

A Study of Chinese Women Directors' Creative Practice — With a Focus on Shao Yihui's Films

Tse Yan Sik

St Stephen's College, Delhi, India
yansiktse25@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper contextualizes Shao Yihui's recent works within the evolving framework of feminist film theory, examining how her cinematic practice constitutes both a theoretical intervention and a formal revolution. Through close analysis of *Love Myth* (2021) and *Her Story* (2024), this study demonstrates how Shao's directorial efforts fashion complex female subjectivities while systematically challenging patriarchal narrative conventions. Her achievement lies not in merely applying feminist theory to cinematic content, but in generating what might be termed an "immanent critique"—working through innovation from within cinematic form itself, rather than external criticism that raises the problem of form. This paper explores in particular Shao's soundscape, narrative and spatial manipulation to emerge from the conception of space, structure and spatial dynamism. The "feminist formal language" that reconfigures the bond between characters within these films and their cinematic environment. More specifically, by comparing Shao's construction to the gender politics in box office hit animated film *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea*, this discussion illustrates how the problems of patriarchal representation remain while highlighting Shao's unique role in the making of what can be interpreted as "feminine gaze" in the Chinese cinema of today. The paper examines how digital counterpublics are challenging what feminist discourse can look like in China's rapidly evolving media ecology.

Keywords: feminist film theory, Shao Yihui, male gaze, female subjectivity, Chinese cinema

1. Introduction

The depiction of women in international cinema underwent significant changes during the last few decades. From the 1970s to today, they were subjected to a tortuous evolution—from the backlash against gender representation in classic Hollywood cinema to the development of alternative film aesthetics by women filmmakers. Since then, feminist film theory has moved from gender criticism to the localization and theoretical reproduction of feminist perspectives.

Gender inequality and the patriarchy remain huge problems in the film industry. The narrative throughout and the process of film production exhibit control towards women. Female actors, female directors, even the female audiences are always sidelined. In such a context, women filmmakers have been energetically reconstructing these imaginaries by constructing alternative images of women that rise above the binary frameworks of empowerment and dependency. The

increasing visibility of female directors has also profoundly brought change in both the portrayal of women and the aesthetics of film itself. With the creative practices of female directors in recent decades, a tension-filled space for dialogue has emerged.

The new generation of female directors represented by Shao Yihui, together with feminist films, constitutes both a new theoretical exploration and a localized practice of feminist film theory in the current context of China's new media. This paper situates Shao Yihui's films within the framework of feminist film theory, taking *Love Myth* (2021) and *Her Story* (2024) as examples, and raises the following questions: First, in Shao Yihui's films, as the female image is constructed and expressed, how does the film discourse achieve this construction and expression? Second, how do the portrayals of female images and female relationships in her films embody or enrich the themes of feminist film theory? Third, what is the difference between female and male directors in their approaches to gender? Through these inquiries, this paper aims to explore the profound social implications of Shao Yihui's cinema art.

2. Feminist film studies: female images in two dimensions

The development of feminist film theory is of great significance for our understanding of the connotations of the works of Chinese female directors. The "Male Gaze" proposed by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* reveals how women are the "objects being gazed upon" in mainstream cinema, through which cinema constitutes a technology of gender [1]. Mulvey argues that narrative and visual structures function to sustain the power of the gaze. She identifies three types of gazes operating within film viewing: the camera's gaze, the male character's gaze, and the audience's gaze that is positioned to give continuity with the look at women. Through this lens, gaze upon women objectifying functions to legitimate male-led heterosexual relations and deny sexuality that does not fit into the patriarchal model.

But Mulvey's gaze is not universally accepted as theory. Doane advanced the masquerade theory of female subjectivity, which posited that women's identities can only be created through the put-on of tropes and cliché. Viewers engage with male gaze at a psychological distance [2]. Claire Johnston believes that mainstream cinema should be subverted through the conscious use of art as "counter-cinema" [3]. Counter-cinema was, for Johnston in her proposal, a "deconstructive" cinema in which sexist ideology was made apparent, and where female artists could explore feminist expression. All these theories provide crucial lens through which to view women's films.

Notably, feminist cinema also has long tradition in national culture and history. It is also important to note that feminist cinema also has deep roots in local culture and history. In the Chinese context, Dai Jinhua believes that Chinese feminism has a kind of "locality": it echoes both the global wave of feminism and the cultural and social realities of China [4]. For our understanding of a group of new female film directors, including Shao Yihui, it is important to connect it with the global feminist movement while not ignoring the specificity of Chinese realities.

