the glamourous Nana. In essence, instead of Mulvey's libidinal gaze, the pivotal trope in the film is the observational look. Nana is often positioned in an environment or space that highlights the contrast between destruction and revitalisation, and her subjective look consistently observes her surroundings.

For example, regarding the look of the camera upon the woman, Nana is consciously positioned in a space between desolation/destruction and revitalisation/modernisation, highlighting a sense of "in between" socialism and postsocialism/capitalism. M. Berry (2022, p. 8) also notices Jia's attention to such a space in his films, which he calls "the liminal space". This framing of liminal spaces can be seen on two levels: macro-level and micro-level. The macro-location of *24 City* is Chengdu, a city between destruction and modernisation. And the micro-locations are the specific spaces where Jia's characters, such as Nana, is shot, such as a cole flower field existing in a state of desolation with Nana sitting in a modern car and the backdrop of buildings under construction or an old factory being demolished where Nana is standing with a modern tower in the background (fig. 4.6). These liminal spaces in which Nana is positioned can be seen as refracted allegorical portraits of her, who herself navigates the same transformation as her environment, between socialist legacy and postsocialist/capitalist modernity.

**FIGURE 4.6 Nana frequently occupies a space that embodies the dichotomy
between destruction and modernisation.**

According to what Nana tells the invisible interviewer in the film, as someone born in

the reform era, she initially dislikes the factory system of the socialist legacy of her

parent's generation, so she is reluctant to go home to visit them. But after she once

witnesses how hard her mother works - carrying ingots of steel like a man - at her

factory, she finally starts to appreciate the hard-working quality of socialist workers

like her mother. On the other hand, Nana shows disdain for elements of the postsocialist era – many youngsters her age directly inherit money from their parents without working hard themselves. Unlike these youngsters, Nana wants to become a powerful woman through her own hard work to take good care of her parents. In her own words, "I can do it, [because] I'm the daughter of a worker." Through Nana's monologue, one learns that she embraces the socialist legacy yet rejects elements of the postsocialist era.

Jia's meticulous attention to liminal spaces in *24 City* is further exemplified and intensified not only through his strategic positioning of Nana and the camera's look on her, but also through Nana's own subjective look. This subjective look unfolds as the camera captures destruction and demolition from Nana's point of view, as well as the subsequent construction and modernisation. In the final scene of the film, Nana stands atop a tall building and observes the entire city of Chengdu being demolished. In this moment, the convergence of the camera's look and Nana's subjective look once again manifests as the observational look, a perspective lens that observes the liminality between destruction and modernisation, and metaphorically, between socialism and postsocialism/capitalism. As the camera looks at Nana, she becomes positioned within the liminal space between demolition and modernity (fig. 4.7a). Then, the camera pans to reveal Nana's subjective look, allowing the spectator to witness the city of Chengdu through her perspective. This grand view of the city can be interpreted as a macro-level liminal space, situated between old buildings and the ongoing process of destruction, juxtaposed with the

emergence of modern new structures and the spirit of progress and modernisation

(fig. 4.7b).

FIGURE 4.7a Nana looks down at the city of Chengdu from the rooftop of a towering

building in the process of demolition, evoking a sense of sentimental attachment

to the city.

FIGURE 4.7b Nana's perspective unveils Chengdu as a city poised between

destruction and modernisation, capturing the liminal space of transition.

Yet nowhere provided a more ideal canvas for Jia's meditation on China in the transformation from socialism to postsocialism/modernisation than the drowning city of Fengjie[119] in *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*. Fengjie is known as a place full of history and fascinating scenic sites, as the famous Tang poet Li Bai 李白 once wrote a famous line of poetry while in Baidi Fortress, which is in Fengjie, "The cries of the monkeys from both sides of the shore never cease, as my small boat traverses ten thousand layers of mountains." Yet through Jia's camera, one only sees a wasteland where the debris occupies a central place. Local dwellings are turned into piles of stone, brick, and cement blocks.

As Jia acknowledges in several interviews (see M. Berry, 2009; Mello, 2014; Jia, 2017), he is conscious of how a disappearing space, termed by Mello (2019, p. 5) "an ephemeral space", implies the loss of the memory. Because of this, he derives an urgency from filming these spaces and these memories, which are felt to be always on the cusp of disappearance. On the other hand, Mello (2019, p. 5) observes that Jia cultivates a seemingly contradictory slowness in observation, almost as an act of resistance in the face of the speed of transformations, which Jia regards in his interview with Mello (2014, p. 353) as a "form of violence", imbued with a "destructive nature". While China's embracing of a market economy has brought with it an accelerated form of economic expansion that also translates into an

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[119] Fengjie is an ancient city with more than three thousand years of history located within the affected area of the Three Gorges Dam construction project being developed as part of China's modernisation. The building of this giant hydroelectric dam had begun in 1994, and at the time of Jia's shooting, the project was drawing to its end. To make way for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam project, the affected area was demolished and submerged, and about 1.4 million local people were relocated.

accelerated politics of the time, Jia's approach to filmmaking can be seen as what

Mulvey (2006) identifies as slowing down cinema, through greater shot lengths, the

use of the long take and by embracing a delayed narrative style. Jia's slow cinema

aesthetics, in C. Berry's (2009) view, would disrupt Communism's grand narrative of

the progress of social realist Chinese films and would function, on one level, as an

aesthetic response to the violence of speediness of China's transformation.

In her exploration of the shattered yet captivating landscape of Fengjie, Shen Hong,

portrayed by Zhao Tao, assumes the role of an outsider. Through the look of the

camera upon her and her own subjective look, her social-realist observations of daily

life and the rapid transformations brought about by Fengjie's modernisation are

unveiled. This makes the early development of the observational look as a recurring

cinematic trope in Jia's subsequent films, including *24 City*, *Mountains May Depart*,

and *Ash is Purest White*. Notably, the construction of Shen Hong's image as an

estranged woman, searching for her lost husband, diverges from Mulvey's libidinal

structure of the gaze, wnich relies on male relays and shot-reverse-shot sequences.

Instead, similar to the approach used in *24 City*, the observational look becomes the

key trope, often situating Shen Hong in environments marked by demolition and

destruction (fig. 4.8). Her subjective look perpetually observes the surroundings of

ruin and the people residing amidst the remnants.

**FIGURE 4.8 Shen Hong finds herself amidst the demolition in *Still Life* (2006),
witnessing the abandoned factory being brought down by the demolition team
wielding sledgehammers.**

The ruins in Fengjie as observed by Shen Hong, as Cui Weiping 崔卫平 suggested, can
even be seen as the actual protagonist in *Still Life* (Li et al., 2007, p. 7). Following Cui
Weiping's suggestion, one can venture that the English title of the film, "Still Life"
(inanimate objects), might refer to debris. In the film, one learns that Fengjie, with
over three thousand years of history, has been destroyed at a bewildering speed. This
rapid transition of the Three Gorges area, as an example of the dramatic pace of
China's modernisation, is felt by Jia as if it was all surreal (Jia & M. Berry, 2022, p. 99).
For Jia, people living in that environment during that time must have been
experiencing this surreal feeling. Since this surrealist vibe already touched the real
world, Jia captured that sensation he had felt by placing surreal moments into *Still
Life* that was otherwise rooted in realism. For instance, one moment is when a

building called the Commemorative Tower of the Immigrants suddenly launched off into the sky as a rocket ship. As Jie Li (2009, p. 105) comments: "The very transience of the landscape, communities, and values in Jia's Three Gorges world is ingeniously conveyed when its documentary, realist mode slides into a rather surreal and even apocalyptic mode of representation."

Another surreal moment is when a UFO streaks across the sky as the other protagonist in the film, Han Sanming, looks out over the river. As the UFO disappears off-screen, there is a match on action cut to Shen Hong, who also sees the UFO streaking across the sky. The two leads, who never meet in the film, are connected. This moment is when the look of the camera upon Hong is engaged for the first time in the film. While she is positioned in the space of destruction, the camera is positioned so that the spectator looks up at her back as she looks up at the UFO, in a position that emulates hers (fig. 4.9). As the camera's look only engages with her back through the use of a long take without cutting in her subjective look that shows her expression, this can be seen as a documentary observational structure that aims to inspire the spectator to the observation of the surrealistic aspects of the environment in which Shen Hong is positioned rather than indulgence in her subjective feeling.

FIGURE 4.9 Hong stands on the bank of the Yangtze River, observing the remnants amidst a surreal landscape of ruin that resembles the aftermath of an alien invasion.

Further, one finds that the destruction and demolition of Fengjie also serve as an allegory for the disintegration of human relationships and moral values in *Still Life*. Such human relationships in ruins in the backdrop of the physical environment in ruins are illustrated clearly in Shen Hong's relationship with her lost husband, Guo Bin, from which she is estranged. While alienating Shen Hong, Guo Bin has an extramarital affair with a successful businesswoman. Such a morally problematic action shows his apathy toward his relationship with Shen Hong. On the other hand, Hong values and takes responsibility for their relationship. She travels from Shanxi to Fengjie to search for Guo Bin. After finally finding him, Shen Hong chooses to exempt him from moral guilt by telling him she has fallen in love with someone else and wants a divorce. As suggested by the Chinese title of the film, "The good people of the Three

Gorges" (*Sanxia haoren*), Shen Hong can be considered one of the "good people",
who maintain moral values amid the monstrous change grappling China.

Furthermore, Shen Hong's subjective look captures the disintegration of human
relationships. The observational look, a key trope in *Still Life*, is accentuated through
the camera's look upon Shen Hong, who is placed within a setting of destruction and
demolition. This camera's look is then followed by her own look, which often
witnesses irreconcilable conflicts between ordinary individuals and government
officials, laid-off workers and employers, and between demolition workers and local
residents.

In *Mountains May Depart*, Zhao Tao's portrayal can also be examined through the
lens of Berry and Farquhar's three senses of the look. Regarding the look of the
camera upon the woman, while Mulvey's libidinal gaze, mediated by her male
counterparts, is present in the first part of the film when Tao is confronted with two
suitors, it is not the primary focus here. Rather, the narrative trajectory of the film,
which portrays Tao's divided family as a reflection of a divided nation, steers the
camera's look upon her in a manner that is not necessatily libidinal, with a focus on
male relays and shot-reverse-shot structures. The key trope, once again, is the
observational look that Jia has employed in his earlier works, often situating Tao
within an environment or space that embodies tradition.

Throughout *Mountains May Depart*, when the camera looks at Tao, she is consistently situated within the presence of an imposing pagoda, which appears in various time periods: past, present, and future. While Mello (2019, p. 73) identifies this pagoda as Fenyang's Wenfeng Pagoda, the oldest brick pagoda in China, its repeated usage in a film centred on loss and impermanence suggests a contrasting symbolism of tradition and permanence. This aligns with Jia's personal sentiments, as he himself has expressed that the sight of this pagoda from his hometown evokes a sense of home and roots (Yang Yuanying 杨远婴 & Jia, 2015).

In the first part of the film, set in the past when Tao is in a relationship with Jinsheng, the camera captures Tao riding her moped with the pagoda in the background. In the second part, set in the present after Tao and Jingsheng have separated, the camera once again frames Tao driving her son along the same road, with the pagoda serving as a backdrop. Finally, in the last shot of the film, set in the future when both Jinsheng and her son have abandoned her, the camera captures Tao dancing in the falling snow, positioned in a space with the pagoda visible in the distance (fig. 4.10). The recurrent placement of Tao within the realm of tradition, against the backdrop of this historical architecture, reinforces her image as a woman who embraces and clings to China's profound legacy. Tao's image encompasses traditional values like filial piety and brotherhood, rooted in Confucian principles.

**FIGURE 4.10 Tao dances gracefully with the pagoda in the background in *Mountains
May Depart* (2015).**

In contrast, Jia juxtaposes Tao's male counterpart amidst the realm of ultra-
modernisation, represented by his life in modernised Australia. This deliberate
contrast emphasises the inherent contradiction between the images of the female
and male protagonists. While Tao embodies the preservation of traditional values,
the male character is portrayed as someone who has forsaken these virtues in pursuit
of modernisation.

4.6 Discussing the Significance of the Three Senses of the Look in Presenting the Transformative Portrait of the Nation

In Jia's *A Touch of Sin* (2013), the director presents a distinct representation of the
woman-as-nation concept in the twenty-first century by citing the narrative role of
the sexual object that was prominently featured by his predecessors in twentieth-

century Chinese cinema. However, Jia's portrayal of the sexual object differs from the portrayals of his predecessors. While the images of the sexual objects played by Ruan Lingyu and Gong Li in twentieth-century Chinese cinema signified a nation grappling with suffering and adversity from internal and external threats, Jia's portrayal of Zhao Tao's character in *A Touch of Sin* signifies a nation that is defiant and stronger in the twenty-first century. This contrast in representation can be seen as a replacement of the key cinematic trope of the empathetic look used in portraying Ruan and Gong's character with the protesting look.

The construction of the image of the sexual object can be attributed to a combination of all three senses of the look. Notably, the camera's direct look upon the woman's face in the close-ups, as well as her subjective look or the reverse shot that captures the camera's look on her male counterpart. In comparison to Zhao Tao's characters, Ruan and Gong's characters in the films of Jia's predecessors look more glamorous before others. The appearance and costume of Zhao Tao's character in Jia's *A Touch of Sin*, on the other hand, draw inspiration from female knights-errant in King Hu's martial arts films. The empathetic look, a central trope used by Jia's predecessors, often encompasses two senses of the look. First, the camera's direct look upon the woman's face in the close-ups capture her emotive facial expressions. This is followed by her empathetic subjective look through flashbacks or imagination, or a reverse shot illustrating her male counterpart's empathetic reaction to her situation.

Jia utilises a similar approach to portray Zhao Tao's character, embodying the camera's direct look on her face in the close-ups to vividly capture her emotions of defiant resistance. This technique, akin to the camera's direct look on Ruan and Gong as sexual objects, emphasises the protesting look within Jia's portrayal of a strong female image. This technique is further reinforced by the subjective look of Zhao Tao's character or a reverse shot capturing the terrified reaction of her male counterpart. The transition from her subjective look back to the camera's direct look upon her, effectively capturing her expression of vengeance.

Rather than depending on the empathetic look employed to construct the weak and victimised images of Ruan and Gong's characters as sexual objects in the twentieth century by Jia's predecessors, it is the protesting look that assumes the central trope in Jia's cinematic structure, establishing the powerful image of Zhao Tao's character in the twenty-first century. While Ruan-as-China and Gong-as-China symbolise a nation grappling with suffering and adversity during the twentieth century, Zhao Tao-as-China, as depicted by Jia in *A Touch of Sin*, embodies a transformed and stronger nation in the twenty-first century.

In addition to the protesting look employed in *A Touch of Sin* to portray the transformative image of the sexual object representing the nation, there is a consistent use of another notable trope in most of Jia's other films: the observational look. The observational look also incorporates two senses of the look, often placing Zhao Tao's character in a space of contrast between tradition/destruction and

modernisation, symbolising the dichotomy of socialism and postsocialism/capitalism.

This is then followed by her subjective look, as she observes and reflects upon the

surrounding environment.

For instance, in *Still Life*, Shen Hong is situated within an environment marked by

demolition and destruction, and her subjective look captures the desolate

surroundings and the lives of those residing amidst the ruins. Similarly, in *24 City*,

Nana finds herself in a space juxtaposes destruction and revitalisation, and her

subjective look offers insights into her surroundings. Through the observational look,

Jia presents a two-dimensional portrayal of China's transformation, oscillating

between tradition and modernisation.

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts

within the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation reveals a two-dimensional

representation of the Chinese nation in the films of Jia Zhangke. The female

characters, portrayed by Zhao Tao, are depicted as active agents in the public space,

serving as role models for the rapidly developing China in the twenty-first century.

They embrace China's enduring traditional values and socialist heritage, symbolising

a nation that holds steadfast to its cultural legacy amidst the whirlwind of societal

and economic transformations. On the other hand, the male counterparts of Zhao

Tao's characters are portrayed as individuals whose pursuit of material prosperity

outweighs their adherence to traditional Confucian or masculine ideals. These male

characters serve as symbols of a nation that has achieved significant material

advancement, yet at the same time, faces spiritual impoverishment as a

consequence.

The gender relations between Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts

demonstrate a consistent trope in Jia's oeuvre, wherein the women are often

estranged or abandoned by their male partners. This estrangement reflects the

tension between the preservation and loss of spiritual values. Zhao Tao's characters

steadfastly maintain their spiritual values throughout the two decades of the twenty-

first century, while the male characters become increasingly consumed by material

pursuits as China's modernisation accelerates.

Jia's cinematic techniques are instrumental in shaping the image of China undergoing

transformation. The protesting look assumes a central role, capturing the strong

image of Zhao Tao's character through close-up shots that convey her emotions of

defiant resistance, as well as her subjective look or a reverse shot that depicts the

terrified reaction of her male counterpart. Notably, Jia's portrayal of the role of the

sexual object in *A Touch of Sin* presents a contrasting representation from that of his

predecessors in twentieth-century Chinese cinema. Instead of depicting the sexual

object as weak and victimised, Zhao Tao's character embodies strength and defiance

in the twenty-first century, signifying a transformed and resilient nation.

Moreover, another prominent cinematic trope found in many of Jia's other films is the observational look, which frequently juxtaposes tradition and modernisation, effectively reflecting the dichotomy of socialism and postsocialism/capitalism with China's evolving landscape. The observational look is manifested through Jia's intentional positioning of Zhao Tao's character in a space of that contrasts tradition and destruction with modernisation, as well as through her own subjective look. Through this subjective look, the camera captures scenes of destruction and demolition from her viewpoint, as well as the subsequent construction and modernisation.

In summary, Jia Zhangke's films provide a nuanced depiction of the Chinese nation through the portrayal of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts. Through the analysis of the narrative roles of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts, and considering the three senses of the look they embody in alignment with RQ2, it becomes evident that the female characters, consistently played by Zhao Tao, embody the embrace of China's traditional values and socialist legacy. On the other hand, the male characters symbolise the pursuit of materialism and the potential erosion of moral values. In line with RQ1 and employing the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation, the images of Zhao Tao's characters and their male counterparts collectively represent a multifaceted image of the nation amidst the whirlwind of societal and economic transformations. They encapsulate the preservation of China's enduring cultural legacy and socialist heritage while also reflecting the trade-off of material advancement at the expense of spiritual

impoverishment. Jia Zhangke skillfully captures the complexities of China's transformation, navigating the delicate balance between tradition and modernisation. Having explored Jia Zhangke's gendered portrayal of the nation in this chapter, the subsequent chapter will delve into the gendered portrayal of the nation by other independent Sixth Generation directors, with a particular focus on Wanma Caidan, who can be considered a Tibetan counterpart to Jia.

Chapter 5 Wanma Caidan's Portrayal of the Nation through Male and Female Characters: Revealing a Multifaceted China in Transformation

5.1 Introduction

Following the examination of Jia Zhangke's portrayal of the nation in the preceding chapter, this chapter delves into the representation of the nation as depicted by other independent Sixth Generation directors. One such director is Wanma Caidan, who can be considered a Tibetan counterpart to Jia. Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter investigates Wanma Caidan's portrayal of the nation by analysing the female and male characters, as well as their gender dynamics, in his films. The analysis will primarily explore their narrative roles and the three senses of the look they embody.

