

Indigenous Feminist Frameworks: Cultural and Historical Trajectories of Chinese Women's Cinema

Huiqiang Dong¹²

¹*College of General Education, Shandong University of Arts, Ji'nan, China*

²*Department of Comparative Literature, Binghamton University SUNY, Binghamton, USA
hdong6@binghamton.edu*

Abstract. This paper takes the notion of “indigenouness” (or “endogenousness”) as a point of departure to examine the cultural and historical trajectory and theoretical construction of Chinese women's cinema within its distinct cultural context. Unlike Western feminist cinema, which is often framed around well-defined theoretical concepts such as the “male gaze” and “gender oppression,” Chinese women's cinema bears the deep imprint of China's unique historical and cultural conditions, familial structures, processes of social transformation, identity formation, and, crucially, the emergence of female self-awareness shaped by these intersecting forces. By tracing the development of Chinese women's cinema, this study outlines the construction of a uniquely primordial form of female subjectivity—one that is deeply rooted in the indigenous cultural and historical conditions—and explores the distinctive cinematic strategies through which this subjectivity is expressed. The analysis highlights how Chinese women's cinema articulates a culturally embedded female consciousness through its original and context-specific narrative forms.

Keywords: Chinese women's cinema, indigenouness, high culture embeddedness, gender narrative, female subjectivity

1. Introduction

While Western feminist cinema often centers around systematically developed theories such as the “male gaze” [1] and “gender oppression” [2], the trajectory of Chinese women's cinema is deeply embedded within localized historical gender narratives, national politics, transformations in family structures amidst societal changes, and evolving individual identities. Accordingly, Chinese women's cinema exhibits a distinctive indigenous construction of female subjectivity and narrative characteristics.

The word “indigenouness” refers explicitly to an internally generated localization. Within the context of women's cinema, this implies unique modes of expression arising inherently from China's distinctive historical culture and social progression—particularly reflected in female cultural psychology, gender relations, family ethics, and identity quests. The articulation and representation of female subjectivity in various stages of Chinese women's cinema thus embody historical, cultural, and social complexities and multiplicities that carry indigenous significance.

Therefore, this paper adopts “indigenouness” theory as its central analytical framework, examining the developmental trajectories and theoretical implications of indigenouness within the fluid evolution of Chinese women’s cinema.

2. Defining indigenouness theory

Unlike Western feminist cinema, which possesses clearly defined and extensively theorized frameworks, Chinese women’s cinema is predominantly constructed upon culturally indigenous or endogenous dynamics, here referred to as “indigenouness”. More specifically, it is challenging to trace a systematic theoretical framework in Chinese women’s cinema; rather, its significance resides primarily in an inheritance and reflexivity grounded in deep-seated cultural traditions, coupled with multifaceted and complex breakthroughs and explorations arising from social transformation. This approach results in narratives that closely reflect the authentic conditions of women’s experiences and poignantly articulate their existential struggles. However, this does not imply an inability to critically examine and analyze Chinese women’s cinema from theoretical perspectives; indeed, the approach offers valuable insights and references for the ongoing theoretical enrichment and practical development of Chinese women’s cinema in the future.

This paper synthesizes existing definitions of women’s cinema, with a particular focus on female subjectivity and the ways in which this subjectivity is cinematically expressed. Building on this foundation, it traces the theoretical framework of “indigenouness” in Chinese women’s cinema, which manifests in two key dimensions: first, the cultural embeddedness of Chinese women’s cinema, shaped by traditional ethical structures, familial culture, and classical aesthetics; second, the political functionality of female subject narratives within these films. While these characteristics may differ from the comprehensive and systematic theoretical frameworks found in Western feminist cinema, they offer a distinct aesthetic dimension that is uniquely rooted in the Chinese cultural and historical context.

3. Cultural embeddedness of female subject narratives in Chinese women’s cinema

3.1. The concept of high culture embeddedness

The concept of “high culture” originates from critical debates in Western cultural studies surrounding the binary between “high” and “popular” culture [3] [4]. Such discussions foreground the aesthetic hierarchies and symbolic power relations at play in cultural work. Within the framework of Chinese women’s cinema, “high culture embeddedness” refers to a conscious aesthetic practice where filmmakers purposefully access traditional Chinese cultural resources and literati aesthetics—encompassing poetic imagery, symbolic structure, negative space, classical rhetoric, and philosophical narrative modes. These films thus have a remarkable culture density visible in both visual and linguistic terms. Most importantly, this approach helps filmmakers to dodge the broad prescriptive limits of representing women’s experience, putting in their place a kind of narrative logic of metaphor and indirection.

The embedded mode of expression is based on specific historical and cultural conditions. Classical Chinese literature and performance traditions have long been infused in rich cultural motif rooted in female emotion, desire, destiny, and sacrifice. Examples include Lin Daiyu’s sorrow and tears in *Dream of Red Mansions*, Du Liniang’s dream-like passion and dilemma between life and death in *The Peony Pavilion*, and the spiritualized embodiment and the use of claustrophobic spatial imagery in works such as *Qiangtou Mashang* (*On the Wall, on the Horseback*) and *A Chinese Ghost*

Story. These cultural texts enrich the narrative resources of Chinese women's cinema, and create the space for the active construction of a broad range of modes of female subjectivity and narrative strategy. Meanwhile, Chinese social organization has traditionally been dominated by the family as the basic unit. Within this regime, Confucian norms have historically prescribed relations between people, and informed and constrained behavior between individuals within the household as well. The system of morality, which is internal-oriented, can be seen reflected in the social identity of women in relations with familial roles and spatial belonging. As a result, Chinese women's cinema has evolved a unique aesthetic orientation towards domestic space—kitchens, courtyards, bedrooms, windowsills, thresholds—as visual containers for the transmission of female feelings and the formation of gendered self-identity. And in this introverted social formation, the feminine subject rarely presents herself in the face of overt confrontations. Instead, for women, conflict is provoked silently, repeated in space, moved round and embodied in rituals. These introverted lyrical discourses do not mark passive subjugation to tradition, but express gendered experience through mediating aesthetic forms of opposition and emotion.

3.2. Narrative analysis of high culture embeddedness in *Buddha Mountain*

Directed by Yu Li, *Buddha Mountain* (Guanyin Shan, 2011) stands as a representative example of Chinese women's cinema characterized by high culture embeddedness. The film weaves a culturally rooted and indigenous narrative logic through its spatial configuration, character relationships, emotional expression, and the symbolic resonance of its cultural signifiers. These elements collectively articulate a distinctly female subjectivity and perspective, rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics and social imaginary.

First of all, in terms of spatial belongings, *Buddha Mountain* uses a decaying town and an aging house to construct a highly introverted spatial structure within the traditional Chinese social organization. The main events of the film take place mainly in the old house lived in by the character played by Sylvia Chang, who stands in as a symbolic 'mother'. The spatial layout of the old house clearly inherits the traditional family structure: atrium, bedroom, kitchen, Buddhist shrine, etc. Together, these elements form a nostalgic, closed and gendered domestic space saturated with cultural memory and feminine affect. The spatial context does not only serve as an environmental backdrop, but a sediment and constraint of emotion, reinforcing the inscribed female experience in domestic confinement. According to Giuliana Bruno's elaboration on how interior spaces are imbued with emotional significance, interior space becomes the topography of emotions and a room may become the architecture of longing [5]. In the case of the mute girl Nan Feng from *Buddha Mountain*, the home is no longer simply shelter but forms an affective topography, where identity is reconstituted against the backdrop of trauma and dislocation. In this way, the rooms of the old house become a map of the heart, a space where loss and displacement struggle, even if silently, to be turned into something structured and restorative.

Second, the film's interpersonal relations are also structured by a Confucian-inflected ethic of maternal duty. The figure of Sylvia Chang performs this role of the maternal not by way of words of authority or the conveyance of morals but through silent suffering, emotion held in check, and the maintenance of domestic order. The labor she does taking care of them—cooking, tending the Buddhist altar, orchestrating household rhythms—forms a symbolic and emotional infrastructure that substitutes affective work for hierarchical power. These are the acts that she does in order to both protect and orient the two conflict-ridden youths she looks after. This mother-figure also fits neatly within Chinese "prescriptive" beliefs about women as emotional linchpins of the family, as the moral "spines" of the family, ethicized through the gendered principle of "dominant inside and

subordinate outside” (nèi zhǔ wài cóng) and the Confucian ideal of balance and harmony through quiet moral presence.