While Jia Zhangke's films form an interconnected cinematic world, Wanman Caidan's works are often independent and stand-alone. Therefore, instead of examining the director's entire body of work collectively, this chapter will concentrate on one specific film, *Tharlo* (*Taluo* 塔洛, 2016), as a case study. This choice is driven by the reseach objective of exploring the portrayal of the nation in the twenty-first century. While Wanma Caidan's other films predominantly depict stories set in the late twentieth century, including *The Slient Holy Stones* (2005), *Soul Searching* (2009), *Old Dog* (2011), and *Balloon* (2019), and *Jinpa* (2018) lacks a specific temporal setting, *Tharlo* stands out as an exceptioinal film that takes place in the new century. Its

demporal and thematic alignment with the desired research objective makes it an ideal and compelling focal point for analysis.

Following this introduction, the chapter will be devided into five sections:

5.2 Exploring the Woman-as-Nation Significance through the Narrative Role of the Female Protagonist

5.3 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Yangcuo: Constructing A Strong Female Image

5.4 Exploring the Man-as-Nation Significance through Narrative Role of the Male Protagonist

5.5 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Taluo: Constructing A Male Image Estranged from Modernity

5.6 Conclusion: Discussing the Significance of Gender-as-Nation through Narrative Roles and the Three Senses of the Look: Unveiling a Nation Straddling Tradition and Modernisation

5.2 Exploring the Woman-as-Nation Significance through the Narrative Role of the Female Protagonist

In *Tharlo*, the narrative role of the female protagonist, Yangcuo, holds significant importance. Yangcuo is depicted as a barber in her early thirties during the setting of the film, which takes place in 2004[120]. Alongside Yangcuo, other female characters,

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[120] In 2004, the Chinese government began issuing its citizens a second-generation Resident Identity (ID) Card. The plotline of *Tharlo* is for the eponymous male protagonist, Taluo, to obtain a second-

such as the owner of the photographic shop where the male protagonist, Taluo 塔洛,

gets his ID card photo taken, and the owner of the store where Taluo buys his

supplies, also contribute crucially to the film's narrative. These two female

characters, though brief in appearance, play indispensable roles in advancing the

story. Collectively, the presence of these female characters in *Tharlo* reflects a larger

tradition seen throughout twentieth-century mainland Chinese cinema, where

women symbolise the nation as active participants in public and professional realms,

rather than being confined to traditional domestic roles. In essence, Wanma Caidan

draws on the narrative role model of the daughter figure prevalent in twentieth-

century Chinese cinema to construct the image of the nation in the twenty-first

century in *Tharlo*.

According to C. Berry (2016, p. 100), Yangcuo embodies the allure of modernity. She

represents the Tibetan population in her town[121] who aligns with contemporary

society or acts as a signifier of modernity. Yangcuo, with her short hair, penchant for

smoking, and preference for pop music over traditional Tibetan songs, embraces the

markers of modernity prevalent in urban areas. This stark contrast between Yangcuo

and Taluo becomes apparent when he criticises her choices, stating, "It's really not

good for Tibetan women to keep their hair short or to smoke." Here, the divergence

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generation Resident ID card, so the film was set in 2004. Wanma Caidan also acknowledges this
calculation in his interview with Beijing Film Academy professor Liu Jiayin 刘伽茵 (2015, p. 128).
[121] The film never names the city it is set, but Wanma Caidan has consistently made films about the
real world of the lives of Tibetans within the Amdo region where he grew up.

between Yangcuo and Taluo is evident, with Yangcuo embracing modernity while Taluo clings to tradition.

Yangcuo's aspiration for modernity is further emphasised by her desire to explore major cities like Lhasa, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. In a karaoke parlour, she sings aloud her wish to break free from the confines of the pastureland and experience the outside (modern) world. Despite lacking the necessary funds to travel to these cities, she hopes that Taluo will serve as her ticket out of town, encouraging him to sell his sheep for money.

However, despite Taluo following her advice and selling his sheep to obtain money, hoping to explore the outside modern world with her, Yangcuo betrays him by stealing all his money and leaving him alone. The portrayal of Yangcuo in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo* evokes a resemblance to Zhao Tao's male counterparts in Jia Zhangke's films, who priotises materialism over moral values. Similar to those male characters, Yangcuo symbolises a nation undergoing rapid modernisation but is spiritually impoverished.

5.3 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Yangcuo: Constructing A Strong Female Image

The portrayal of Yangcuo in *Tharlo* reflects the three senses of the look, as conceptualised by Berry and Farquhar (2006). Examining the look as appearance, Yangcuo's traditional Tibetan characteristics are only evident through the Buddha beads around her neck and the highland blush on her face. In Taluo's eyes, she

deviates from the image of a conventional Tibetan woman and embodies the traits of a modern city woman.

The first encounter between Yangcuo and Taluo is captured in a single static, long take, where the camera's look is directed towards both characters in the same frame. According to Bordwell et al. (2020, p. 211), the use of a static, long take in filmmaking allows the spectator to focus on the characters' worlds and dialogues, amplifying the significance of their power dynamics. This effect is also apparent in the static, long take that captures the camera's look upon Yangcuo and Taluo, drawing the spectator's attention to their dialogue while simultaneously exposing their power dynamics.

According to Bordwell et al. (2020, p. 143), filmmakers often strive for compositional balance by evenly distributing various points of interest, such as characters, within the frame. Where two characters are present, they are typically positioned to maintain a balanced composition of the screen space. However, unbalanced shots can also be employed to create powerful effects, particularly in indicating unequal power dynamics between characters (Bordwell et al., 2020, pp. 143-4). In the case of shots capturing the camera's look upon Yangcuo and Taluo together in the same frame, intentional composition choices disrupt the balance and highlight Yangcuo's dominant position. Throughout these shots in the film, Yangcuo is consistently positioned in a more central position, while Taluo is relegated to the corner of the frame (fig. 5.1), emphasising Yangcuo's dominant role in their power relationship.
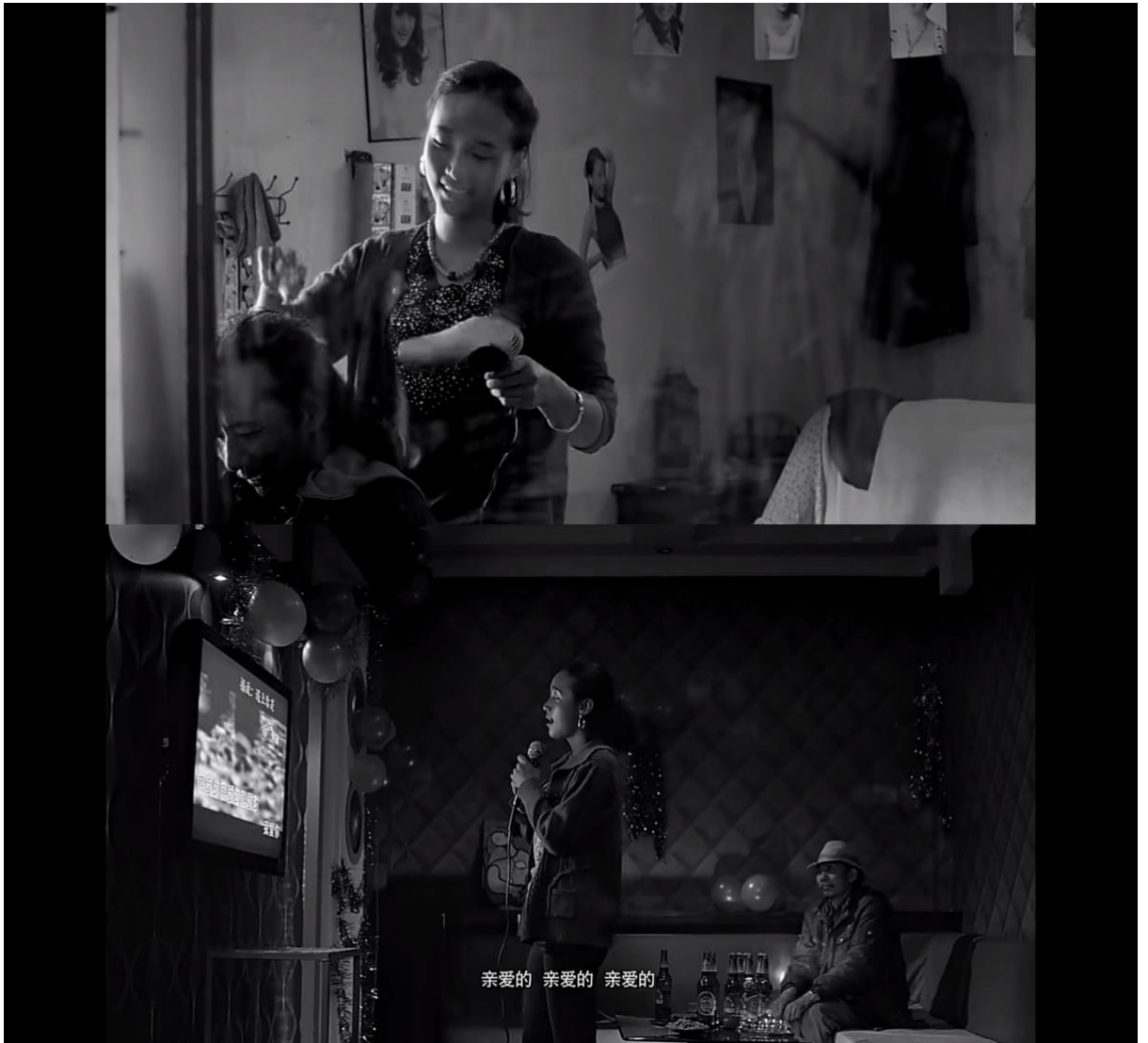
FIGURE 5.1 The camera consistently favours Yangcuo in its look upon her and Taluo in *Tharlo* (2016), emphasising her dominant presence.

For instance, despite Taluo being the customer receiving Yangcuo's services in their initial encounter, Yangcuo, in her role as a "waitress", maintains control and dominance. Taluo nervously sits, tightly abiding by Yangcuo's "control". This unequal power dynamic is further accentuated by the unbalanced composition of the frame, with Yangcuo positioned more centrally and Taluo pushed to the corner. Similarly,

when Yangcuo takes Taluo to a karaoke parlour, the camera's look upon them together in the same frame places Yangcuo at the centre of the frame while relegating Taluo to the corner, underscoring Yangcuo's dominance.

Moreover, on both of these occasions, Yangcuo, as a standing figure, occupies significantly more space with the frame compared to the seated Taluo, intensifying the woman's control over the man. While the height difference between the barber (Yangcuo) and the customer (Taluo), or the performer (Yangcuo) and the audience (Taluo), could be considered natural for these instances, the deliberate reinforcement of the height difference in a later scene, following their "one-night stand", illustrates Yangcuo's continued dominance. Taluo gets up first and sits on a chair, attempting to comprehend what has occurred, while Yangcuo awakens later and naturally stands behind him, despite the option of sitting next to him and engaging in flirtation. This calculated height difference reinforces the standing woman's control and influence over their relationship.

Furthermore, filmmakers often employ the principle of contrast to guide the spectator's attention (Bordwell et al., 2020, p. 144). In the karaoke parlour scene, despite eventually standing up to sing a Tibetan folk song or *Layi*[122] 拉伊, which is widely sung among herders, Taluo appears stiff and sings without a microphone. He explains that he is only accustomed to singing *layi* in the pastureland. His nervousness and awkwardness in fitting into the karaoke parlour, a symbol of modernity, stands

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[122] Tibetan folk songs are called "Layi" in Amdo area (Shuyue Ding, 2020, p. 307).

in stark contrast to Yangcuo's confidence and enjoyment of the modern environment. This contrast is further highlighted by the framing and composition of the camera's look upon each character. When the camera captures Yangcuo singing, she is positioned at the centre of the frame, commanding attention. In contrast, Taluo is placed in the corner of the frame when the camera observes him singing, emphasising his subordinate presence. Additionally, Bordwell et al. (2020, p. 144) note that brightly lit faces tend to stand out in black-and-white films, while darker areas recede. In the instances of the camera's look upon Yangcuo and Taluo, Yangcuo's well-lit face appears more prominent compared to Taluo's darker face. This contrast further emphasises the woman's dominance over the man in their relationship.

In their initial encounter, upon learning the value of Taluo's sheep flock (160 thousand RMB), Yangcuo sees him as her opportunity to escape the town and flirts with him, remarking, "I keep short hair to wait for a man like you with a pigtail, and you look handsome." This action by Yangcuo, representing the allure of modernity, symbolises an "invasion" of modernity into Taluo's life, which embodies tradition (further elaborated in the following section). Overwhelmed by Yangcuo's flirtation and the intrusion of modernity, Taluo hastily leaves the store with wet hair. Placed in the corner of the frame when the camera captures both Yangcuo and Taluo, he is eventually squeezed out of the frame, leaving Yangcuo alone. This marks Taluo's gradual surrender to modernity. Indeed, from this initial "invasion", Yangcuo graudally "domesticates" Taluo throughout the film. For instance, at Yangcuo's

urging, Taluo visits a karaoke parlour for the first time and ultimately sells his prized

sheep to acquire money for their journey to the big cities.

The camera's look upon Yangcuo and Taluo together in the same frame evokes

Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in cinema, which traditionally objectifies female

characters as passive objects of male desire, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics.

However, in *Tharlo*, the camera's look upon Yangcuo and Taluo subverts the

traditional norms associated with the "male gaze", challenging established gender

roles. Rather than being a passive object of the male gaze, Yangcuo is depicted as an

active agent who initiates the gaze towards Taluo.

Wanma Caidan employs multiple shots with over the shoulder[123] framings to depict

Yangcuo's perspective as she observes Taluo while he is in town. This technique

allows the spectator to experience the narrative through her lens. When the camera

captures Yangcuo and Taluo together in the frame, Yangcuo directly looks into Taluo's

eyes and flirts with him, while Taluo, as the passive object of female desire, struggles

to maintain eye contact and frequently resorts to peeking, averting his gaze, or

keeping his head down. By presenting Yangcuo as the active agent of the "female

gaze" and Taluo as the passive object of female desire, Wanma Caidan cosntructs

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[123] In cinema, an "over the shoulder shot" refers to a camera shot that is taken from behind one
character's shoulder, with the other character in the frame or partially visible. This shot is typically
used during a conversation or interaction between two characters, providing a perspective that
simulates the point of view of one character while also including the reaction or presence of the other
character (Bordwell et al., 2020, p. G-4).

Yangcuo with a strong image and reaffirms her dominance in the gender dynamics with Taluo.

5.4 Exploring the Man-as-Nation Significance through the Narrative Role of the Male Protagonist

In *Tharlo* (*Taluo*), the eponymous male protagonist, Taluo, is a sheep herder in his early forties. Taluo does not know his exact age; he can only guess he should be older than forty. But his age is vital for one to understand what historical background he has gone through in his life. This important identity information of Taluo is indicated right in the opening sequence of the film, where he fluently recites the full text of (Han) Chairman Mao's famous speech, *Serve the People* (*Wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务), in Mandarin Chinese. Taluo tells his local (Tibetan) police chief, Duojie 多杰, that he has been able to recite that speech since he was nine when the texts they studied at primary school then were mainly *Quotations from Chairman Mao*[124]. But he drops out of school after graduating from primary school and has been herding sheep since then. Here one discerns that Taluo was born into a peasant family in the Mao/socialist era, approximately in the late 1950s to the early 1960s, who witnessed the Tibetan areas' direct transition to a socialist society and lived through the Cultural Revolution.

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[124] Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong (*Mao zhuxi yvlu*, 毛主席语录) is a book of statements from speeches and writings by Mao, published from 1964 to about 1976 and widely distributed during China's Cultural Revolution. Billions were produced, the most popular versions being in bright red covers in small sizes that could be easily carried, becoming commonly known domestically and internationally as *The Little Red Book*.

In addition, one notices that when Taluo recites Mao's speech *Serve the People* in Mandarin, his intonation differs from what a Han person would use. Instead, he recites the text like Tibetans chant scriptures. Therefore it is not surprising to learn from his conversation with the police chief Duojie that he does not fully understand Mao's speech. Yet his rote memorisation of the speech reveals the significant impact that the Han culture of the socialist era has had on him or Tibetans at large[125].

For Taluo, the Han soldier Zhang Side[126] 张思德 mourned for by Mao in his speech rather than any Tibetan figure is his role model. Taluo further equates a person who serves the people like Zhang Side with a good person, and an opponent is a bad person. Since Zhang Side is the very example of serving the people by performing his duty perfectly as a soldier, what it means to "serve the people" for him as a shepherd is to herd sheep without losing one single sheep. From this, one can see that Taluo embraces the socialist legacy, which significantly emphasises self-sacrifice. In the opening sequence of *Tharlo*, one finds that Wanma Caidan consciously emphasises the historical background that his male protagonist Taluo has experienced. The role of Taluo, guided by Mao's speech throughout his life and embracing the socialist

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[125] Indeed, according to Wanma Caidan (Wanma Caidan & Liu, 2015, pp. 130-1), there are many other "Taluos" who witnessed the Tibetan areas' direct transition to a socialist society and lived through the Cultural Revolution.

[126] Zhang Side (1915-1944) is a Han Communist soldier and is one of several figures whose resolutely ordinary lives have been used in socialist China to serve as role models. In the afternoon of September 8, 1944, the organs directly under the CPC Central Committee held a grand funeral ceremony, at which Chairman Mao inscribed the elegiac words of "salute to Comrade Zhang Side who sacrificed his life for the benefit of people" and attended the funeral ceremony in person. At the ceremony, Mao made the critical speech, *Serve the People*, highly praising his lofty morality of serving the people wholeheartedly: he "died for the benefit of people, and his death is indeed heavier than Mount Tai".

legacy, represents the many other Tibetans of the older generations born and/or
growing up in the socialist era.

In *Tharlo*, one notices a series of consecutive sequences that take up nearly twenty
minutes (1:03:42-1:20:34) focusing on Taluo's life as a shepherd/peasant in the
pastureland. If asked to use one keyword to describe his life in the pastureland, that
word would be "primitive" or "traditional". As there is no electricity in his mud house,
he must light candles or use a torch to get light at night. When he hears wolves howl,
he lights dynamite to scare them away. Listening to the radio is the only way for him
to get information from the outside world. When he is in shortage of water, he must
ride his motorbike to fetch it from a faraway well. Despite being primitive and lonely,
Taluo's life as a shepherd in the pastureland looks simple and fulfilled, in which he
herds his flock of sheep, feeds his Tibetan mastiff, and sings *layi*.

However, Taluo's simple and fulfilled life as a shepherd herding sheep in the
pastureland is shattered when the local police station requires him to apply for an
identity card. From the opening sequence, one learns that Taluo has never had a
Resident Identity Card [127] (*jumin shenfenzheng* 居民身份证) before in the
postsocialist era. Given that the identity card is an official identity document for
personal identification in China, Taluo, without an identity card, can be seen as a
Chinese citizen without official identification in public. Therefore, Taluo is sent into

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[127] Before 1984, citizens within China were not required to obtain or carry identification in public. On
April 6, 1984, the State Council of China passed the Identity Card Provisional Bill, commencing
issuing first-generation identity cards. On March 29, 2004, China established using newer, second-
generation identity cards, which is when *Tharlo* was set.

town by police chief Duojie to get a photo taken of the identity card he is required to have.

Taluo does not think that a traditional shepherd like himself needs an identity card, as he puts it: "As long as I know who I am, that will be enough; others do not need to know". But Duojie stresses the importance of getting the identity card: "When you go into town, others will only know who you are if you have an identity card". The importance of having an identity card is reinstated in the film when one police officer in town becomes suspicious when Taluo cannot produce an identity card. From Duojie's description of the function of the identity card, one can see that to Taluo, the identity card he applies for is his "pass" into the modern society of China. This exact requirement to get an identity card is also seen by C. Berry (2016, p. 97) as a marker of modernity, as are so many other markers of modernity Taluo encounters in town, especially the female protagonist Yangcuo, leading to his deprivation and, ultimately, his suicide.

Having lived alone in the pastureland, Taluo journeys to town and is shocked to meet Yangcuo, who embodies all of modernity's temptations. Like the male characters in Jia Zhangke's films, who pursue materialism and capitalism at the cost of losing moral values, Yangcuo also seeks materialism and capitalism at the expense of moral deterioration. Specifically, Yangcuo encourages Taluo to sell his sheep for money and steals all his money. The space of the town in *Tharlo*, as C. Berry notes (2016, p. 98), is marked as both modern and female. Indeed, Taluo meets all the female characters

in town, including Yangcuo, the female owner of the photographic shop where he

takes his ID card photo and the female owner of the store where he buys the

dynamite he lights at the end of the film to blow himself up, in town. Via his film

language (this point will be discussed in detail in the next section), Wanma Caidan

consciously contrasts between Taluo, who represents all of the tradition's marks, and

the women he encounters in town, embodying modernity.

The cities and towns where these female characters live, according to Andrew M.

Fischer (2008) and Rong Ma (2011), are where the market economy in the Tibetan

areas of China has had the most significant impact. In *Tharlo*, the town directly

symbolises modernity. Before *Tharlo*, the effect of the market economy in the cities

and towns of the Tibetan areas of China and its corresponding modernity is also

illustrated in Wanma Caidan's earlier films, such as *Old Dog*[128] (*Laogou* 老狗, 2011).

C. Berry (2016, p. 93) and Chinese film scholar Wang Xiaolu 王小鲁 (2022) regard

Tharlo as a companion piece to *Old Dog*. One finds that both films communicate the

tension between modernity and tradition.

In *Old Dog*, the Tibetan mastiff of an old Tibetan shepherd and his son has become a

precious dog/product because of the escalating trade in Tibetan mastiffs across

China. At the beginning of the film, a Han businessman in the nearby town tries to

buy Tibetan mastiffs, and the son tries to sell their Tibetan mastiff to the

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[128] The main plot of *Old Dog* describes a Tibetan farmer who tries to stop his son from selling the
family mastiff to a Han trader.

businessman. But the old shepherd reclaims his dog and resists the effort of others to buy or steal it to resist modernity. His resistance to modernity and change is signified by his final decision to kill his dog rather than see it stolen or sold. Both C. Berry (2016, p. 97) and Wang Xiaolu (2022) see Taluo's fate in *Tharlo* as a resemblance to the fate chosen for the dog by the old shepherd in *Old Dog*. Their choices of suicide or killing the alive can be seen as demonstrating their helpless rage caused by failing to embrace modernity as traditional shepherds/peasants.

The narrative role of Taluo, a peasant, as a type set by Wanma Caidan in a film made in the twenty-first century, can be seen as a citation of the narrative role model prevalent in the Third Generation cinema of the Mao/socialist era. In the Third Generation cinema, the available male roles are the exemplary workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing* 工农兵), as well as occasionally cadres (*ganbu* 干部), officials, and administrators (Williams, 2004, p. 77; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Lu, 2021). This socialist type of male role is also cited in Jia Zhangke's portrayal of the men of the socialist era made a few years before Wanma Candan's *Tharlo*. For example, in Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (2008), the exemplary masculine figure in the socialist era is the factory worker. Lu (2021) observes that Jia Zhangke's shots linger on the plainness of the faces and bodies of the male socialist workers, who may look shy and hesitant yet directly face the camera. For Lu, such unglamorous images lionise these men and transform them into "ordinary heroes". However, these model workers in the socialist period were no longer appreciated in the new era of reforms and postsocialism.

As the nature of Chinese society was transformed by the end of the Cultural Revolution and the onset of economic reforms, during which the Chinese economy moved away from a predominantly planned economy to a mixture of a planned economy and a market economy, a multitude of new role models for men in society appeared on screen in the Fourth and Fifth Generation cinema of the post-Mao/postsocialist era. Male roles of the old socialist trio of workers, peasants, and soldiers popular in the Third Generation cinema became less appealing and were reinvented in the Fourth and Fifth Generation cinema (Williams, 2004, pp. 77-150; Lu, 2021; Wang Haizhou, 2022). Instead, reformers, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals appeared as new available positive male roles of the postsocialist era.

Careful examination of male characters in Jia Zhangke's body of work reveals that the socialist male role model of the worker, as shown by the migrant worker Han Sanming in *Still Life* (2006), the male factory workers interviewed in *24 City*, and Zhao Tao's another suitor and coal miner Liangzi in *Mountains May Depart* (2015), is disintegrated in the twenty-first century. Taking the story of one real-life worker portrayed in *24 City*, Song Weidong, as an example, he was once a proud worker at the state-owned factory who had a stable relationship with his girlfriend, who also worked at the factory. But Song lost his girlfriend due to China's social changes. His girlfriend no longer appreciated his social status as a state-owned factory worker after she became a university student or intellectual, thanks to the reopening of universities in the reform era.

In narrative terms, the tragic fate of Taluo in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo* echoes those of the socialist male roles portrayed in Jia Zhangke's films. Specifically, Taluo fails to get his identity card because his bald head, shaved by Yangcuo, no longer resembles the photo he took with his pigtail. While obtaining a social identity – an identity card, Taluo loses his pigtail, the sheep he herds, and the ability to fluently recite Mao's speech in Mandarin, the personal markers that represent his (personal) identity - a shepherd who embraces the socialist legacy. Worse still, Taluo is abandoned by his lover Yangcuo, who embodies modernity and steals all his money to travel to more modernised cities. Taluo's failure to get an identity card and his love affair with Yanguo, who embodies modernity, indicates his failure to integrate into modern society.

At the end of the film, Taluo's motorbike runs out of fuel or breaks down at a bend on the highway, symbolising modernity, with snowy mountains in the distance, symbolising tradition. C. Berry (2016, pp. 94-5) reads the running out of fuel or breaking down of his motorbike, another marker of modernity and change, as symbolising a failed attempt to be modern. With his motorbike parked, Taluo sits on it, smokes a modern cigarette, which does not require him to roll it himself, and he did not smoke before he met Yangcuo, turns his back to the shot, with his bald head without a pigtail standing out. These markers of change of Taluo indicate that Taluo can no longer easily survive in tradition if he chooses to go in the direction of the pastureland. Yet simultaneously, he fails to obtain a ticket to modernity. Feeling

hopeless, Taluo takes the liquor he usually drinks out of his bag, drinks it in silence, throws the bottle away after a few sips, and finally lights the dynamite he bought to scare off the wolves and blows himself up.

Robert Barnett (2015, p. 143) coins the term "Tibetan Masculinities on the Road" to encompass the braoder cycle of Tibetan road movies, including Wanma Caidan's films. It is worth noting that all of Wanma Caidan's road films feature male protagonists undertaking transformative journeys. Examples include the boy monk in *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005), the film director and his companion, the businessman, in *Soul Searching* (2009), the old father and his son in *Old Dog* (2011), and the truck driver Jiapa and the hitchhiker Jinpa in *Jinpa* (2018). Barnett (2015, p. 146) further highlights that these films revolve around the "crisis of Tibetan manhood in the modern context".

Indeed, the protagonist of *Tharlo*, Taluo, embarks on a journey from the pastureland to the town, embodying a male figure grappling with the challenges posed by modernity. Taluo's failed romantic relationship with Yangcuo and his struggles to adapt to the changing world can be viewed as an illustration of the "crisis of Tibetan manhood in the modern context". This theme of manhood in crisis is recurrent throughout Wanma Caidan's body of work, extending beyond *Tharlo*. For instance, in films like *Old Dog* (2011) and *Jinpa* (2018), one encounters male protagonists, such as the son in *Old Dog* and the hitchhiker Jinpa in *Jinpa*, who similarly exemplify the complexities and dilemmas surrounding Tibetan manhood.

Similarly, in Jia Zhangke's *24 City*, Song's failed love affair due to social and economic transformations is seen by Lu (2021) as a reflection of the "masculinity in crisis" during the reform era. Lu's perspective resonates with Stephanie Donald's (2000, pp. 105-12) analysis, where she examined the male protagonists in the debuts of renowned Sixth Generation directors like Jia, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and He Jianjun 何建军. Donald remarked that these films highlight a profound crisis of male subjectivity within a changing sociopolitical landscape, where male artists feel alienated and outraged by both political and commercial mainstreams.

Furthermore, Jia Zhangke's portrayal of man-as-China in the early twenty-first century reveals a dearth of male role models. Jia's male characters strive to assume new social roles, albeit often dubious ones: migrant workers in *The World* (Taisheng), *Still Life* (Sanming) and *A Touch of Sin* (Xiaohui), gangsters or criminals in *Unknown Pleasures* (Qiao San), *Ash Is Purest White* (Bin), and *A Touch of Sin* (Dahai and San'er), as well as seedy entrepreneurs in *Still Life* (Guo Bin) and *Mountains May Depart* (Jinsheng). These male characters can also be seen as emblematic of the "masculinity in crisis" or "crisis of male subjectivity" discussed by scholars. Whether depicting Han men in Jia Zhangke's films or Tibetan men in Wanma Caidan's films, these Chinese men collectively embody a crisis of Chinese masculinity/manhood in the early twenty-first century.

Within the theoretical framework of man-as-nation, the depiction of male characters embodying a crisis of masculinity/manhood in the films of Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan goes beyond individual struggles and assumes a broader significance as a reflection of the nation itself. In this context, the portrayal of troubled male protagonists reflects the wider challenges, uncertainties, and conflicts faced by the nation as a whole. Their portrayal serves as a poignant symbol of a nation confronting its own sets of challenges and contradictions, particularly the intricate dynamics between tradition and modernity in an era marked by swift transformations during the early twenty-first century.

5.5 Exploring the Three Senses of the Look in Taluo: Constructing A Male Image Estranged from Modernity

In *Tharlo*, the portrayal of the male protagonist Taluo encapsulates the tensions between his socialist background and his struggle to adapt to the realities of post-socialist modern society. This portrayal can be analysed through Berry and Farquhar's (2006) framework of the three senses of the look. Originally developed to examine the construction of the image of Chinese women in cinema, this framework can also be applied to analyse the image of Chinese men. In the case of Taluo, the three senses of manifest as his physical appearance, the camera's look on him, and his subjective look.

Regarding the look as appearance, the pigtail is the most prominent feature of Taluo's appearance, which he has kept all his life. So instead of his real name, Taluo, which

he merely uses to apply for his identity card, he is commonly known by his nickname, "pigtail" (*xiao bianzi* 小辫子). Another notable feature of how he looks before others is the little lamb he takes wherever he goes, emphasising his role as a shepherd. When Taluo visits the police station for the first time in the film, as shown in its opening sequence composed of a 12-minute static, long take, he is remembered by the police chief Duojie as a local shepherd called "pigtail" who can fluently recite Mao's speech in Mandarin. In other words, his pigtail, little lamb, and ability to fluently recite Mao's speech in Mandarin can be seen as the markers that define him most. Ironically, Taluo loses these personal markers that represent his (personal) identity, a shepherd who embraces the socialist legacy while obtaining a social identity, as illustrated by applying for an identity card used to carry identification in public.

The framing and composition of this first shot of the film already imply Taluo's tragic ending (fig. 5.2). In the shot, while both are standing in the space of the police station, shepherd Taluo is trapped in a frame formed by the heating pipeline, but police chief Duojie is not. This contrast suggests that Taluo, who does not possess an identity card, or a "pass" into modern society, will be restricted in modern society. More importantly, this heating pipeline separates the Chinese character "人" (person) from "民" (citizen). This composition placing Taluo under "人" confirms his biological identity as a human being. Yet he, without an identity card, is not accepted as a citizen recognised in public by modern society.

FIGURE 5.2 The composition highlighting Taluo's exclusion from citizenship in modern society.

While obtaining an identity card in town, shepherd Taluo who has lived alone in the pastureland has to encounter all sorts of markers and temptations of modernity, among which Yangcuo embodies the best example. All his hair, including the pigtail, is shaved off by Yangcuo. In the scene of Yangcuo shaving his hair, instead of naturally falling to the floor, the shaved hair is placed in front of the mirror by Yangcuo, triggering the spectator's attention to the loss of Taluo's most prominent feature of appearance.

Also, all his sheep are sold to realise Yangcuo's desire to go to the big cities. Apart from emphasising his role as a shepherd, the little lamb Taluo takes wherever he goes can also be seen to symbolise his simplicity and goodness. Later, on the night of going to the karaoke with Yangcuo, Taluo is separated from the little lamb for the first time

and gradually falls into her temptation. The little lamb is, in the end, tragically killed by wolves in an accident. In that accident, Taluo loses many sheep he herds, including the little lamb. The death of the little lamb is followed by a scene of Taluo cooking and eating a sheep left by the angry sheep owner. Taluo once declares to him as a shepherd, being a good person like his role model Zhang Side means herding sheep without losing one single sheep. Here eating the sheep he once treasures hints that his original belief in being a good person has collapsed.

It is therefore not surprising that in the penultimate scene of the film (fig. 5.3), still a static, long take that resembles the first scene of the film, Taluo, who now has lost the critical markers of his appearance and personal identity – the pigtail and the little lamb, loses his memorisation of Mao's speech, which is once the foundation of his belief system. From the opposite direction of the slogan "Serve the people" on the wall, one notices this shot as a mirror shot. In his investigation of the effects mirrors can have in cinematography, Julian Hanich (2017, pp. 149-53) suggests that mirrors can be used for moments of disorientation and distortion. With Taluo standing under the slogan that reverses left and right, this mirror shot implies his collapsed belief system.

FIGURE 5.3 The mirror shot reflecting Taluo's collapsed belief system.

As previously discussed in relation to the camera's look upon Taluo and Yangcuo together in the same frame, Taluo is consistently positioned in the corner, emphasising his surbodinate status. This framing and composion structure also extends to instances where the camera looks solely at Taluo without Yangcuo present, particularly in various locatioins within the town. In these instances, Taluo is placed at the edge of the composition, creating a sense of alienation between him and the urban environment (fig. 5.4).

For instance, there is a scene where Taluo is situated on the edge of the frame as the camera's look captures him feeding his little lamb milk in front of the photographic shop while awaiting his turn to have his ID card photo taken. Through a static, long take, Taluo occupies minimal space within the frame, with the bustling street of the town dominates the majority of the screen space. This intentional framing and composition accentuate Taluo's marginalised position as a shepherd navigating the

urban sapce with his little lamb, symbolising the clash between tradition and modernity. The affirmation of his marginalisation within the town is further reinforced in the subsequent scene, where a passing police officer mistakes him for a thief, highlighting his suspicious presence.

FIGURE 5.4 Taluo's perpetual presence on the edge of the frame in town.

Furthermore, the film employs Yangcuo as a mediator to guide the camera's look upon Taluo. Through cinematography, the spectator is aligned with Yangcuo's subjective look/point of view. This alignment becomes evident when Yangcuo moves forward and enters the frame from the right side of the screen to observe Taluo from inside her shop across the street (refer to the middle screenshot in fig 5.4). The spectator sees Taluo over Yangcuo's shoulder. The camera's look upon Taluo, particularly from inside Yangcuo's shop, can be interpreted as associated with Yangcuo's perspective.

Towards the end of the film, once again from inside the shop, the spectator witnesses Taluo exiting the photographer's studio and casting one last galnce before riding his motorbike back to the police station outside of town. Although Yangcuo is no longer present, the camera's look upon Taluo remains linked to her perspective. This signifies how Yangcuo, representing the modern world, perceives Taluo as a traditional shepherd, marginalised and rendered obsolete in modern society.

According to Hanich (2017, pp. 149-50), mirror shots can serve as a visual device to depict moments of delusion. In *Tharlo*, the camera often adopts a mirror shot composition when capturing Taluo and Yangcuo in her barber's shop, symboling the ephemeral and illusory nature of their love relationship, which involves a traditional shepherd and a modern barber. Despite Taluo's decision to sell his sheep in exchange

for money, a symbolic gesture of embracing modernity at the behest of Yangcuo, the camera contines to frame their interactions within mirror shots.

Towards the end of the film, when Taluo wakes up for the last time in the barber's shop, he realises that Yangcuo has taken all his money and left. Once again, the camera employs a mirror shot to capture Taluo's reflection. This is followed by a sequence of mirror shots as Taluo futilely searches for Yangcuo in town, emphasising the deceptive nature of modernity to him.

While both Taluo and Yangcuo were previously depicted through mirror shots during their initial encounter, a notable difference in the use of mirror shots occurs in their subsequent interaction in the barber's shop. In a static, long take reminiscent of their initial meeting, the camera consistently captures Taluo through the mirror while Yangcuo leaving the mirror shot and entering reality. Initially, the camera captures Taluo and Yngcuo loking at the stack of cash on the table through the mirror (fig. 5.5a). Then, as Yangcuo exits the mirror shot and enters reality, leaving Taluo alone in the mirrored frame (fig. 5.5b). As the camera captures Yangcuo taking the cash, Taluo, shot through the mirror, is almost obscured by the stack of hundred RMB bills in the real world. This particular detail highlights the inherent incompatibility between traditional Taluo and the notions of modernity associated with materialism, capitalism, and the pursuit of wealth.

FIGURE 5.5a Taluo and Yangcuo observing the stack of cash through a mirror shot.

FIGURE 5.5b Yangcuo transitioning from the mirror shot into the realm of reality.

After collecting the money, the camera oberves Yangcuo as she proceeds to shave Taluo's hair. In this static, long take, both of them are ultimately seen through the mirror once again. The camera captures Yangcuo departing from the left side of the frame, where Taluo remains positioned, and moving towards the right side. The framing and composition establish a distinction between Taluo and Yangcuo within

two separate mirrors or realms (fig. 5.5c), implying that they ultimately belong to two

distinct worlds.

FIGURE 5.5c Taluo and Yangcuo reflected in two separate mirrors.