On this basis, emotional female expression in *Buddha Mountain* lacks explicit confrontation and external resistance. Nan Feng is not a speaking negative; it is a negative embodied—fleeing, touching, weeping, watching. The film bears ample silence shed on her, not as a mere reflection of a (broken) state of mind, but also a kind of soft resistance against normative ordering of the exterior world. Ensuring a nuanced reproduction of the female emotion, the film makes use of a minimal visual style—with muted color schemes, largely boxed-in frames, and fixed shots. This aesthetic orientation privileges body-watching over voice-listening and trains the viewer on the affective streams mediated by bodily motion and spatial presence. This physicalised mode of expressing emotion resonates with Chinese affective aesthetics in which ‘deep feelings are often left unspoken’ (qíng shēn bù yán) and grief is ‘mournful but not wrathful’ (āi ér bù nù). Here, the body becomes the primary medium of emotional articulation, offering a gendered, culturally embedded alternative to discursive or verbal forms of agency.

In addition, the film also uses a large number of traditional cultural symbols to construct situations, such as Guanyin statues, incense, mountains, roof tiles, mirrors, etc. These cultural symbols are not only the reproduction of cultural images, but also become cultural containers for female characters to rebuild relationships and memories. In fact, *Buddha Mountain* is a title replete with religious associations that imply healing, mercy and spiritual contemplation (Buddha, literally in Chinese, Guanyin—the Bodhisattva of Compassion). At the same time, it functions as a poetic space which contains the emotional affect and the cultural identity. In this semiotic arena, the retreat outward into social flight and the turn inward for self-cure converge on a common structure of meaning and metaphor. Noiselessly through the sanctuary of the Buddha (or Guanyin) Mountain, Nan Feng is haunted by a spatial ethics that accommodates her reintegration into a familial, emotional order, spatially reinserting her from social exile into belonging.

By doing so, *Buddha Mountain* consciously shuns any explicit gendered political-critical lexicon. Rather, it builds a submerged narrative logic of female subjectivity by spatial belonging, ethical mission, embodied expression, and culturally resonant symbolism. It is this logic of seeking flexible reconstruction in traditional structures, this silent but powerful embedded structure, that allows Chinese women’s films to show their unique originality, the indigenesness.

These image structures and character constructions, rich in cultural metaphor, frequently function as oblique modes of expression for the female subject when open articulation is closed down. In contexts of stricture and inarticulacy, such culturally embedded tactics serve to create, covertly and deeply, a forum for political speech. Thus, cultural embeddedness emerges as a strategic site of entry through which women articulate alternatives in their struggle for self-expression within structural oppression. In the end this cultural strategy points to a modest and profound political functioning—a functioning that questions how subjectivity is profoundly encoded by social institutions and power. By staging a series of ethical conundrums, linguistic breakdowns, and emotional shattering in the female subject, the film imagines a subtle but compelling critique of the systems of control that govern gendered life. It is in this dialogue between the unspoken and the symbolic, the affective and the structural, that Chinese women’s cinema speaks with its native accent.

4. The political functionality of female subject narratives in Chinese women’s cinema

4.1. The political functionality of female subject narratives

In the Chinese context, women's cinema does not merely center on individual gendered experience; rather, it remains deeply entangled with structures of national, social, and cultural power. This entanglement endows female subject narratives with an inherently political functionality. Such political valence is not only evident in the thematic content of these films, but is also deeply embedded in their narrative forms and ethical expressions.

4.1.1. Political embeddedness of narrative content

In Chinese women's cinema, the very act of "narrating women" constitutes an entry into the political field of discourse. A woman's voice, body, and emotional presence on screen are not neutral depictions but sites of negotiation—between female self-expression and the demands of national narratives, familial ethics, and social order. In recounting their personal life experiences, female characters simultaneously articulate the fractures and contradictions inherent within broader social structures. The personal thus becomes political, as each narrative gesture reveals tensions between the individual and the collective, the intimate and the institutional.

4.1.2. Narrative structure as political strategy

Narrative strategies commonly found in Chinese women's cinema—such as fragmentation, non-linearity, temporal delay, and ellipsis—are not merely aesthetic choices rooted in traditional Chinese cultural sensibilities. Rather, they serve as deeper modes of expressing the lived realities of dislocated identities, emotional rupture, and linguistic repression experienced by women in contemporary society.