Apart from the camera's look upon Taluo with Yangcuo in her shop being mirror

shots, the camera's look upon Taluo when he is in town is overall composed as a

mirror shot, including his presence in various spaces in town, such as the

photographic studio, the street, and the convenience shop. These mirror shots used

when Taluo is in town indicate the unreal and inaccessible nature of modernity to

Taluo. On the other hand, no single camera's look upon Taluo is composed as a mirror

shot when he is in the pastureland. This contrast suggests that the pastureland is the

real world where Taluo, a shepherd, truly belongs.

Moreover, the camera's look upon him when he returns to his daily routine in the

pastureland often places him in a much more central position in the frame (fig. 5.7).

This kind of camera's look upon him varies from medium close-ups[129] to medium shots[130], and long shots[131]. In the latter case, often, he is placed against the magnificent physical landscape of the pastureland, which emphasises it is the space of the pastureland that he belongs to. Compared with his marginal position in the camera's look upon him when he is in town, this contrast reinforces that Taluo is more in charge of his life and at ease in the pastureland. In other words, he is more used to and embraces the traditional life offered by the pastureland rather than the modernity offered by the town.

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[129] According to Bordwell et al. (2020, p. G-3), a medium close-up is a framing in which the scale of the object shown is relatively large, or a human figure seen from the chest up would fill most of the screen.
[130] A medium shot is a framing in which the object's scale is of moderate size, or a human figure seen from the waist up would fill most of the screen.
[131] A long shot is a framing in which the object's scale is small, or a standing human figure appears nearly the height of the screen.

FIGURE 5.6 Taluo's centrality in the frame as the camera looks upon him in the pastureland.

When the camera looks upon Taluo with another person he meets in town, such as Yangcuo, the police officer, or the convenience shop owner, the unbalanced composition is the norm, where he is always placed on the edge of the frame. However, one finds a balanced composition when he is in the pastureland, even an extreme type of such balancing, in the camera's look upon him with the sheep owner (fig. 5.7). In this scene, even Taluo is scolded and slapped by the sheep owner for an accident in which wolves kill the latter's sheep, the camera's look upon the two is framed symmetrically, emphasising the balanced power relations between them, both as shepherds. This compositional balance, together with the sheep owner's two consecutive lines saying, "don't you know you're a shepherd" and "remember you are a shepherd", reinforces the role and identity of Taluo as a shepherd who belongs to the pastureland, symbolising tradition.

FIGURE 5.7 The camera's look balances Taluo (left) and the sheep owner (right) in the frame.

Turning to the question of the third sense of the look, that is, the man's subjective look, one finds that the cinematic trope of the observational look used by Jia Zhangke in his constructions of the image of Zhao Tao's characters can also be found in Wanma Caidan's construction of the image of Taluo. For instance, as Taluo waits for his turn to get his ID card photo taken, from his perspective, he observes a newly married Tibetan couple getting their photos taken in the photographic studio. Both are dressed in traditional Tibetan costumes. In the photographer's words, they look "very good" in front of the background image of the Potala Palace[132] in Lhasa. The couple in their Tibetan costume also look "very good" in front of the background image of

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[132] The Potala Palace is a dzong fortress in Lhasa, Tibet. It was the winter palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 to 1959, has been a museum since then, and a World Heritage Site since 1994.

the Tian'anme[133] in Beijing, with a portrait of Chairman Mao in the foreground of the

background image.

However, when the background image is changed to modern landscape architecture

in New York, they look "a bit awkward". Therefore the couple are asked to change

their Tibetan costume into modern suits. Yet even changed into suits, the couple look

"unnatural". After hearing the little lamb Taluo takes with him bleat, the wife tells

him that they used to be shepherds and requests if she can hold the little lamb while

taking the photo. The couple finally look "natural" when the wife holds the little lamb

and the husband holds the lamb's milk bottle.

Here, through his own perspective, Taluo observes how the Tibetan couple are

situated in a scenario where they are caught between tradition and modernity. The

Tibetan couple look a lot more natural and comfortable when dressed in traditional

Tibetan costume, surrounded by traditional Tibetan and Chinese landmarks, with the

latter emphasising the socialist past or being reminded of their old social role as

shepherds (presumably in the socialist era). On the other hand, the couple look

unnatural and awkward when engaged in markers of modernity, such as modern suits

and modern landscape architecture in New York (the latter could easily be changed

with modern landscape architecture in Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai). In

other words, Taluo observes how the Tibetan couple embrace tradition and/or the

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[133] The Tiananmen ("Gate of Heavenly Peace"), a gate in the wall of the Imperial City, was built in 1415 during the Ming dynasty. It has great cultural significance as it was the site of several important events in Chinese history. For example, Chairman Mao proclaimed the founding of the PRC there on October 1, 1949.

socialist past while struggling to adapt to modernity in the contemporary postsocialist era. Through his subjective look, Taluo observes other Tibetans like him, caught between tradition and modernity.

5.6 Conclusion: Discussing the Significance of Gender-as-Nation through Narrative Roles and the Three Senses of the Look: Unveiling a Nation Straddling Tradition and Modernisation

In *Tharlo*, Wanma Caidan delves into the inner turmoil faced by the male protagonist, Taluo, as he navigates the challenges of alienation and dislocation amidst the forces of modernity. Taluo finds himself distanced from his traditional role as a shepherd/peasant during the socialist era and encounters difficulties in assilmilating into the post-socialist modern society. Wanma Caidan's visual approach enhances the portrayal of Taluo as a traditional man who is estranged from the modern world. The framing and composition of the camera's look upon him when he is in town consistently depict him as marginalised, positioned in the corner of the frame, thereby accentuating his sense of detachment from contemporary society.

In contrast to the relatively fragile image of the male protagonist, Taluo, the female protagonist, Yangcuo, is portrayed as a strong woman who embodies the allure of modernity, attracting Taluo's attention. The recurring use of mirror shots when the camera captures Taluo and Yangcuo together serves to underscore the illusory nature of their relationship, involving a traditional shepherd and a modern barber. The contrast between Yangcuo's modern sensibilities and Taluo's traditional values leads

to the failure of their relationship, highlight the irreconcilable differences between

tradition and modernity. This failed relationship between Taluo and Yangcuo echos

the narrative trope often seen in Jia Zhangke's films, where the romantic relationship

between Zhao Tao's character and her male counterpart is ultimately fractured.

Within the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation, akin to the portrayal of Zhao

Tao and her male counterpart in Jia's films, Wanma Caidan's depiction of Taluo and

Yangcuo presents a two-dimensional representation of the Chinese nation. Similar to

Zhao Tao's characters, Taluo embraces China's socialist legacy and upholds moral

integrity, symbolising a nation holding onto its traditional heritage. Conversely,

Yangcuo embodies the male counterparts of Zhao Tao's characters who prioritise

modernity and materialism over moral values, symbolising a nation that is spiritually

impoverished as it relentlessly pursues modernisation.

A stubtle distinction emerges between the two-dimensional images of the nation

depicted by Jia and Wanma Caidan. While Zhao Tao's characters often experience

estrangement or abandonment by their male partners, they retain their

independence and continue their lives. Conversely, when Taluo, a parallel figure to

Zhao Tao's characters, is abandoned by Yangcuo, he succumbs to despair and takes

him own life, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity and

illustrating the arduous preservation of tradition in the face of modernisation.

Furthermore, the power dynamics between Yangcuo and Taluo exemplify the influence of modernity on tradition. Intentional composition choices that disrupt the balance of the camera's look upon Taluo and Yangcuo within the same frame visually expose the unequal power dynamics at play. Throughout these shots in the film, Yangcuo consistently occupies a more central position, while Taluo is marginalised in the corner of the frame, accentuating Yangcuo's dominant role in their power dynamic. This deliberate compositional approach, favouring Yangcuo and marginalising Taluo, further emphasises the tension arising from the marginalisation of tradition in the face of modernisation.

Towards the end of *Tharlo*, Taluo finds himself in a predicament, torn between returning to his traditional role as a shepherd/peasant in the pasturelands that represent tradition and assimilating into the bustling town that symbolises modernity. This inner conflict ultimately leads to his confusion and eventual suicide. While the choice between tradition and modernity poses a significant challenge, Wanma Caidan, in an interview with Professor Xu Feng 徐枫 (2017, p. 49) from Central Academy of Drama, emphasised his intention to depict the reality of Tibetan regions rather than presenting a simplistic binary opposition between tradition and modernity. Despite the tensions arising from the marginalisation of tradition in the face of modernisation, as seen in works like *Tharlo*, when considering Wanma Caidan's body of work, including *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005), *Soul Searching* (2009), *Old Dog* (2011), *Jinpa* (2018), and *Balloon* (2019), one can observe his portrayal of a

nation caught between tradition and modernity. These works highlight the significance of retaining the essence of tradition while discarding its dross.

Although *Tharlo* primarily centres on the story of Taluo, it serves as a reflection of the collective experiences shared by many individuals like him within the Tibetan community. Taluo, confronted with the crisis of masculinity, becomes a symbolic figure embodying the struggles and uncertainties experienced by the Tibetan areas within China amidst profound societal shifts, as it grapples with the challenges of modernisation, capitalism, and globalisation. His struggle epitomises the broader dilemmas confronted by the nation in reconciling its historical heritage with the demands and influences of modernisation. Through the careful portrayal of the male and female protagonists in *Tharlo*, Wanma Caidan masterfully captures the intricate dynamics of China's transformation, presenting a nuanced depiction of a multifaceted nation navigating the delicate interplay between tradition and modernisation.

In summary, Wanma Caidan presents a nuanced depiction of the Chinese nation through the male protagonist Taluo and the female protagonist Yangcuo in *Tharlo*. By analysing the narrative roles of these characters and considering the three senses of the look they embody, as aligned with RQ2, it becomes evident that Taluo embodies the embrace of traditional heritage and the challenges of navigating between tradition and modernity. Conversely, Yangcuo symbolises the pursuit of modernity and materialism. Aligning with RQ1 and employing the theoretical

framework of gender-as-nation, the images of these protagonists in *Tharlo* collectively represent a multifaceted portrayal of the nation amid societal and economic transformations. They encapsulate the tension between preserving traditional heritage and embracing modernisation. Similar to Jia Zhangke, Wanma Caidan deftly captures the complexities of China's transformation. Having explored Jia Zhangke's gendered portrayal of the nation in Chapter Four and Wanma Caidan's gendered portrayal of the nation in this chapter (Chapter Five), which together represent the non-mainstream perspective of portraying the nation for the nation-people, the subsequent chapter will delve into the gendered portrayal of the nation by "directors within the system", with a particular focus on the Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou and New Force Generation Wu Jing, representing the mainstream perspective of portraying the nation for the nation-state.

Chapter 6 Mainstream Portrayals of the Nation through Male and Female Characters: Revealing China as a Powerful and Unified Nation

6.1 Introduction

After delving into the gendered portrayals of the nation in non-mainstream films by independent Sixth Generation directors Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan in Chapters Four and Five, this chapter turns its focus to the gendered representation of the nation in mainstream cinema. Specifically, it explores the works of "directors within the system" who operate within the guidelines set by the authorities. The primary emphasis will be on New Force Generation director Wu Jing and Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou, providing a contrasting perspective to the non-mainstream portrayals.

Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou have both demonstrated their adeptness in navigating the Chinese film industry, earning recognition as exemplary "directors within the system". Wu Jing is renowned for his action-oriented films, making notable contributions to the domestic film scene with directorial and acting roles in top-grossing productions such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). On the other hand, Zhang Yimou has received international acclaim for his artistic sensibilities and his exploration of sociopolitical themes, establishing him as a distinguished filmmaker representing China. While their approaches may differ, both directors have successfully resonated with Chinese audiences and garnered appreciation from the state.

This chapter directs its attention to the mainstream blockbusters of Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou in the twenty-first century, with a specific analysis of their respective films: Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *The Flowers of War* (2011). Zhang's *Hero* holds a significant position in Chinese film history as it has shaped the contemporary commercial cinematic landscape and influenced the portrayal of the nation on screen in the twenty-first century. Building upon *Hero*'s legacy, *The Flowers of War* established new standards in the second decade. By examining these films, Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou offer distinct perspectives on gender roles, dynamics, and the construction of national identity and pride. This selection allows for a comprehensive exploration of gender portrayal in mainstream Chinese cinema and its contribution to the construction of the nation, aligning with RQ1.

The analysis will focus specifically on how Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou construct their gendered portrayals of the nation through the narrative roles of male and female characters, as outlined in RQ2. Considering that New Force Generation directors often prioritise commercial success over artistic merit, and frequently choose established genres such as action, films like Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* inherently prioritise action-packed narratives and high-budget visual effects. As a result, there is limited space for exploring distinct and nuanced cinematic techniques. Therefore, the analysis will primarily concentrate on the narrative roles of male and female characters in mainstream films.

6.2 Exploring the Man-as-Nation Significance through Narrative Roles of Mainstream Male Characters

The Chinese film market has undergone a period of rapid growth, as evidenced by the increasing aggregate box-office receipts in the years following 2010. In 2016, the market reached a new milestone with release of *The Mermaid* (*Meiren yu* 美人鱼, 2016), directed by Hong Kong filmmaker Stephen Chow 周星驰, which became the highest grossing film of the year. However, it was in 2017 that the pursuit of mainstream blockbusters within the confines of Chinese mainstream ideology reached its zenith with release of *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhanlang 2* 战狼 2, 2017), directed by Wu Jing 吴京 from the New Force Generation. This film garnered unprecedented success and achieved remarkable acclaim. Described as "phenomenal" by Stephen Teo (2019), it marked a significant milestone in Chinese film history by surpassing five billion RMB (precisely 5.68) in all-time box office revenue in China, as reported by Endata and Maoyan Pro.

Wu Jing embarked on his career in the mid-1990s, initially gaining recognition as a martial arts specialist in Hong Kong films. However, it wasn't until 2015 that he achieved widespread fame in the mainland Chinese film industry with the release of *Wolf Warrior* (2015), the prequel to *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). The remarkble success of *Wolf Warrior 2* propelled Wu Jing to the status of a cinematic superstardom. He has then played leading roles in several other films that rank among the top ten highest-grossing films of all time in China, including *The Wandering Earth* franchise (2019 & 2023), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise (2021 & 2022).

Wu Jing's cinematic works consistently revolve around heroic and patriotic narratives that deeply resonate with a wide Chinese audience. These films uphold traditional gender roles by portraying male protagonists as strong, courageous, and devoted to defending the nation. Such portrayals are in line with traditional and Confucian ideals of masculinity and national pride, catering to the expectations and aspirations of the state. Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* stands as a notable archetype for the portrayal of the Chinese nation through male characters in mainstream Chinese cinema of the twenty-first century.

Regarding the narrative role, Leng Feng 冷锋, portrayed by Wu Jing, is a discharged soldier from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) special forces, known as the "Wolf Warriors". He undertakes missions authorised by the Chinese government while operating in a private capacity. Scholars such as C. Berry (2018, pp. 41-2), Stephen Teo (2019, p. 327), Tingting Hu and Tian Guan (2021, p. 7) view Leng Feng's independent actions as a manifestation of individual heroism.

According to Teo (2019, p. 328), Leng Feng can be seen as a hybrid of Hollywood-style individualistic hero and a Chinese-style selfless hero, aligning with Chinese mainstream values rooted in socialist political ideology, such as patriotism. Teo (2019, p. 330) further suggests that Leng Feng embodies both an independent heroic protagonist and a hero of the state. Hu and Guan (2021, pp. 6-7) argue that Leng Feng's individual heroism reinforces the strength of China's military force. Indeed,

Leng Feng exhibits unwavering loyally and patriotism towards the Chinese military

and the state, as evident in his assertion: "Once a wolf warrior, always a wolf warrior."

Through his authoritative identity, Leng Feng's portrayal as a soldier symbolises the

national image of the nation-state. This is exemplified by the film's depiction of the

massive evacuation of Chinese citizens during the Libyan crisis in 2011, showcasing

the nation-state's commitment to protecting its people and projecting its strength on

the global stage.

Leng Feng first made his appearance as the protagonist in *Wolf Warrior* (*Zhanlang* 战

狼, 2015), a film also directed by and starring Wu Jing. While *Wolf Warrior 2* shares

little connection with its predecessor in terms of plot and characters, the relevance

of the prequel lies in establishing Leng Feng's narrative role and his unconventional

nature. In the first film, he is a highly skilled soldier of the PLA but is dismissed from

the army for disregarding orders during a mission. He acts without authorisation to

save his army comrades, leading to his reinstatement in a new special forces unit

known as the "Wolf Warriors", led by a female commander who later becomes his

girlfriend. The death of his girlfriend sets the stage for personal revenge in the sequel.

At the beginning of Wolf Warrior 2, Leng finds himself imprisoned and expelled from

the army once again, this time for defying orders. He takes matters into his own hands

by confronting an immoral construction boss and his crew, who are demolishing the

house of a fallen comrade. Thus, while maintaining a loyal and patriotic connection

to the Chinese military and the state, Leng also embodies an independent soldier with

rebellious instincts, standing alongside the people.

As predicated by Teo (2019, p. 329), Leng Feng's role in the *Wolf Warrior* franchise is

likely to become a new heroic archetype for male characters in mainstream Chinese

cinema. This tendency can be observed in current mainstream Chinese films that

feature male army soldiers, representing a strong military force and the nation itself.

Notable examples include the top ten highest-grossing films in China, such as *The

Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *The Wandering Earth* (2019),

Full River Red (2023), *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022), and *The Wandering Earth

2* (2023). These blockbuster films solidify China's trajectory towards becoming the

world's largest film market.

Leng Feng's character, serving as a model for male characters in twenty-first-century

mainstream Chinese cinema, can be seen as a reference to the narrative role models

prevalent in the Third Generation cinema of the Mao/socialist era. Even his name

Leng Feng, echoes Lei Feng, a legendary PLA figure from the Mao/socialist era.

Scholars such as Williams (2004, p. 77), Wicks (2009, p. 399), and Lu (2021) noted

that the male roles in the Third Generation cinema encompass exemplary workers,

peasants, and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing*). While Leng Feng draws inspiration from

the socialist role model of the soldier, he represents a new, transformative type of

soldier of the twenty-first century.

Notably, Leng Feng's rebellious nature as a soldier introduces a fresh formula to the portrayal of soldiers in mainstream Chinese cinema. It is plausible that this new formula played a significant role in the unprecedented success of *Wolf Warrior 2* in Chinese film history. A comparison can be made with another film released around the same time as *Wolf Warrior 2*, *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun daye* 建军大业, 2017), a state-commissioned project commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of the PLA. In stark contrast to the massive success of *Wolf Warrior 2*, which grossed 5.694 billion RMB, *The Founding of an Army* fared poorly, earning only 0.407 billion RMB (see Maoyan Pro). While the latter film adhered to stale conventions in portraying soldiers lacking autonomy from the party-state as individuals, Leng Feng's role in *Wolf Warrior 2* breaks free from the traditional mould of a Chinese soldier. He embodies selflessness, rebellion, and individualism, adding a refreshing dynamic to the character of a soldier.

Like Wu Jing's portrayal of the heroic soldier Leng Feng, his predecessor Zhang Yimou also depicted a soldier as a hero in the film *The Flowers of War* (2011). Chinese soldiers are depicted as heroic and selfless individuals who willingly sacrifice their lives to protect a group of convent schoolgirls. The film showcases their heroism primarily through intense combat sequences. In the opening scenes, when Japanese troops chase after terrified schoolgirls, the tattered remnants of the Chinese forces, led by Major Li, decide to forgo their opportunity to escape Nanjing in order to save the girls. In their initial encounter with the Japanese troops, Major Li's Chinese unit

demonstrates such remarkable heroism that they successfully eliminate the entire enemy squad.

The heroism of the Chinese soldiers is further exemplified as they continue to engage subsequent waves of Japanese troops. Despite being vastly outnumbered and outgunned, with only a handful of Chinese soldiers facing hundreds of Japanese soldiers, armed only with rifles against tanks, they fight valiantly, striving to eliminate as many enemies as possible, even at the cost of their own lives. One Chinese soldier attaches explosives to his body and sacrifices himself to destroy a Japanese tank. Another group of Chinese soldiers, lacking sufficient weaponry to combat the tanks, forms a human shield to get close enough to plant a bomb. Following this intense battle against the Japanese troops, only Major Li and a severely wounded teenage boy named Pu Sheng remain. Pu Sheng, who is homeless, is taken in by Major Li's troop.

The heroism and selflessness of the Chinese soldiers are further underscored through the portrayal of Major Li. In stark contrast to the inhumane Japanese soldiers, Major Li is portrayed as a compassionate and humane soldier who genuinely cares for the well-being of the Chinese youngsters. To provide Pu Sheng with a warm place to stay before his death, Li takes him to the cathedral and leaves him with the prostitutes, enduring their insults. When Li witnesses the convent girls he saved finding safety in the church, singing hymns for the deceased, he is filled with a sense of relief, shedding tears, and silently leaving the church.

Despite having the opportunity to change into civilian clothing and escape Nanjing, Li chooses to remain near the church, determined to protect the schoolgirls. The next day, when the Japanese invade the church, Li intervenes just in time to prevent Shujuan from being raped, shooting two Japanese soldiers from a distance. His subsequent defense against the Japanese platoon becomes the most notable action sequence featuring Chinese soldiers in the film. Singlehandedly, Li skillfully eliminates the entire Japanese platoon. Each shot he takes is calculated and precise, while the Japanese soldiers shoot indiscriminately, constantly missing their targets. Ultimately, Li meets an honorable death as he sacrifices himself, along with the remaining group of Japanese soldiers, by detonating explosives. This climactic scene showcases Li's heroism through visually stunning imagery, with colorful fabric from a nearby paper shop soaring through the air amidst dust and debris. As a Chinese soldier, Li relinquishes his chance to escape Nanjing in one final act to save his countrymen.

In *Wolf Warrior* 2, Leng Feng confronts Western mercenaries while rescuing innocent Africans caughter in the midst of a civil war between rebel forces and government troops. Teo (2021, p. 327) interprets Leng's actions as a display of his macho heroism. Over time, Leng gains the support of a diverse group of characters, including Rachel, an American female doctor working on a vaccine, and Chinese factory owners Zhuo Yifan 卓亦凡 and He Jianguo 何建国, who employ both Chinese and African workers. Leading this group of survivors, Leng aims to reach a garrison and evacuate to the coast, where a Chinese warship awaits to transport Chinese citizens and innocent

Africans to safety. However, the mercenaries catch up to them, leading to a climatic

final battle. As Leng faces off against Big Daddy, the American mercenary leader, an

exchange takes place.

In this pivotal moment, Big Daddy gestures towards the trapped victims and

challenges Leng, asking if he is willing to die for them. Leng responds, "I was born for

them." Big Daddy asserts that individuals like Leng will always be inferior to people

like him. This triggers a surge of determination within Leng, who, despite being

overpowered, delivers a punishing blow to Big Daddy, declaring, "That's fucking

history." This exchange resonates with the theme of China's historical humiliation

and the imperatives to overcome it. In contrast to the portrayal of victimised women

as symbols of a suffering nation in twentieth-century Chinese cinema, the

representation of man-as-nation has taken precedence in response to China's

evolving global role in the twenty-first century. Specifically, the role of male soldiers

and warriors has emerged as signifiers of a strong nation. This shift reflects the

necessity of developing new narratives that align with China's changing position on

the world stage.

In the current Chinese film industry, seven out of the top ten highest-grossing

domestic films[134] directly project an image of the Chinese nation through strong,

heroic, and resilient male protagonists in soldiers/warriors roles. These films include

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[134] The box office information is found in Box Office Mojo, Endata and Maoyan Pro. The latter two
are Chinese resources which systematically track box-office revenue.

The Battle at Lake Changjin (*Changjin hu* 长津湖, 2021), *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhanglang 2* 战狼 2, 2017), *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang diuqiu* 流浪地球, 2019), *Full River Red* (*Man jiang hong* 满江红, 2023), *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (*Changjinhu zhi shuimenqiao* 长津湖之水门桥, 2022), *The Wandering Earth 2* (*Liulang diqiu 2* 流浪地球 2, 2023), and *Operation Red Sea* (*Honghai xingdong* 红海行动, 2018). Produced in the second decade of the twenty-first century or more recently, these films have shattered domestic box office records in China. They have reingnited a collective sense of pride in the Chinese nation, receiving enthusiastic acclaim from Chinese audiences, as evidenced by audience reviews on platforms like Douban[135]. Through these films, the Chinese people are depicted as active and indispensable participants in an expanded global landscape. They appear as individuals, members of an army (as seen in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise), a lone soldier (as in *Wolf Warrior 2*), a team of astronauts and rescue workers (as in *The Wandering Earth*), or a military group like the navy marine corps (as in *Operation Red Sea*). Notably, China has embarked on producing its own interstellar adventures and staking its claim in the realm of science-fiction films - a genre typically dominated by Hollywood, the film industry of the sole superpower. These films contribute to a more internationally recognised and robust image of the Chinese nation on the world stage compred to previous eras.

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[135] Douban is the most popular Chinese database to find audience ratings and reviews.

In his influential work *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*,
Kam Louie (2002, pp. 8-9) posited that Chinese culture encompasses two distinct
ideals of masculinity that exist in a productive tension. The first is known as *wen* (文)
masculinity, characterised by refinement, cultivation, and exemplified by figures such
as Confucius (Kongzi), the esteemed Chinese philosopher. Confucius emphasised
personal and societal morality, the importance of harmonious social relationships,
justice, kindness, and sincerity. The second ideal is *wu* (武) masculinity, associated
with martial prowess and embodied by Guan Yu, a revered Chinese military general.
Wu masculinity shares similarities with Western notions of macho masculinity.
However, the Chinese model differs in its prioritisation of *wen* (cultural attainment)
over *wu* (martial valor). Unlike the Western emphasis on "brawn" over "brain", as
discussed by Christopher Forth in *Masculinity in the Modern West* (2008, p. 29), the
Chinese model places greater importance on cultural refinement. In fact, the
idiomatic expression in Chinese consistently presents it as "*wen-wu*", highlighting the
primacy of *wen* masculinity.

Louie's conceptualisation of the dual model of Chinese masculinity provides valuable
insights into the character of Leng in *Wolf Warrior 2*. Leng embodies not only the *wu*
model of macho masculinity but also the *wen* model, showcasing a combination of
both ideals. As highlighted by Hu and Guan (2021, p. 8), Leng exemplifies not only
martial prowess but also strategic thinking, teamwork, and the application of *wen*
masculinity. By embodying both dimensions of masculinity, Leng represents a
multifaceted expression of Chinese masculinity ideals. Moreover, as Hu and Guan

(2021) argue, Leng's character symbolises a powerful Chinese nation, characterised by an enhanced comprehensive blend of soft and hard power.

Furthermore, as the sequel to the film with the tagline "whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away", *Wolf Warrior 2* expands Leng's battlefield from defending China's sovereignty to a fictional African country. Despite his righteous intentions, Leng struggles to control his *wu* masculinity, which becomes evident in his actions. One notable instance is when he brutally beats Big Daddy to death, proclaiming "blood for blood". This scene echoes a similar incident at the beginning of the film, where Leng inflicts severe injury upon an evil boss who is demolishing the house of a fallen comrade[136]. Zairong Xiang (2018) interprets Leng's uncontrolled *wu* masculinity as an example of "toxic masculinity". It is important to acknowledge that this toxic *wu* masculinity is not condoned within China. In fact, Leng is expelled from the PLA twice, once in *Wolf Warrior* and again in *Wolf Warrior 2*, due to his recourse to toxic *wu* masculinity when addressing problems within China.

Further, being a sequel that continues the tagline, "whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away", Leng's battlefield is extended from China's sovereignty in *Wolf Warrior* to a fictitious country in Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2*. Despite

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[136] After the events of *Wolf Warrior*, Leng and members of his special forces team bring a comrade's remains back to his home village for his funeral, only to see his house on the verge of being pulled down by a demolition team. The boss of the demolition team confronts Leng and the other soldiers with a gun and sneers at them for presenting the remains to the bereaved family. Leng kicks him to the ground. The boss gets back up after the police arrive and enrages Leng, "You'd better kill me now, because when you're gone, I'm going to make the family wish they were dead", only for himself to be kicked in the stomach by Leng. The kick sends the boss crashing onto the windshield of a police car and leads him to spit up streaks of blood from his mouth.

righteous reactions, one notices Leng's inability to control his *wu* masculinity despite

righteous reactions. His out-of-control *wu* masculinity is displayed to full effect when

he beats Big Daddy to death, asserting "blood for blood". This episode also reminds

one of another similar episode at the beginning of the film, in which Leng severely

injures an evil boss whose crew is demolishing the house of a deceased comrade This

out-of-control *wu* masculinity of Leng is seen by Zairong Xiang (2018) as an example

of "toxic [*wu*] masculinity". And it is essential to note that this toxic *wu* masculinity is

not accepted within China. Indeed, Leng is cashiered from the PLA twice (once in *Wolf*

Warrior and another in *Wolf Warrior 2*) for resolving problems through toxic *wu*

masculinity within China.

In contrast, such toxic *wu* masculinity is only deemed acceptable outside of China.

According to Louie (2002), the *wen* man governs the kingdom and the home, while

the *wu* man operates in the realm beyond civilisation, safeguarding its borders and

pursuing wrongdoers. In the context of *Wolf Warrior 2*, the anonymous African

country represents that space beyond civilisation, where Leng's toxic *wu* masculinity

is perceived as a display of macho heroism, necessary to vanquish enemies (in this

case, Western mercenaries) and protect allies (innocent Chinese nationals and

African civilians). Furthermore, Leng, who manifests toxic *wu* masculinity towards the

American mercenary Big Daddy outside of China, is viewed by C. Berry (2018, p. 42)

as a response to China's evolving global role. As C. Berry (2018, p. 43) articulates,

"China moves beyond isolation from the West, beyond accommodation with the

West, into open hostility toward the West and contestation."

In contrast, the disapproval of Leng's unrestrained *wu* masculinity within China in

Wolf Warrior 2 reflects the emphasis on disciplined *wu* masculinity for the unification

of the Chinese nation depicted in the preceding mainstream Chinese blockbuster

Hero (*Yingxiong*, 2002) directed by Zhang Yimou. *Hero* is widely recognised as the first

Chinese commercial blockbuster in the history of Chinese cinema, and it marked a

significant turning point in Zhang Yimou's career, solidifying his position as one of

China's most successful directors (Haizhou Wang & Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, 2010, p.

92).

In *Hero*, the King of Qin embodies both *wen* (cultural attainment and strategic vision)

and *wu* (courage and martial arts skills). He possesses the wisdom to confront

physical threats and emotional isolation, and his long conversation with the assassin

Nameless reveals his transformation from an ambitious individual to a revered ruler

with a grand vision for a unified nation under the concept of "all under heaven" (*tian

xia*). The King of Qin's character exemplifies the fusion of cultural sophistication and

martial prowess, representing the ideal combination of *wen* and *wu* masculinity.

The film's portrayal of the King of Qin highlights the significance of self-control and

discipline in *wu* masculinity, as he channels his martial skills towards the goal of

unifying China. This emphasis on controlled *wu* masculinity resonates with the

disapproval of Leng's unrestrained *wu* masculinity in *Wolf Warrior 2*. Both films

explore the nuanced relationship between *wu* masculinity and the greater purpose

of the Chinese nation, showcasing the importance of self-discipline and the pursuit of unity in the face of adversity.

As Xu Haofeng (2003, p. 7) aptly noted, the sword represents the epitome of masculinity in the martial arts genre. In the film *Hero*, the sword serves as a powerful symbol that connects the King of Qin and the assassins. The king possesses the swords of his presumed dead adversaries and showcases Broken Sword's red calligraphic rendering of the word "*jian*" (sword) behind his throne. When Nameless confronts the king without a sword, he is compelled to steal the king's sword in order to assassinate him. However, in a pivotal moment, the king willingly offers his own sword to Nameless, granting him the choice to kill or spare him. Nameless, enlightened by the vision of a united nation, ultimately decides not to kill the king.

Throughout his audience with the king, Nameless never possesses a sword except when it is bestowed upon him by the king. Interestingly, Nameless relinquishes the king's sword, illustrating his abandonment of *wu* masculinity for the sake of the political objective of national unification, which is embodied by the king. It is through his actions that Nameless attains heroic status. In the end, despite being executed as an assassin, Nameless is buried as a hero. The film's title, "Hero", underscores its purpose of depicting Chinese heroism, suggesting that true heroism necessitates the abandonment of *wu* masculinity and the embrace of *wen* accomplishments, emphasising the idea of national unity.

However, the question arises: Is Nameless the sole hero in the film? Who else embodies heroism? The character of Broken Sword, like Nameless, also demonstrates the renunciation of *wu* masculinity by abandoning his sword. This aspect is evident not only in his actions but also in his name. Three years prior to Nameless's attempted assassination of the King of Qin, Broken Sword had the opportunity to kill the king when he stormed the palace and came face to face with him. However, at a critical moment, he chose to abandon the assassination attempt. This decision created a rift between Broken Sword and his lover and fellow warrior, Flying Snow. Both Nameless and Flying Snow struggle to comprehend why Broken Sword relinquished his mission to assassinate the king.

Broken Sword elucidates, "The principles of calligraphy and swordsmanship are the same." He explains to Nameless that he and Flying Snow refine their martial skills through the practice of calligraphy. In other words, they enhance their *wu* abilities by cultivating their *wen* expertise. It is through the mastery of *wen* skills that Broken Sword realises true heroism lies in the unification of a nation and comes to admire the king's vision of a united China. Consequently, when Flying Snow agrees to assist Nameless in his assassination attempt, Broken Sword endeavors to dissuade Nameless from taking the king's life. He conveys his message by writing the Chinese characters for "*tianxia*" (all land under heaven), emphasising the significance of a unified China (fig. 6.1). As Broken Sword elucidates, the seven kingdoms have long engaged in incessant warfare, resulting in the suffering of the people. Only the King of Qin can bring an end to these conflicts and unite China. Born in the enemy kingdom

of Zhao, the amalgamation of Broken Sword's sword and brush empowers him to envision the greater importance of *tianxia*, transcending his personal desire for revenge. The abandonment of *wu* masculinity by Broken Sword qualifies him as a hero.

Figure 6.1: Broken Sword writes the characters of *tianxia* 天下 in the sand.

In their respective films, both Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou presented strong, heroic, and resilient male characters. Wu Jing's film *Wolf Warrior 2* featured male character like Leng Feng who was a soldier. Similarly, Zhang Yimou's works, such as *The Flowers of War* and *Hero*, showcased male soldiers and warriors like Major Li and the three assassins.

These male characters served as prominent embodiments of heroism and bravery within the films, contributing to the overall narrative and representation of the nation. Their physical prowess, strategic thinking, and adherence to traditional/Confucian ideals of Chinese masculinity, encompassing both cultural

attainment (*wen*) and martial valour (*wu*), further symbolised the nation's capacity

to overcome challenges and protect its interests. Within the conceptual framework

of man-as-nation, these mainstream male characters personified a united, unified,

and powerful Chinese nation, standing as icons of strength and resilience.

6.3 Exploring the Woman-as-Nation Significance through Narrative Roles of Mainstream Female Characters

Furthermore, within mainstream films, it is observed that male characters take on

prominent roles as central figures who drive the narrative forward. In contrast,

female characters more commonly occupy supporting or secondary roles, serving as

"assistants" or "beneficiaries" to the male protagonists. In films like Zhang Yimou's

Hero and *The Flowers of War*, the representation of gender plays a central role in

shaping the depiction of the nation. In *Hero*, the female character is portrayed as a

pawn in a political game, while the male characters hold the power and agency.

Similarly, in *The Flowers of War*, the male protagonist emerges as a heroic figure who

rescues a group of vulnerable women, reinforcing the notion of male dominance and

female vulnerability. Mainstream Chinese cinema has often depicted gender roles in

a manner that reinforces established Chinese values and ideals. Women are

frequently portrayed as submissive and passive, while men are depicted as strong

and heroic. These gender portrayals are closely intertwined with the construction of

national identity and the representation of the nation as a whole.

In *Hero*, the characters of male warriors Nameless and Broken Sword, hailing from the enemy state of Zhao, engage in a battle against the King of Qin. However, they consciously choose not to employ their swords, the embodiment of their *wu* masculinity, as lethal weapons against the king. Instead of resorting to combat, their defeat stems from the idea of a unified China. Essentially, the male assassins willingly relinquish their swords, and by extension, their *wu* masculinity, in favour of *wen* masculinity. While all the male assassins demonstrate heroism and grasp the broader context (including Sky, who also discards his sword), the sole female assassin, Flying Snow, falls short.

When Flying Snow discovers that Broken Sword admires the King of Qin's vision of a united China, she vehemently opposes this notion. Her failure to comprehend the larger concept of *tianxia*, which transcends her personal quest for revenge, disqualifies her as a hero. Zhang Yimou himself expressed his intention to reshape the martial arts genre, shifting the focus away from combat and killing—the essence of *wu* masculinity. He stated, "I take the genre in a new direction. In my story, the goal is the negation of violence. The characters are motivated by their desire to end the war. For real martial arts masters, true heroes, the heart is far more important than the sword" (quoted in Stephen Short and Susan Jakes, 2001). While Zhang does not explicitly define the "heart", the prevailing message in the film suggests that an ideal hero embodies both *wen* and *wu* masculinity, with *wen* prevailing over *wu*. Men are heroes, not women.

The Flowers of War presents two distinct groups of women, often referred to as "flowers". One group comprises the convent schoolgirls, while the other consists of beautiful prostitutes seeking refuge in the cathedral. John, a character in the film, acknowledges the strength and enduring beauty possessed by these Chinese women and girls. The experience of the schoolgirls is primarily filtered through Shujuan, who adamantly refuses to leave Nanjing without her fellow classmates. To protect the courtesans hiding in the cellar, Shujuan cleverly leads the Japanese soldiers upstairs, diverting their attention. When one of the prostitutes, Mosquito, inadvertently exposes herself to the Japanese officers who come to listen to the girls sing, Shujuan bravely intervenes, claiming that Mosquito is a member of the church choir who has misplaced her uniform. Aware of the potential fate that awaits them, the girls valiantly contemplate group suicide.