These narrative forms function as structural resistance to the dominant discursive logic of mainstream cinema. By disrupting linearity and coherence, they challenge hegemonic temporalities and singular perspectives, articulating a politics of form that resists normative frameworks of power and representation. In this way, the aesthetic form itself becomes a mode of counter-hegemonic critique, offering a cinematic language through which women's experiences—often silenced or marginalized—are rendered visible, affective, and politically resonant.

4.1.3. Ethical expression in a cultural context

In the Chinese cultural context, ethics are not merely personal virtues or moral codes, but are deeply embedded within broader structures of power and social order. As a result, the ethical subjectivities ascribed to women—those of filial piety, tolerance, and self-sacrifice—are not merely the stuff of private moral virtue; they serve institutionalized social purposes governed by structures of hierarchical authority. The location of female subjectivity in Chinese women's cinema may thus lie at the conjuncture of a range of power regimes: the state, the family, and wider society. In such a configuration, women seldom emerge as distinctly identifiable subjects with assertive subject positions. Instead, they are often presented in narrative states of contradiction, hesitancy, and at times, silence. Dale Spender explores the theme that women's silence is not due to a lack of language but stems from the ways language has been constructed to marginalize and exclude them [6]. Such narrative formations manifest the material reality of structural oppression; they are not efforts to articulate a coherent, coherent self so much as they are forceful absences, ruptures, breakages, that give rise to the emotional experiences that cannot entirely be contained within the prevailing discursive structures. And in the process—often unwittingly—they become affective

vessels of historical trauma and ethical disorientation, bringing to light what is rendered unspeakable within the history of hegemonic representation.

The political operations of female subject narratives in Chinese women's cinema can therefore be seen to unfold in terms of practices of negotiation, resistance and reconfiguration in relation to forms of power and knowledge. Following this interactivity a sense of indigenous expression is produced, one which is specifically rooted into the historical, social and ethical arrangements characterizing Chinese culture. As a mode of expression through which women's cinema functions as more than simply a gender-conscious product, but as a visual rendering of national history, social governance, and politics of feeling. And it is in this conjunction that Chinese women's cinema finds its most trenchant and unique cultural aspect.

4.2. The political functionality of female subject narratives in *Spring Tide*

Lina Yang's *Spring Tide* (2019), set in a home that belongs to three generations of women, reveals multilayered structural pressures women suffer from home to outside in a narrative of rhythms of coexistence and the emotional tension accumulations. Hao Dongmei is a triple identity bearer as a journalist, daughter, and mother. This identity formation, viewed from the outside, may seem done and finished, though torn apart by inner contradictions and emotional denudation. These positions devour and upend each other, creating a complex entanglement of generational warfare and identity trauma.

In her relationship with her mother, Hao Dongmei is trapped in a double impasse of structural power and inter-generational feeling. Her mother, who adopts "the morality stance" and models herself as "the sacrificing figure" repeatedly uses sayings like "I did this for your good" and "you should be filial" as rhetorical devices to erase the independence of the subjectivity of Hao Dongmei. This is not about maternal empathy or concern, but about the transmission of emotional mechanisms of control and ethical formation by way of power. Under these circumstances, maternal power takes the form of legitimate moral pressure. As a representative of the modern female consciousness, Hao Dongmei is trying to break away from these regulating and immoralizing mechanism. Yet she is thwarted in her endeavors; she has no real channel to claim her subjectivity. This distorted inter-generational relationship cannot be solely attributed to an individual misunderstanding within the private realm. Instead, it betrays a more profound generational rupture created by the convergent forces of national history, social ideology, and family structure.

As a mother, Hao Dongmei is caught in an inherited repression and emotional fragmentation with her daughter. Unwittingly, she passes on her own unmet expectations and unresolved emotional wounds to the next generation, unconsciously replicating her mother's oppressive methods, which makes her feel both guilty and powerless. As a figure of the tri-generational structure, Hao Dongmei is in-between, she is unable to achieve emotional separation from the older generation, nor reach meaningful emotional understanding with the young generation. Her subjectivity is estranging and estranged in a zone of inter-generational limbo, tinged with emotion and dulled by morality.