The prostitutes, led by Mo, are portrayed as formidable, brave, exquisite, and skilled, as John describes them. They exhibit exceptional care for the dying teenage soldier, Pu Sheng, who is brought into the church by Major Li. One of the prostitutes, Doukou, treats Pu Sheng as her own younger brother. In a selfless act, Doukou risks her life to retrieve three additional *pipa* strings from her brothel so she can play a beautiful song for Pu Sheng before his passing. Inspired by Mo's noble example, the other prostitutes offer to protect the girls from tragedy by attending the Japanese celebrations in their place. They declare, "We will all go instead of you. We will protect you. We won't let the Japanese hurt you." Before being taken away by the Japanese, the prostitutes give their valuable belongings to the girls, urging them to

live a good life in their honor. As a parting gift, the prostitutes sing their signature song from the brothel for the girls. With the help of John, a professional mortician, and dressed in new uniforms provided by the girls, the prostitutes successfully deceive the Japanese, making the ultimate sacrifice to spare the girls from the horrors of Japanese gang rape. Despite the bravery and vaulor displayed by the Chinese females in *The Flowers of War*, it is the male characters, John and Major Li, who assume the role of heroic figures, rescuing this vulnerable group of women and reinforcing the idea of male dominance and female vulnerability.

Furthermore, even in the case of the national heroine Mulan, she is depicted as an "assistant" to her male commander. *Mulan* (2009) carefully orchestrates a re-configured woman warrior who negotiates her female identity as a gendered other. Mulan is transformed from a sexless woman who tries to prove that she is as good as a man in the 1956 version, to a feminine heroine who acts in a different manner from men. Yet the self-growth of this feminine Mulan still depends on the support of a man, her male counterpart.

Both Disney's 1998 animation and China's 2009 film sustain an essential core legend of Hua Mulan's story in which the maiden dresses as a male soldier and fights on the battlefield taking her father's place in the army. Mulan transforms into a heroine who performed heroic deeds in battle and eventually returns home. Yet the main themes dramatically differ. Disney's story constantly emphasises the idea of honouring her ancestors and family throughout Mulan's journey. To avoid dishonouring the family,

Mushu, a compact-sized and lizard-looking dragon from Mulan's family temple is sent to retrieve Mulan. Rather than accentuating Mulan's war heroism, the Disney film makes filial piety Mulan's fundamental motivation to join the army. Disney's theme of filial piety is also emphasised in the ending of the film. At the closing scene, Mulan returns home with the sword of the foe and the crest of the emperor. Her father's words, "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter", ultimately join together the family honour with Mulan's personal achievement. Mulan's grandmother trivialises Mulan's heroic experience, however. She remarks with sarcasm, "Great. She brings home a sword. If you ask me, she should've brought home a man." The showing up of Mulan's love interest Captain Li Shang at Mulan's house puts closure on Mulan's adventure outside home. The Disney's film version ends with the likelihood of a good marriage for Mulan and emphasises her accomplishment of filial duty to her family.

Disney's film version is actually in compliance with Chinese premodern retelling traditions of the Hua Mulan legend. As Louise Edwards (1994: 88) pointed out in her discussion of the woman warrior, the various redactions of Hua Mulan's life highlight her Confusioan virtue of filial piety over her loyalty to the nation/the emperor. This is exemplified by a description in a later version of how when the emperor requested that she join his palace on hearing of her remarkable deeds, Mulan refused and committed suicide rather than obey his command. Joseph R. Allen (1996) traced the changes of the telling of the Hua Mulan legend since its inception and noted that the patriotic and nationalistic aspects of the role are developed to at least match the filial

aspects and meet the demands of the modern period as one response to European imperialism. When comparing Edwards' and Allen's comments, one sees that as the story is retold in the modern era after the encounter with imperialist incursion, as the concept of "nation" changes, different discourses and images of Mulan are produced and reconfigured. China's 2009 film version of the Mulan legend follows this logic.

In contrast to her Disney counterpart, Hua Mulan in the 2009 film is motivated more by her patriotism and nationalism than filial piety. The 2009 film depicts a journey of self-growth similar to Disney's, but during which Mulan learns that her country is more important than anything else, and she eventually chooses to be a warrior for her country instead of for her father or her lover. This is also projected through the film's ending in which Mulan altruistically chooses to relinquish her love to exchange for the security and peace of her country. The love between Mulan and her lover Wentai 文泰 is transformed into their love and sacrifice toward their country. Mulan and Wentai part at the end, and the film's ending projects an ambiguous future for Mulan. She indeed returns home but does not truly return to the role that is constrained by Confucian ethics, which reaffirms the film's core theme of patriotism over filial piety.

Further, when tracing the development of Mulan's image since its inception, Dong (2010: 53) points to the possibility that Mulan has a non-Han Chinese ethnicity at the earliest stage of her literary journey. In the 2009 film, director Jingle Ma gives Mulan a Han identity and shows this national heroine of the Northern Wei state fighting a

righteous war against the Rouran tribes led by their leader Chan Yu. The evil of Mulan's foreign counterpart in the battleground, Mendu 门独, is underscored through his merciless killing of Chinese prisoners of war, other Rouran clan leaders, and even his own father. Director Ma uses a contrastive setting to illustrate Mulan's stance toward her role, and her nation. While her troop is besieged by Mendu's army in a valley without food or medicine, Mulan gives the order that all surviving soldiers prepare for combat and death in honour of the Chinese nation (the author's translation): "Today, we will fight to the death. Homeland is just behind us, even if we bleed until the last drop, even if we decompose into a skeleton in the desert, we ought to jeopardise our lives to protect her. To let the Rouran people know, our Wei soldiers, never give in, never yield! Soldiers can betray me, the general can abandon me, but I Hua Mulan... will never betray my country! (fig. 6.2)"

Figure 6.2: "I Hua Mulan... will never betray my country!" Hua Mulan tells her fellow soldiers at the end of Mulan (2009).

In *Mulan* (2009) depiction of the story of Hua Mulan, there is a less pronounced tension regarding gender norms. While Mulan's father initially expresses the desire

for her to have a suitable marriage at the start of the film, it does not create significant conflict or tension surrounding gender expectations. Unlike Disney's Mulan who adopts a male name Ping, Mulan in the 2009 film confidently reports to the recruitment officer in the army under her real name Hua Mulan. Disney shows that Mulan is abandoned by her lover Captain Li Shang after her female identity is revealed; the revelation of Mulan's female identity in the 2009 film, however, only increases the admiration and respect that fellow general Wentai attributed to her. Wentai promises to keep Mulan's gender identity private and asks her to stay in his army. In addition, Mulan persuades the Rouran princess to assist her in killing the cruel and selfish ruler Mendu by revealing her female identity (the author's translation), "Actually Mulan… is a woman too… The greater good of peace, and your destiny… are all grasped in our own hands."

Furthermore, Mulan's femininity is highlighted in the 2009 film. As Li (2018: 372) notes, though Mulan's femininity is not omitted in other Chinese modern cinematic adaptations, it is usually mixed with battlefront masculinity including male mentality. Yet, director Ma conscientiously depicts Mulan's female subjectivity, sensitivity and feelings. In his view, this version deals with the emotional depth of Mulan and focuses on her vulnerabilities and relationships: "Most people think Hua Mulan is a god, but I think Hua Mulan is a woman" (Min Lee 2009). The film provides a noticeable female subjectivity of Mulan distinguishing her from fellow male soldiers by delving into her trepidation when killing for the first time and confronting the death of her comrades. Mulan falls in love with fellow general Wentai and the fact of being afraid of losing

him makes her troops fall into the enemy's trap. Mulan's emotional struggles towards death and reluctance to fight war are projected through close-ups of her crying face (fig. 6.3) and her monologues such as (the author's translation): "Why does father get excited when he talks about war? I fought one battle after another ... Comrades died one by one, I really don't want to fight anymore ... I don't want to fight anymore ... I don't want to be a general, I want to be an ordinary person." In the 2009 film, Mulan's femininity is portrayed as the opposite of familiar battlefront masculinity.

The male protagonist Wentai is portrayed as a saviour in the film. Wentai supports and mentors Mulan throughout her army journey, playing the role of the man behind the heroine. Wentai orders Mulan to execute her first killing in the battle. More importantly, he teaches Mulan to choose the nation over personal feelings by faking his own death and cutting her emotional tie attached to him. When Mulan is betrayed by her general and injured, Wentai reveals his secret identity as a prince and volunteers to be the enemy's hostage in exchange of the lives of Mulan and fellow soldiers. In fact, the portrayal of Wentai emphasises that Mulan's self-growth and success as a national heroine actually depends on the support of her male counterpart. Because of Wentai's influence, Mulan makes her final choice of sacrificing her love in exchange of the peace of her country. Mulan's final choice of self-sacrifice shows that her female subjectivity is overshadowed by the importance of sacrifice for the Chinese state.

Figure 6.3: Hua Mulan reveals her emotional vulnerability in the battle in Mulan (2009).

Directors like Jia Zhangke present female characters who exhibit a powerful nature, displaying an independent spirit even in the face of adversity or abandonment by men. These characters embrace and embody China's tradition and heritage rather than rejecting it. Similarly, directors like Wanma Caidan showcase female characters who have the strength and determination to assert their independence and break free from the influence of men, as exemplified by the character of Yangcuo.

However, it is important to note that within mainstream films, there is still a prevailing trend where female characters often rely on the assistance of male counterparts. Films such as *Hero*, *The Flowers of War*, and Mulan (2009) exemplify this dynamic. This echoes the portrayal of Gong Li's image by Zhang Yimou in his earlier works from the 1980s to 1990s, where female characters often required the support or involvement of male characters. While there is progress in the depiction of female characters by Sixth Generation Directors, mainstream films continue to

present a more limited range of roles for women, highlighting the ongoing need for

greater representation and diverse portrayals of female characters in Chinese

cinema.

6.4 Conclusion: Discussing the Significance of Gender-as-Nation through Narrative Roles: Unveiling a Powerful and Unitary Nation

In their respective films, Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou portrayed strong, heroic, and

resilient male characters. Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* showcased PLA soldier Leng Feng,

along with his allies He Jianguo and Zhuo Yifan, while Wu jing himself played PLA

soldier Wu Wanli in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise and soldier and astronaut

Liu Peiqiang in *The Wandering Earth* franchise. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* featured three

male warriors/assassins, and his work *The Flowers of War* showcased soldier Major

Li, while *Full River Red* featured soldier Zhang Da. These mainstream male

protagonists all assumed narrative roles of soldiers/warriors. Significantly, these

characters possessed an authoritative identity bestowed upon them by the emperor

or government, and their actions and decision carried significant implications for the

nation's overall image. They acted as representatives of authority, shouldering a

strong sense of responsibility towards the nation's territorial sovereignty and safety,

while protecting and leading the people. These male characters served as prominent

embodiments of heroism and bravery within the films, contributing to the overall

narrative and representation of the nation. Their physical prowess and strategic

thinking, in line with with traditional/Confucian ideals of Chinese masculinity

encompassing *wen* (cultural attainment) and *wu* (martial valour), coupled with their

heroic actions, symbolised the nation's capacity to conquer challenges and protect its interests. Within the theoretical framework of man-as-nation, these mainstream male characters personify a united, unified, and powerful Chinese nation.

The narrative rolse of these mainstream male protagonists, as established by Wu Jing and Zhang Yimou in their films, can be seen as a reference to the prevalent narrative role model of the Third Generation cinema during the Mao/socialist era. The socialist trio of workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing*) were commonly portrayed as exemplary figures during that period (Williams, 2004, p. 77; Wicks, 2009, p. 399; Lu, 2021). However, with the transformation of Chinese society following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the onset of economic reforms, the portrayal of male roles underwent a shift in the Fourth and Fifth Generation cinemas of the post-Mao/postsocialist era. Positive male figures emerged in the roles of reformers, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals, while the appeal of the old socialist roles diminished (Wang Haizhou, 2022). Despite these changes, mainstream films continue to appreciate the portrayal of model soldiers from the socialist period, even in the new era of reforms and postsocialism of the twenty-first century. This appreciation may be attributed to the emphasis on constructing a socialist nation that promotes loyalty to the nation, echoing the ideology of the Mao era.

Indeed, mainstream films often portray both male and female characters as individuals who willingly make sacrifices for the greater good of the nation. Examples include the male assassins/warriors in *Hero*, the woman warrior Hua Mulan in *Hua*

Mulan, the group of prostitutes led by Yu Mo and Major Li in *The Flowers of War*, soldier Zhang Da and his lover in *Full River Red*, and the team of soldiers led by Yang Rui in *Operation Red Sea*. This portrayal highlights the importance of individual commitment and loyalty to the nation, reflecting a collective sense of patriotism towards the country. These resilient and selfless characters contribute to a positive and affirming image of the Chinese nation, fostering a sense of national pride and identity.

Moreover, in mainstream films, male characters often assume prominent roles as central figures driving the narrative, while female characters tend to occupy supporting or secondary roles, serving as "assistants" or "beneficiaries" to the male protagonists. For example, Moon, the loyal apprentice of the male warrior Broken Sword in *Hero* (2002), Yang Rui's sole female team member who aid in the mission to evacuate Chinese citizens in *Operation Red Sea* (2018)*,* and Zhang Da's lover who supports him in his mission to assassinate a national traitor in *Full River Red* (2023). These portrayals of gender relations exemplify the assigned gender roles for Chinese women to Chinese men, revolving around support and assistance to men. Even in the case of strong, courageous, and even "manly" woman like Hua Mulan, her journey towards becoming a true warrior and national heroine often relies on the guidance and support of her male commander. In essence, the image of woman-as-nation complements that of man-as-nation, collectively constructing a unified vision of the nation as powerful and cohesive. With the theoretical framework of gender-as-

nation, these gendered representations contribute to the construction of a unified

and formidable national identity.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Having analysed the gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation in non-mainstream films by independent Sixth Generation directors Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan in Chapters Four and Five, as well as the gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation in mainstream films by "directors within the system" such as Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou and New Force Generation director Wu Jing in Chapter Six, this concluding chapter aims to provide a comprehensive summary of the findings derived from these analyses conducted throughout the main body of the thesis. This chapter will be structured into two parts: the discussion of findings and the theoretical and analytical contributions to the field of film studies.

In the first part, the discussion of findings will address the three research questions (RQs) posed in the introduction chapter, presenting the findings in a step-by-step manner. The second part, focusing on the theoretical and analytical contributions to the field of film studies, will explore the original contributions to knowledge made by this research. By organising the conclusion in this manner, ths chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the research findings and highlight the significant contributions made to the field of film studies.

7.1 Discussion of Findings

This section offers a thorough and in-depth discussion of the research findings, with a specific focus on two main aspects: the comparative analysis of gendered portrayals of the nation in mainstream and non-mainstream films, and a comparison and

contrast with previous research. By approaching the findings from these two perspectives, the significance of the research becomes evident. The section provides a detailed examination of the specific findings while also situating them within the broader context of previous research, threby advancing one's understanding of the intricate relationship between gender and the nation in Chinese cinema.

7.1.1 Comparative Analysis of Gendered Portrayals of the Nation in Mainstream and Non-mainstream Films

This section presents a comprehensive examination of the findings on how mainstream and non-mainstream films portray the Chinese nation through the lens of gender. By conducting a systematic analysis and comparing these portrayals, the section aims to address the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) raised in the introduction chapter:

1. How are the images of the Chinese nation portrayed on screen in the twenty-first century through the lens of gender, encompassing women, men, and their gender relations, as presented by various directors?

2. Specifically, how are these portrayals constructed through the narrative roles of female and male protagonists and the three senses of the look they embody?

In the early twenty-first century (2000-present), the Chinese film industry showcased a range of images that portrayed the Chinese nation through the lens of gender. This cinematic landscape reflects a combination of traditional and progressive gender

depictions, contributing to a rich and comprehensive representation of the nation. Particularly noteworthy is the comparison between portrayals of the nation through gender in non-mainstream films crafted by independent Sixth Generation directors, and the mainstream films by directors from the Fifth and New Force Generations, who operated within the system. These comparisons reveal both distinct differences and intriguing similarities within the two contexts.

Exploring Gendered Portrayals of the Nation in Mainstream Films

The portrayal of gender in mainstream Chinese cinema exhibited specific patterns and characteristics. Fifth and New Force Generation directors who work within the system tended to depict gender relations in harmony and traditional norms within the context of the nation. Men were often portrayed as powerful and heroic, while women were as nurturing and supportive of them. Male and female characters were shown to complement each other, highlighting the notion of gender cooperation and unity as essential components of a powerful and unitary nation. In other words, the image of woman-as-nation complements that of man-as-nation. With the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation, they jointly construct a unified vision of the nation, that is, powerful and unitary.

Take the top ten highest-grossing domestic feature films, for example; while there may be variations among individual films, some common observations can be made. Mainstream films like them tended to prioritise male protagonists and their stories. Nine out of the top ten highest-grossing films revolved around male characters who played central roles in driving the plot and conflict, except for the top three grosser,

Hi, Mom[137] (*Nihao Li Huanying* 你好，李焕英, 2021). The male protagonists in the rest of the top ten grossers were typically depicted as strong, heroic, and action-oriented, such as the group of soldiers of PLA's 7th Company led by Wu Qianli 伍千里 in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise (2011 & 2022), soldier Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), soldier and astronaut Liu Peiqiang 刘培强 in *The Wandering Earth* franchise (2019 & 2023), soldier Zhang Da 张大 in *Full River Red* (2023), and the team of solderis of Chinese navy led by Yang Rui 杨锐 in *Operation Red Sea* (2018), embodying traditional/Confucian notions of Chinese masculinity including loyalty, brotherhood, and the harmonious integration of intellectual and physical capabilities (*wen-wu* dyad). The depiction of men as upholders of Chinese cultural traditions reinforced the image of China as a nation rooted in its rich history and cultural legacy.

Compared to male characters, the representation of female protagonists in these top-grossing films was relatively limited. Female characters were often invisible, as in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise, or relegated to supporting roles, primarily serving as love interests and/or providing team support to the male leads, as Leng Feng's late fiancée in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Liu Peiqiang's fellow trainee and later wife in *The Wandering Earth 2*, Zhang Da's lover in *Full River Red*, and Yang Rui's only female team member in *Operation Red Sea*. These portrayals of women and their relations with their male counterparts reinforced traditional gender norms and expectations in Chinese society – women as nurturing, passive and supportive of men.

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[137] *Hi, Mom*, made by female director Jia Ling 贾玲，is a female-centric narrative between a daughter and her mother.

The portrayal of gender in mainstream Chinese cinema of the early twenty-first century, including those discussed above, played a significant role in constructing images of the Chinese nation. Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou and New Force Generation directors like Wu Jing portrayed firm, heroic, and resilient male characters in ther films, such as the male "heroes" (the three male assassins/warriors and the King of Qin) in *Hero* (2002) and soldier Leng Feng and his two allies He Jianguo and Zhuo Yifan in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), as discussed in Chapter Six. These mainstream male protagonists reflect the image of a united, unified, and powerful Chinese nation. Their physical prowess and heroic actions symbolised the nation's ability to overcome challenges and defend its interests.

Mainstream films, such as *Wolf Warrior 2*, *The Wandering Earth franchise*, and *Operation Red Sea*, also showcased the nation's military and technological prowess and comprehensive national power through portrayals of male characters. They were portrayed as skilled soldiers (Leng Feng and his allies) in *Wolf Warrior 2*, astronauts (Liu Peiqiang and Liu's mentor) and computer scientists (Tu Hengyu 图恒宇 and Tu's colleague) in *The Wandering Earth* franchise, or members of elite forces in *Operation Red Sea*, taking action and missions against global crises or threats beyond China's borders, reflecting China's emergence as a global power. They project an image of China as a confident, capable, and responsible nation actively engaged in international affairs, highlighting its military strength, technological advancements, and commitment to national unity and pride.

Moreover, both male and female characters in mainstream films were often depicted as individuals who willingly made sacrifices for the greater good of the nation, such as the male assassins/warriors in *Hero* (2002), the woman warrior Hua Mulan in *Hua Mulan* (2009), the group of prostitutes led by Yu Mo and their protector Major Li in *The Flowers of War* (2011), soldier Zhang Da and his lover in *Full River Red*, and the team of soldiers led by Yang Rui in *Operation Red Sea*. This portrayal emphasised the importance of individual commitment and loyalty to the nation, reflecting a collective sense of patriotism towards the country. The representation of resilient and selfless characters in these mainstream films, both male and female, contributed to a positive and affirming image of the Chinese nation, fostering a sense of national pride and identity.

Exploring Gendered Portrayals of the Nation in Non-mainstream Films

Like mainstream Chinese directors, independent directors such as the Sixth Generation also used gender as a lens to examine broader societal issues and express their visions of the nation. Yet independent Sixth Generation directors offered alternative representations of women and men and challenged traditional gender roles and expectations in their non-mainstream films. Through portrayals of unconventional gender images, non-mainstream films shaped a different vision of the nation. Women were often depicted as independent and strong, while men faced their struggles and insecurities. While both male and female characters experienced the transformation of society between tradition and modernity, some of them lost their spiritual values amid material gains. They collectively shaped a two-dimensional, economically prosperous yet spiritually impoverished image of the

nation, rather than the singular, predominantly positive image depicted through gender in mainstream films.

As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, love and romance between males and females played a significant role in the narratives of the films of independent Sixth Generation filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan. They have played a crucial role in providing nuanced portrayals of gender within the context of the nation in non-mainstream Chinese cinema in the twenty-first century. Some common themes and representations emerged between Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan's portrayals. Unlike mainstream films, such as the top ten grossers, which tended to prioritise male protagonists and their narratives, Jia Zhangke often portrays his male and female leads (consistently played by Zhao Tao) in a balanced manner, highlighting or even amplifying the privileged visibility accorded to female characters. Wanma Caidan employs a similar approach to show his male and female leads in *Tharlo*.

Female characters in the films of Jia and Wanma Caidan were portrayed as independent, strong, and resilient individuals, breaking away from mainstream portrayals of women as "assistants" to men, as Zhao Tao's characters throughout Jia's body of work and the female protagonist Yangcuo in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo* (2016). At the same time, portrayals of male characters also differed from traditional norms and conventions seen in mainstream films, who are powerful and embody the essential male or Confucian codes. Men were depicted as having vulnerabilities and flaws, or to borrow scholars' (Donald, 2000; Barnett, 2015; Lu, 2021) terminology,

experiencing "masculinity in crisis", as the male counterparts of Zhao Tao's characters in Jia's *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), and the male protagonist Taluo in *Tharlo*.

Specifically, male characters in Jia's films were depicted as rejecting traditional/Confucian notions of Chinese masculinity, such as loyalty, by cheating on their lovers/wives as Zhao Tao's male counterparts do in *The World* and *Still Life*, or righteousness, by attempting to rob a bank as Zhao Tao's male counterpart Xiao Ji does in *Unknown Pleasures*, or attempting to rape Zhao Tao's character in *A Touch of Sin*. They were also depicted as pursuing material wealth at the expense of a spiritual decline, as Zhao Tao's male counterparts do in *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White*. Although male characters in Wanma Caidan's films were not depicted as losing moral integrity, they often exemplify what Barnett (2015, p. 146) would call the "crisis of Tibetan manhood in the modern context", such as the son in *Old Dog* (2011), Taluo in *Tharlo*, and hitchhiker Jinpa in *Jinpa* (2018).

Through an exploration of the struggles and vulnerabilities of male characters, non-mainstream films offer a critical examination of the nation's identity, values, and aspirations in the face of rapid change. These male characters emerge as powerful symbols, representing the struggles, anxieties of the nation itself, as it grapples with the imperative to navigate the complex interplay between tradition and modernity during the early twenty-first century's era of rapid transformation. In this context,

non-mainstream films provide valuable insights into the nation's collective journey

and the pressing need to address its complex dynamics.

The portrayal of gender relations in non-mainstream films by Jia and Wanma Caidan

also differs from that in mainstream cinema. While mainstream films often depicted

harmonious gender relations within the context of the nation with male and female

characters shown to complement each other as a unity, the romantic and/or family

relationships between male and female characters in the films of Jia and Wanma

Caidan often ended up in brokenness. In other words, male and female characters

often went their separate ways. In Jia's oeuvre, female protagonists, played by Zhao

Tao, were often depicted as the romantic interests of their male counterparts. Yet

Zhao Tao's character is either estranged from her male partner, as in *The World* and

Still Life, or abandoned, as in *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White*.

Similarly, male and female protagonists also separate in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo*.

Instead of being estranged or abandoned by men who recklessly pursue materialism

at the cost of losing spiritual values which Zhao Tao's characters preserve, the

situation reverses in *Tharlo* in which the female abonadons the male. Regardless of

the exact condition of separation, portrayals of gender relations in non-mainstream

films are far less harmonious and unitary than those in mainstream cinema.

Under the circumstances, if one applies the theoretical framework of gender-as-

nation to understand the idea of the nation constructed in non-mainstream films by

Jia and Wanma Caidan through gender images, the author finds a critical, two-

dimensional vision of the nation that differs from the singular vision of the nation constructed in mainstream films. As the image of woman-as-nation no longer complements but contradicts that of man-as-nation in these non-mainstream films, a singular vision of the nation constructed in mainstream cinema is challenged. The image of the broken romantic relationship between male and female characters in these non-mainstream films of the Six Generation of directors reminds one of the cinematic trope of the divided family-home in the films of the Second Generation, such as *Street Angel* (1937) and *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). Berry and Farquhar (2006, pp. 82-90) suggested that the image of the divided families in these pre-1949 films signifies a divided nation. Likewise, the picture of the broken romantic relationship in the films of the Sixth Generation can also be seen as expressing these directors' visions of the nation that is "divided". Yet in the twenty-first century of today, this nation is not divided by imperialism, war, and political party; but by the perseverance and erosion of spiritual values amid material advancements such as rapid modernisation.

Unlike the singular, predominantly positive image of the nation depicted through gender in mainstream films, these non-mainstream films presented alternative visions of the Chinese nation, a two-dimensional nation caught between modernisation and tradition, material prosperity and spiritual impoverishment. Specifically, in Jia's films, Zhao Tao's characters preserve spiritual values, whereas their male counterparts pursue material gains at the expense of spiritual well-being. Wanma Caidan's films gave voice to minority nationalities (Tibetans) within the Chinese nation, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and contributions to a

more inclusive national identity. In his *Tharlo*, the female protagonist is shown pursuing material wealth by cheating the male protagonist, Taluo. Taluo, on the contrary, his conservatism and inability to adapt to modern society/modernity lead to his suicide. Without exception, male characters, as in Jia's films, or the female protagonist, as in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo*, were depicted as losing moral integrity while embracing modernity and pursuing materialism. These portrayals of men or women losing moral integrity merge as a metaphor for the nation caught between the erosion of spiritual values amid material advancements.

Narrative Roles

More specifically, the gender images within the context of the nation in both mainstream and non-mainstream Chinese films can be seen by constructed through the narrative roles of male and female protagonists, as well as the three senses of the look upon them. The author finds that in mainstream Chinese films where male characters often occupy prominent roles as central figures driving the narrative, male protagonists often play narrative roles of soldiers/warriors/protectors, as the male warriors in *Hero*, Hua Mulan's commander Wentai in *Hua Mulan*, Major Li in *The Flowers of War*, and PLA soldier Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior 2*, PLA soldiers led by Wu Wanli in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* franchise, soldier Liu Peiqiang in *The Wandering Earth* franchise, soldier Zhang Da in *Full River Red*, PLA soldiers led by Yang Rui in *Operation Red Sea*. These male roles are all endowed with an authoritative identity the emperor or government bestows, and their actions and decision often have significant consequences for the overall image of the nation. They act as representatives of the authority, having a strong sense of responsibility towards the

territorial sovereignty and/or safety of their nation while protecting and leading the nation-people. They also often exhibit characteristics associated with traditional/Confucian conceptions of Chinese masculinity, such as physical prowess (*wu*), strategic thinking (*wen*), loyalty, and a sense of brotherhood.

On the other hand, non-mainstream films often challenge established gender norms and provide more complex and nuanced depictions of Chinese men. For example, male characters in Jia Zhangke's films are frequently portrayed as deviating from conventional masculinity ideals, prioritising material gains at the expense of moral integrity. These male protagonists (Zhao Tao's male counterparts) often play the narrative role of the entrepreneur. Examples include the businessman and gangster Qiao San in *Unknown Pleasures*, the businessman Guo Bin in *Still Life*, the successful entrepreneur, or to borrow scholars' (David S. G. Goodman, 2008; John Osburg, 2013) terminology, "China's new rich" Jinsheng (later Peter) in *Mountains May Depart*, and gangster-turned-entrepreneur Bin in *Ash Is Purest White*. In contrast to the dominant portrayal of influential and authoritative male figures in mainstream films, male characters in non-mainstream films often convey vulnerability, confusion, and alienation. This is notably exemplified in the portrayal of multiple male protagonists who assume the narrative role of the migrant worker in Jia's films, including characters like Taisheng in *The World*, Sanming in *Still Life*, Xiaohui in *A Touch of Sin*, and Liangzi in *Mountains May Depart*. Additionally, in Wanma Caidan's films, various male protagonists undertake the narrative roles of the peasant/shepherd, such as the son in *Old Dog*, Taluo in *Tharlo*, and hitchhiker Jinpa in *Jinpa*.

Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan delve deep into the complexities of the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century, providing a critical exploration of this transformative period. Their works bring to the forefront the crisis of masculinity, serving as a metaphor for the broader crisis of national identity and the intricate navigation of tensions between traditional values and modernisation. Through their thought-provoking portrayals of Chinese men that deviate from the norms of mainstream cinema, they shed light on the challenges, conflicts, and disorientations experienced by individuals and society as a whole, offering valuable insights that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the nation in this evolving era.

In mainstream films, female characters often assume supporting roles or play secondary roles to male protagonists. Their narrative roles are frequently "assistants" or "beneficiaries" to male protagonists. For example, Moon, the loyal apprentice of male warrior Broken Sword in *Hero*, Zhang Da's lover who supports him in his mission to assassinate a national traitor in *Full River Red*, and Yang Rui's only female team member who assists in his mission to evacuate Chinese citizens in *Operation Red Sea*. These portrayals of gender relations suggest that the societal role assigned to Chinese women is to support and assist Chinese men. Despite being a strong, courageous, and even manly woman like Hua Mulan, her journey to become a true warrior and national heroine relies on the support of her male commander.

In contrast, female protagonists in non-mainstream films often embody a greater sense of agency. They are portrayed as independent, strong-willed, and capable individuals who navigate their paths. This is evident in the various characters

portrayed by Zhao Tao in Jia Zhangke's films, as well as the female protagonist in Wanma Caidan's *Tharlo*. However, it is important to note that both mainstream and non-mainstream films portray female characters as active agents in the public sphere rather than confining them to the domestic realm. They serve as role models and contribute to constructing the Chinese nation in the twenty-first century. While there are notable differences between the two, the portrayal of female characters in both mainstream and non-mainstream films highlights their significance and impact beyond traditional gender norms.

Three Senses of the Look

The utilisation of cinematic techniques by independent art-house directors from the Sixth Generation plays a pivotal role in shaping and enhancing the portrayal of their female and male characters, as well as their gender relations. Filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan employ their artistic choices to craft intricate and multi-dimensional portrayals of gender, inviting a comprehensive analysis that aligns with Berry and Farquhar's framework of the three senses of the look. Through their unique approach, these directors delve into the complexities of their characters' experiences, offering a profound exploration that extends to the larger context of the nation. By intertwining the personal and the societal, they illuminate the intricate connections between gender dynamics and the broader fabric of the Chinese nation.

Within Jia Zhangke's body of work, the utilisation of the observational look emerges as a consistent and significant cinematic trope, capturing China's transformation between tradition and modernisation. This cinematic technique incorporates two

senses of the look, often positioning Zhao Tao's character within a realm of contrast that embodies the dichotomy between tradition and modernisation. This symbolic portrayal reflects the tension between socialism and postsocialism/capitalism. Jia Zhangke's meticulous focus on liminal spaces, where Zhao Tao's character is strategically placed when the camera looks at her (the second sense of the look), is heightened by her own subjective look (the third sense of the look). As a result, the narrative unfolds through her subjective look, as she observes and contemplates her surrounding environment amidst the backdrop of destruction and construction. This deliberate approach enriches the exploration of the character's perspective and contributes to a more nuanced portrayal of the transformative landscape.

In *Still Life* (2006), for instance, Zhao Tao's character, Shen Hong, is immersed in an environment marked by demolition and destruction. Through her subjective look, the spectator gains insight into the desolation of the surroundings and the lives of those who endure amidst the ruins. Similarly, in *24 City* (2008), Zhao Tao's character, Nana, finds herself within a space that juxtaposes destruction and revitalisation, and her subjective look offers a profound understanding of her environment. Through the use of the observational look, Jia Zhangke presents a multidimensional depiction of China's transformation, oscillating between the realms of tradition and modernisation. This nuanced approach captures the complexities inherent in the nation's journey of change and evolution.

It is noteworthy that in Jia Zhangke's films, only Zhao Tao's characters are associated with this observational look, while her male counterparts are not. This distinction

reflects the embrace of China's traditional legacy by the female characters, while the male characters pursue modernisation at the expense of traditional values. Thus, it is not surprising that only the female characters pause and observe their surroundings.

For example, throughout *Mountains May Depart* (2015), the camera consistently positions Zhao Tao's character, Tao, in the presence of an imposing pagoda - a symbol of tradition and permanence - across different time periods. This recurring placement of Tao within the realm of tradition, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the historical architecture, reinforces her portrayal as a woman deeply connected to and embracing China's traditional legacy. In contrast, Jia contrasts Zhao Tao's male counterpart within the realm of ultra-modernisation, symbolised by his life in modernised Australia. This deliberate juxtaposition in the settings where Zhao Tao and her male counterpart are positioned highlights the inherent contradiction between the images of the female and male protagonists. While Zhao Tao's charater embodies the preservation of traditional values, the male character is portrayed as someone who has forsaken these virtues in pursuit of modernisation.

The visual motif of the setting serves to emphasise the deep connection of Zhao Tao's character to her cultural heritage and the enduring influence of tradition on her identity. Jia Zhangke skillfully utilises his cinematic language to enrich the portrayal of his female protagonists, underscoring the profound impact of their cultural heritage on their experiences and choices. Additionally, through the observational look associated with Zhao Tao's characters, Jia Zhangke presents a nation in the midst of transformative journey between tradition and modernisation. This approach aligns

with the concept of realism in Chinese cinema, as defined by Berry & Farquhar (2006, p. 77), where the power of realism lies in its explicit links to the construction of a modern Chinese nation. Jia Zhangke's realist films, as examined in Chapter Four, exemplify this power by adeptly depicting the intricate and nuanced dynamics of social transformations through the exploration of gender in contemporary China.

Wanma Caidan, similar to Jia Zhangke, employs a distinct cinematic language to depict a nation navigating the realms of tradition and modernisation. As the observational look linked to Zhao Tao's character in Jia Zhangke's films accentuates the nation's transformative voyage, Wanma Caidan utilises deliberate composition choices in the camera's look upon his male and female protagonists (representing the second sense of the look) to amplify their power dynamics. These dynamics underscore the contrasts between a traditional shepherd/peasant estranged from the modern society and a modern barber, highlighting the tensions that arise from the coexistence of tradition and modernity.

In *Tharlo*, the framing and composition of shots featuring the male protagonist, Taluo, in the town consistently convey his marginalisation and detachment from contemporary society by positioning him on the edge of the frame. Additionally, when Taluo and the female protagonist, Yangcuo, appear together in the same frame, deliberate composition choices disrupt the balance of the camera's look upon them, visually exposing the unequal power dynamics at play. Throughout these shots, Yangcuo occupies a more central position, while Taluo is marginalised in the corner of the frame, accentuating Yangcuo's dominant role in their power dynamic. This

intentional compositional approach, favouring Yangcuo and marginalising Taluo, further underscores the tension between tradition and modernisation, as tradition is marginalised in the face of modernity. By depicting gender dynamics similar to those in *Tharlo*, Wanma Caidan skillfully portrays the intricate and nuanced dynamics of social transformations within the interplay of tradition and modernisation. In doing so, he enveils a nation that traverses the landscapes of tradition and modernisation.

Portrayals of the nation through gender by New Force Generation directors operating within the system, such as Wu Jing, lack a distinct cinematic language in comparison to independent art-house directors like Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan. These "directors within the system" primarily focus on creating mainstream blockbusters that cater to a wide audience. Their films prioritise commercial success and mass appeal, often relying on familiar and clichéd visual spectacles rather than exploring unique and nuanced cinematic techniques. This emphasis on delivering entertainment and spectacle limits the depth and complexity of gender portrayals within the context of the nation.

Furthermore, New Force Generation directors working within the system frequently opt for established genres like action (e.g., *Wolf Warrior 2*) and science fiction (e.g., *The Wandering Earth* franchise). These genres inherently prioritise action-packed narratives and high-budget visual effects, relying on established tropes and formulaic storytelling. As a result, there is limited space for exploring nuanced gender dynamics.

This lack of distinct cinematic language and artistic qualities in the films of these "directors within the system" can be attributed to the post-WTO market regime they emerge in. The prevailing emaphsis on commerce over art within the Chinese film industry in the twenty-first century has posed growing challenges in sustaining the previously established generational taxonomy. This shift also accounts for the absence of an official Seventh Generation following the Sixth Generation. The shift towards prioritising commercial appeal in mainstream films has overshadowed the pursuit of artistic merit, thereby diminishing the opportunities for exploring unique perspectives on gender and societal changes.