Hao Dongmei's professional identity as a journalist ostensibly positions her as a speaker of truth and a conduit of justice. In the public sphere, she possesses the capacity to expose social problems and confront structures of power and violence. Yet within the domestic sphere, she is thoroughly stripped of agency—rendered silent and repressed in the face of inter-generational conflict. This sharp contrast of speech and silence in the public/private presentation of her identity increases her mental disintegration: even if women gain a voice in the public discourse system, they still have to face the reconstruction and weakening of their identity by traditional ethics when they return to their families. The disassociation between Hao Dongmei's public empowerment and her private dis-

empowerment in the *Spring Tide* discloses the historical contradiction between gendered subjectivity and domestic patriarchal formations.

These interwoven duties are what underpin the complex political functionality of female subject narrative in *Spring Tide*, a role that places Hao Dongmei as the paragon of one who is subjugated to absorb and to control emotional pressure—the pressured mediator of affect within an oppressive system. Her ongoing nightmare of drowning and submersion, as well as her hallucination of flooding within the lounge, act as the irrational yet affectively loaded image—the unreasonable quintessence of a long withheld emotion.

Through narrative techniques of non-linear temporal frames, fractured sound and language fragmentation the film translates the inexpressible psychological pain as an emotionally tangible weight for the spectator. These formal mechanisms make apparent the irreducible matter which language alone cannot support, and build a distinctly Chinese filmic expression marked by a systematized repression. In this way, *Spring Tide* illustrates how women's cinema is capable of expressing trauma, dislocation and resistance not by making it explicit in discourse, but in an aesthetic of interruption, a poetics of the silenced pain.

Therefore, the female subjectivity constructed in *Spring Tide* does not follow a explicit linear paradigm of “self-expression” or “female awakening.” Instead, it takes the form of a polyphonic structure, suspended between ethical recursive entrapment, linguistic breakdown, and the burdens of identity. The female voice is suppressed, displaced, and misunderstood—but not absent. As Dori Laub observes that the body carries what the voice cannot utter [7]. This mode of representation brings to light the micro-politics embedded in women's everyday lives, offering a critical lens through which to perceive the invisible operations of larger structures of oppression. Through this narrative architecture, *Spring Tide* emerges as a paradigmatic case of the political functionality of Chinese women's cinema: it does not speak of power, yet each operation of power is felt viscerally; it does not explicitly name the system, yet every emotional collapse lays bare the system's depths. In this way, the film performs a quiet yet forceful critique—one where affect becomes testimony, and silence becomes the medium of resistance.

5. Conclusion

The “indigenouslyness” of Chinese women's cinema manifests as a localized articulation of female experience—one that is deeply rooted in the social structures and cultural context of China. This paper has explored how such indigenous expression emerges through two key dimensions: the embeddedness of high culture and the political functionality of female subject narratives. These films engage in multi-layered negotiations—esthetic, structural, and affective—thereby constructing a distinctive logic of expression that diverges from imported feminist paradigms.

The female subjects in these narratives assume the role of emotional and ethical metabolizers, bearing the weight of social structures, historical traumas, and moral expectations in states of silence, repression, and fracture. Through non-verbal strategies such as silence, dream imagery, and bodily dislocation (where the body is present but unable to express itself coherently), these women enact a non-linguistic mode of political expression: rendering visible and sensible experiences that cannot be fully spoken. Therefore, Chinese women's film offers an embodied aesthetics of resistance and testimony unique to the Chinese cinematic landscape: capturing the marginalized women's experiences in the gaps between cultural repression and historical dislocation (the dislocation between women and mainstream socio-historical narratives), and endowing them with emotional depth and narrative space, as well as strong emotional tension and narrative power.

References

- [1] Mulvey, L.(1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- [2] Kaplan, E. A. (1983). *Women and film: Both sides of the camera*. Routledge.
- [3] Arnold, M. (1896). *Culture and anarchy: An essay in political and social criticism*. Smith, Elder & Co.
- [4] Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society, 1780–1950*. Columbia University Press.
- [5] Bruno, G. (2002). *Atlas of emotion: Journeys in art, architecture, and film*. Verso.
- [6] Spender, D. (1980). *Man made language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- [7] Laub, D., & Felman, S. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Routledge.