Cinema as a Reflection of Society

In the early twenty-first century, the image of the Chinese nation as depicted through gender in cinema reflects a dynamic interplay between various factors, including cultural traditions, societal changes, and government policies and initiatives. Cultural traditions in China, deeply rooted in Confucianism and other historical beliefs, have historically influenced gender roles and expectations. Traditional gender norms emphasised family harmony and gender hierarchy, where men held higher status and authority than women. These cultural traditions continue to influence societal perceptions and expectations of gender roles, although they are also subject to reinterpretation and change.

Mainstream films, particularly those by the Fifth and New Force Generation of directors, often depicted gender images in ways that reinforce traditional gender norms and hierarchies, perpetuating male privilege in gender relations. Male

protagonists are prominently portrayed, while women are frequently depicted as subservient and serving the needs of male characters. These films tend to mirror and preserve prevailing gender norms and power dynamics, prioritising commercial viability over challenging them.

However, Chinese society has experienced significant transformations since the establishment of the PRC. Traditional/Confucian gender norms emphasising the distinct roles of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers have historically shaped gender dynamics in Chinese society. Gender-related government policies and initiatives, particularly during the Mao/socialist era (1949-1976), challenged traditional gender roles and encouraged women's participation in the workforce for the socialist construction of the country. This shift aimed to expand women's roles in the public sphere. The lasting impact[138] of this policy can be observed in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema, where female characters are portrayed as active agents in the public space. Women's increased participation in the workforce and their role in driving economic development are highlighted as symbols of national progress.

Furthermore, societal changes such as increased education, urbanisation, and globalisation in the post-Mao era (1979-present) have contributed to evolving perceptions of gender in Chinese society. Non-mainstream films, often made by

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[138] It is worth noting that women have also encountered new pressures to conform to traditional gender roles, prioritising marriage and family over career and personal aspirations since the post-Mao era and continuing to this day (Ji Yingchun 计迎春, 2015, 2016). Concurrent with rapid economic reforms and modernisation, China has experienced a resurgence of patriarchal Confucian traditions in recent years. The revival of patriarchal norms contributed to the deminishing status of gender equality in the country.

independent Sixth Generation directors, reflected these changes by challenging traditional gender stereotypes in their narratives. These films provide alternative representations of gender, exploring themes of independence, agency, and the complexities of gender relations in contemporary China.

7.1.2 Comparative Analysis with Previous Research

By examining and contrasting gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema, encompassing both mainstream and non-mainstream films, with previous research on portrayals in twentieth-century Chinese cinema, this section aims to address the research question (RQ3) posed in the introduction chapter: In comparison to the gendered portrayals of the Chinese nation on screen in the twentieth century, are there any notable similarities and differences in the new century?

Throughout the twentieth-century Chinese cinema, male directors spanning multiple generations, from the Second to the Fifth, commonly depicted woman as symbolic representations of the nation and employed the concept of female victimisation as a critical discourse towards the nation, reflecting the struggles faced by the nation against both internal and external forces. However, in the twenty-first-century, while women continue to be portrayed as national allegories in Chinese cinema, the framework of female victimisation has given way to the portrayal of stronger and more empowered female characters, symbolising a stronger nation in the new century in comparison to the previous century. This evolution is evident in both mainstream and non-mainstream films. In non-mainstream films by directors like Jia

Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, female characters are often depicted as independent, strong, and resilient individuals. Even in mainstream films, where female characters may be less independent, they are portrayed as capable of supporting and assisting their male counterparts.

Throughout the twentieth-century Chinese cinema, the role of prostitutes or sexual objects was frequently empoyed to connect the suffering of women with the broader narrative of the nation, symbolising the oppression faced by the Chinese nation. This narrative role has been cited by Sixth Generation directors like Jia Zhangke. While the portrayals of Ruan Lingyu as a sexual object in the films of Second Generation directors and Gong Li in the films of Fifth Generation directors like Zhang Yimou depicted a nation grappling with suffering and adversity from internal and external threats, Jia's portrayal of Zhao Tao's character in *A Touch of Sin* (2013) represents a defiant and stronger nation in the twenty-first century.

This contrast in representation is encapsulated by the use of two distinct cinematic tropes: the empathetic look, employed to portray the weak and victimised images of Ruan and Gong's characters as sexual objects in the twentieth century, and the protesting look, which takes centre stage in Jia's cinematic structure and establishes the powerful image of Zhao Tao's character in the twenty-first century. While Ruan and Gong symbolise a nation facing suffering and adversity during the twentieth century, Zhao Tao, as depicted by Jia in *A Touch of Sin*, embodies a transformed and stronger nation in the twenty-first century.

Moreover, in contrast to the twentieth-century Chinese cinema, where gender portrayals underscored the privileged visibility granted to women in the context of nation-building, female characters in mainstream films of the twenty-first century often experienced invisibility, or were relegated to supporting roles. Mainstream films tended to prioritise male protagonists who assumed central roles in propelling the plot and conflict. These male protagonists were typically depicted as strong, heroic, and action-oriented. Mainstream films also highighted the nation's military and technological prowess, as well as its comprehensive national power, through the portrayals of male characters. They projected an image of China as a confident, capable, and responsible nation actively involved in international affairs, showcasing its military strength, technological advancements, and commitment to national unity and pride. This shift from featuring victimised females reflecting a struggling nation against internal and external forces in the twenty-first century to featuring powerful males reflecting China's rise as a global power in the new century illustrates the transformative nature of the nation.

While it is natural for the image of the Chinese nation to evolve and change between different eras, there are notable similarities in the portryal of gender in twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Chinese cinema. A resemblance can be observed between the depiction of gender relations in the films of the Third Generation directors and mainstream films of the twenty-first century. In the Third Generation films, female characters often faced oppression rooted in feudal and class systems but underwent a transformation into empowered communist heroines under the

guidance of male Communist Party figures. The collective representation of revolutionary heroines and their male counterparts in Third Generation cinema cultivated a portrayal of a socialist collective nation, emphasising unity and cohesion.

Similarly, mainstream films by directors operating within the system in the twenty-first century tended to depict gender relations in a harmonious manner, emphasising traditional norms within the context of the nation. Male characters in these films continue the role of saviours, mirroring the work of Third Generation directors. Both male and female characters were portrayed as complementary, highlighting the importance of gender cooperation and unity as integral aspects of a powerful and cohesive nation. Although the eras differ, the underlying themes of gender portrayal persist and contribute to the construction of the Chinese nation on screen. This also helps to explain why films from the Third Generation and mainstream films today can both be seen as contributing to the construction of the nation-state.

Another similarity in the portrayal of gender betwen twentieth-century and twenty-first-century Chinese cinema lies in the narrative role of women. Both non-mainstream films by Sixth Generation directors such as Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, and mainstream films by New Force Generation directors responsible for the highest-grossing films, depict female characters as active agents in public and professional realms. They transcend traditional domestic roles and serve as role models for the construction of the rapidly developing Chinese nation, while still potentially being married and/or having children.

This resonates with the narrative role archtype of the "daughter figure" as identified by Berry and Farquhar (2006, p. 112) in twentieth-century Chinese cinema. This archetype, established by previous generations of directors, portrays women actively engaging in the public sphere to shape the image of the nation. In contrast, the "mother figure" archetype is confined to the domestic sphere. The depiction of female characters as active participants in shaping the nation in both non-mainstream films by Sixth Generation directors and mainstream films by New Force Generation directors reflects the continued significance of the "daughter figure" narrative role model in contemporary Chinese cinema.

Moreover, a notable similarity arises in the portrayal of male characters between independent Sixth Generation directors in the twenty-first century and their predecessors from the Fourth and Fifth Generations in the twentieth century. The narrative motif of a symbolically emasculated male protagonist is referenced by Sixth Generation directors to convey thier concerns regarding the nation. The films of the Fourth and Fifth Generations featured marginalised or symbolically emasculated male characters, representing the psychological scars inflicted by a repressive social order during the Mao era. Similarly, in non-mainstream films of the twenty-first century, male characters are depicted with vulnerabilities and imperfections, grappling with a crisis of masculinity that metaphorically reflects the wider crisis of national identity and the delicate navigation of tensions between traditional values and modernisation in an era characterised by rapid transformations during the early twenty-first century.

7.2 Theoretical and Analytical Contributions to Film Studies

In doctoral research, the creation of an original contribution to knowledge is widely recognised as a crucial aspect (Denicolo, 2003; Paul Gill & Burnard, 2012). The notion of originality in doctoral research is often associated with the testing of existing idea/theory, the introduction of new knowledge, and the potential to inform the subject area, professional practice, and/or further related research (Lee, 2010; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Gill & Burnard, 2012; Gill & Dolan, 2015). This section aims to demonstrate the original contribution to knowledge made by this research/thesis.

Firstly, while scholars such as Shuqin Cui (2003) and Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006) have explored the interplay between gender portrayals and the construction of the national image in twentieth-century Chinese cinema, the relationship between gender and the nation in the twenty-first century, as depicted by newer generations of directors like the Sixth and New Force Generation directors, remains unexplored. This research contributes new insights into how contemporary directors portray the nation through gender in twenty-first-century Chinese cinema.

Secondly, previous studies have often focused exclusively on one gender, either women or men, when examining the intricate relationship between gender and the nation. In contrast, this study seeks to examine both women and men simultaneously, recognising their interplay and exploring their respective roles in representing the Chinese nation. It proposes the theoretical framework of gender-as-nation, which provides a comprehensive lens for understanding this interrelationship in cinema.

Thirdly, while Berry and Farquhar (2006) proposed an analytic framework for analysing the portrayal of female characters and their significance to the nation in Chinese cinema, encompassing the "narrative role" and the "three senses of the look", this research expands upon their framework and applies it to the examination of male characters and their significance to the nation. This expansion enables a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate connection between gender, incorporating both female and male characters and their gender relations, and national identity on the Chinese screen.

Fourthly, the theoretical framework and analytic grounding employed in this research focus on Chinese cinema but hold the potential to inform further research on the intersections of gender and nation in cinema beyond Chinese context, encompassing other national cinemas as well. Therefore, by contributing to knowledge in these four areas, this research aims to make original contributions to the field of Chinese film studies as well as the broader field of film studies.

While the previous section highlighted the significance of this research in terms of the author's specific findings, this section underscores its broader importance within the field of film studies, particularly within the context of Chinese film studies. It aims to demonstrate the academic significance of the thesis by showcasing its contributions to the theoretical framework and analytic grounding. By introducing the gender-as-nation theoretical framework and incorporating an analytic approach inspired by Berry and Farquhar's (2006) work, this research expands one's

understanding of the intricate interplay between gender and national identity in Chinese cinema.

Moreover, the theoretical framework and analytic grounding proposed in this thesis have the potential for broader applications in film studies, allowing scholars and researchers to explore similar intersections of gender and national identity in other national cinemas. Additionally, while the primary focus of the theoretical framework and analytic grounding is on Chinese films directed by men, they serve as a valuable foundation for examining gender portrayals and their relationship to national identity in films crafted by women. This expanded scope opens up avenues for comprehensive research and comparative analysis across different cultural contexts and cinematic traditions.

7.2.1 Academic Significance: Gender-as-Nation Theoretical Framework and Analytic Grounding

To grasp the intricate relationship between gender and the nation on screen, the author has uniquely developed the theoretical framework of "gender-as-nation". This framework considers women and men, their gender roles, power dynamics, and their gendered social and cultural experiences in Chinese cinema, not only as individual characters but also as symbolic representations that shed light on the characteristics, virtues, and challenges associated with the nation. Throughout the preceding chapters of this thesis, numerous examples have been provided to illustrate how the experiences of women and men in films symbolically represent the experiences of the nation during their respective time periods.

In the context of this thesis, male and female protagonists, their gender roles, as well as their gendered social and cultural experiences within Chinese cinema, are scrutinised and evaluated through the narrative roles of these protagonists and the three senses of the look they convey. Specifically, the exploration of these three senses of the look, which these men and women often engage in within their gender relations, enriches their respective narrative roles. This process of enrichment signifies the symbolic representation of their gender roles and gender dynamics in society. Collectively, the personal gender experiences of male and female protagonists in film serve as symbolic representations that illuminate the collective national experiences, encapsulating the essence of "gender-as-nation".

The gender-as-nation theoretical framework proposed in this thesis carries substantial academic value in the field of Chinese film studies. It provides a valuable framework through which to examine the representation of the nation in Chinese cinema from a gender perspective. By introducing the concept of gender-as-nation, this framework offers a fresh and inclusive approach to understanding the portrayal of gender and its relationship to national identity, going beyond existing frameworks such as woman-as-nation and man-as-nation. Through the integration and expansion of these separate frameworks, the gender-as-nation approach emphasises the nuanced connections between both genders, encompassing gender dynamics and their respective roles in cinematic depictions of the Chinese nation. This inclusive framework considers the representation of women, men, and the intricate interplay of gender dynamics, offering valuable insights into the intricate connections between gender and national identity in cinematic narratives.

The academic significance of the gender-as-nation theoretical framework lies in its capacity to enhance one's understanding of how gender functions as a crucial element in shaping the portrayal of the nation in Chinese cinema. By broadening the scope of inquiry and shedding light on the influence of gender dynamics in the depiction of national identity in cinema, the gender-as-nation framework offers a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted aspects of gender representation within the context of the nation. It deepens one's understanding of the complexities and nuances of gender representation, enriching the discourse on the intersection of gender and the nation in the realm of cinema. This framework not only contributes to the analysis of Chinese cinema but also offers valuable insights for scholars and researchers interested in exploring the intersections of gender, national identity, and cinematic representation in other national cinemas.

Furthermore, in alignment with the gender-as-nation theoretical framework, this thesis integrates a relevant analytic grounding derived from Berry and Farquhar's (2006) research. Their framework primarily focuses on the portrayal of women and their significance for the nation, analysing their narrative roles and the cinematic tropes associated with their representation, specifically centred around what they term the three senses of the look: the woman's appearance, the camera's look upon her, and her subjective look. However, this framework does not directly address the portrayal of Chinese men and their relationship to the nation.

Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging that this analytic grounding can be adapted and expanded to analyse the depiction of Chinese men in relation to the nation. By broadening the scope of inquiry beyond the confines of woman-as-nation, this expansion encompasses the portrayal of gender, including women, men, and the dynamics between them, exploring their significance for the nation.

Particularly, when analysing the portrayal of female characters within the cinematic system of the three senses of the look, it inherently entails exploring their interactions with their male counterparts. By considering the woman's subjective look as she looks upon others and the world, it becomes evident that in scenes of interactions between the woman and her male counterpart, this third sense of the look can also be perceived as a reverse shot of the camera's look upon the man, aligning with the second sense of the look. In such instances, the shot-reverse-shot structure, incorporating the second and third senses of the look, serves as a potent cinematic device, encapsulating the intricate dynamics and relationships between male and female characters.

Therefore, it is important to note that Berry and Farquhar's analytic grounding can be adapted or expanded upon to analyse the image of Chinese men in relation to the nation. By considering the narrative roles of male characters, who often serve as the male counterparts to the female characters, and their interactions with the three senses of the look, a parallel framework can potentially be developed to explore the portrayal of Chinese men in cinematic representations of the nation. Within this

framework, the three senses of the look encompass the man's appearance, the camera's look upon the man, and his subjective look.

This new analytic grounding proposed facilitates a comprehensive examination of both genders, recognising the simultaneous analysis of female characters and their male counterparts. By examining these interconnected dynamics, a more holistic understanding of the relationships between female and male characters is achieved, enhancing the significance of the original framework and expanding the scope of gender analysis beyond female characters.

Additionally, the application of this analytic framework serves as a catalyst for engaging discussions about the nuanced portrayal of gender and its interconnectedness with broader power dynamics between men and women in society. The analysis of the cinematic trope of the look unveils its influential role in shaping gender representation and its intricate relationship with societal constructs. By strategically utilising the look, cinematic works actively contribute to social reality, holding the potential to either reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics.

In summary, the gender-as-nation theoretical framework, in conjunction with the analytic grounding inspired by Berry and Farquhar's research, makes a substantial contribution to the academic comprehension of the interplay between gender and the portrayal of the nation in Chinese cinema. This framework not only enhances the analysis of Chinese cinema but also provides valuable insights for scholars and

researchers exploring the intersection of gender, national identity, and cinematic portrayal in other national cinemas.

7.2.2 Further Applications

Scholars such as Dai Jinhua (1995), Wendy Larson (1997, pp. 331-46; 2017), Yi Zheng (1997, pp. 347-60), and Cui (1997, pp. 303-29; 2003; 2012, p. 499) perceptively demonstrated that male filmmakers of the Fourth and Fifth Generation often placed the burden of Chinese history and modernity onto the shoulders of Chinese women. However, the emergence of women directors in the Fourth Generation brought about a significant shift. These women directors, when exploring themes of love, marriage, and career, chose to emphasise female experiences from a female perspective, delving into the psychological complexities of their female characters rather than solely focusing on the social implications of the issues at hand (Cui, 2003, pp. 184-5; Zhang, 2004, p. 233).

The contrast between male and female directors in their portrayal of women and gender on screen warrants contemplation. Women directors of the Fourth and Fifth Generation, having established themselves in a predominantly male-dominated Chinese film industry, diverged from their male counterparts by emphasising female subjectivity from a female point of view (Dai, 1995, pp. 276-8; Yau, 1997, p. 703; Cui, 2003, p. 185; Zhang, 2004, p. 233). Films such as *Sacrificed Youth*[139] (*Qingchun ji* 青

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[139] Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* explores the journey of a young Han urban woman who gains a recognition of her own gender identity within the historical context of the Cultural Revolution while working in a Dai minority nationality region. The use of voice-over and the psychological dimension added to the film contribute to its exploration of female identity.

春祭, 1985) and *Woman Demon Human*[140] (*Ren gui qing* 人鬼情, 1987) by Fourth Generation directors Zhang Nuanxin and Huang Shuqin respectively, as well as *Army Nurse* (*Nu'er lou* 女儿楼, 1985) and *Blush* (*Hong fen* 红粉, 1995) by Fifth Generation directors Hu Mei and Li Shaohong respectively exemplify this focus on female subjectivity and desire, effectively articulating a distinct female voice and perspective.

While the theoretical framework and analytic grounding developed in this research primarily focus on Chinese films directed by men, they offer a valuable foundation for examining gender portrayals and their connection to national identity in films created by female filmmakers. A notable example is the work of Yang Lina 杨荔钠, a representative of active female directors in the male-dominated industry and an independent Six Generation director. Exploring Yang Lina's films provides an opportunity to delve into how women directors bring a unique perspective and voice to their film practices, challenging prevailing gender dynamics. Comparing her portrayal of gender and its significance to the nation with that of her male counterparts, such as Jia Zhangke and Wanma Caidan, sheds light on the diverse approaches to gender representation within Chinese cinema.

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[140] Similarly, Huang Shuqin's *Woman Human Demon* presents the female protagonist, Qiuyun, an opera actress who experiences confusion regarding her own gender identity. Qiuyun's relationships with men in her life highlight their weaknesses, while her portrayal of a male role on stage becomes a source of strength and recognition.

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