3. Author's style and narrative innovation: aesthetic breakthroughs in Shao Yihui's films

Shao Yihui, though only directed two films so far, has developed her own style in filmmaking. Her films have transcended the technical expression which works around narrative, structure, and theme, and have formed a unique feminist film aesthetic with her own characteristics.

In terms of audio-video language, sounds and dialogue are extensively used in Shao's film scripts, maintaining the freshness of improvisation on the one hand and pursuing the rigor of words on the other. In *Her Story*, the 2 minutes and 30 seconds of sound construct the motherhood experience

from the perspective of children through intertextuality between a microcosm of everyday family life (cooking, fetching, vacuuming) and a microcosm of nature (wind and rain, pandas eating bamboo, tornadoes). The artistic interplay discovers the poetics in the everyday. The narrative of the sound expands the space of narrative, allowing the female experience to reappear at the center of the cinema stage.

In terms of structure, Shao Yihui applies the genre of mumblecore, an independent film subgenre characterized by low budgets, naturalistic acting, and dialogue-heavy, plot-light narratives that focus on the romantic and personal relationships of young adults. Addressing the local complexities of Chinese society, Shao's movies keep a close eye on the life of Chinese youth, particularly those in big cities. The "unconditional surrender" of Xiao Ye and the band in *Her Story* embodies typical mumblecore traits, but the entire narrative is placed within a highly structured script framework. This stylistic approach enables her works to embody life's fluidity with intellectual depth.

The space narrative of Shao Yihui also embodies the maturity of her authorial consciousness. Her understanding of Shanghai has shifted from that of "a city of charm" to "a place of survival." In *Love Myth*, Shanghai is populated with Shanghainese people, Shanghainese houses, and Shanghainese love, but in *Her Story*, the cityscape is distanced and characters and relations exist independently of the city's features. This transformation demonstrates Shao's increasing competency at telling real stories that were not so dependent on setting and more about the depth of characters' experience.

4. The female perspective: the shift from "being seen" to "watching"

The most characteristic aspect of Shao Yihui's films is their investment in film space and structure, in order to reflect the individual behind each protagonist. The themes related to female protagonist and tendency of the perspective being a clear feminine one provide a good answer to feminist film theories' critiques. First of all, Shao Yihui is an expert at creating involved and multi-layered female portraiture, evolving the stereotypes of women. Her films are not keen on "perfect heroines," but rather on the rich and complex aspects of women's experiences. The single mother Wang Tiemei, the neighbor Xiao Ye, and the daughter Wang Moli in *Her Story* represent different challenges in women's life. Each woman in Shao's films has their complexity. Wang Tiemei's resilience and vulnerability, Xiao Ye's "clear-headed love brain," and Wang Moli's blend of fragility and independence together create a complex and diverse portrayal of female experience. These characterizations challenge stereotypical representations of women and enable female audiences to find multiple points of identification within the film.

Another feminist attempt in Shao's films is that she assumes all women have self-consciousness from the beginning, and there is no need to victimize them. In her view: "Nowadays, films that tell stories about women are usually about being repressed first and then rebellious, and then women awaken or grow, but films like *Her Story* depict awakening first." This adjustment to the narrative strategy also allows her to raise the next feminist questions: What problems will women encounter in real life after awakening? How do awakened women raise the next generation? How can one maintain one's subjectivity while being intimate? The raising of these questions also takes feminist films to a much deeper dimension.

It is particularly worth noting that Shao Yihui's portrayal of gender relations presents a challenge of male dominance in heterosexual relationships. In contrast to the "de-romanization" of many works in recent years, Shao Yihui has always been trusting and curious about love. The classic "dinner table play" in *Love Myth* is a typical example. The characters discuss and negotiate about

the "incomplete woman," and the male Lao Bai becomes the subject of discussion but does not pose a threat to the female relationship; in this way, the gender order is overturned and dissolved.

5. Gender narrative criticism from a comparative perspective: taking "Ne Zha: the demon child" as an example

The following passages give an analysis of another film, *Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea*, which was released around the same time as *Her Story*. My purpose is to further reveal the patriarchy within Chinese film while highlighting the significance of Shao's feminist intervention.

Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea was widely perceived as the peak of Chinese anime film. It received highly positive reviews from critics, and achieved even greater commercial success at a gross of \$2.2 billion worldwide against a production budget of US\$80 million. Adapted from a Chinese folklore, *Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea* focuses on the rebellious spirits of a male child. The patriarchy could be found in several aspects. First, the new adaptation presents a strong preference for masculinity. In Chinese mythology, Nezha has no gender distinction. However, in the new adaptation, the director Jiaozi deliberately depicts Nezha as an ugly, hot-tempered, and aggressive child. Eliminating the gender duality of traditional culture, the male-centered character stands out. Secondly, the film's masculinity is highlighted by a large number of dirty comedic lines and symbolic phallic worship. The abundance of "poop, urine, and fart" and the comedic effect of urination in the film hide the subconscious of phallic worship behind the "jokes." One example is Nezha's public urination, which takes the form of "jokes" that transform the male body into a symbol of power and authority. The stereotypical image of female characters remains another big issue. *Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea* emphasizes the constancy of the male gaze. Specifically, Mrs. Yin, Nezha's mother, was constructed as the good wife and mother without her own personality and desires. The traditional femininity embodied in the film reflects a common conservative portrait of women in Chinese cinema.

6. Challenges and opportunities: the arena for women to speak in the new media era

Feminist film practices are also facing new crises and challenges in the era of new media. The prevalence of streaming platforms and social media has imposed a huge impact on the production, distribution, reception and other aspects of film industry, which further exacerbates the gender inequity between male and female directors. The marginalization of Chinese female directors, as I will explore later, is caused by contemporary media capitalism, which privileges male directors and their works. As feminism has been attacked as a radical ideology that challenges authority, feminist works have less chance to be released and get financial support [5].

The success of *Nezha* is also attributed to its highly successful new media marketing, with the film going viral in the form of short videos that whitewashed and glorified gender-biased parts of the film as "anti-norms" progress. The feminization of androgynous mythological figures, the "phallic worship" embodied in shit, urine, fart, and child urine, instead of being blamed or criticized, was wrapped up in "anti-traditional" discourse and achieved huge commercial success. The market support for *Nezha* can be interpreted through Bourdieu's field theory: in the new media field, the power of capital can easily shape value judgments and present gender discrimination as a consumable form of progress.

In this context, female directors like Shao Yihui have taken a different approach. Unlike traditional top-down promotion, the success of *Her Story* relies heavily on bottom-up engagement from women audiences. Those female audiences especially use social media like Rednote and Weibo

to create "discourse spaces" that are algorithmically shaped according to hashtags. On these platforms, women re-read the film according to their reading protocols. Using the Weibo hashtag #Women's Alliance of Her Story#female users post personal tales about work, parenting and friendship on social media, relating them to the film. Following Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, female viewers are not mere consumers of content but producers, themselves shaping a discourse around the film independent of it [6].

Another type of feminist reception takes place among fans. Fan work on LOFTER often featured the female characters of *Her Story*, exalting their friendships, or imagining original prequels. The editorial policy is to publish only works positively influenced by strong feminist values rejecting submissions that are degrading or abusive, in the spirit of gender equality. Most significantly, social media empowers female audiences to create a communal voice. In response to the backlash *Her Story* received from male reviewers, female viewers in China launched a coordinated discussion on Douban and Weibo which effectively called into question and disassembled the authority of mainstream film criticism. Following Nancy Fraser, these 'scattered' discussions constitute a counterpublic sphere that challenges dominant discourse [7].

From a feminist film theory background, the battle over expression among feminists in the new media ecology can be seen as an expansion of the debate on "the gaze." We then need to revisit Mulvey's theory in the age of digitalization, when the gaze is performed through film reviews, Weibo content and fan fiction, as well as gender performance. Shao Yihui's films, the means of reception and creative reaction by female spectators have formed an "anti-gaze," a resistance to the male-centered language power granted in modernity through this new media background. What is at stake in this practice is not so much simply one work but a particular intervention into the system of cultural production. The collective watching of women on social media is affecting the industry's evaluation criteria and production direction. When women's perspectives like those of *Her Story* take flight in the market, they open up what it means to play gender. This bottom-up cultural change is slowly changing China's media landscape.

7. Conclusion

The films of Shao Yihui serve as a key example in the world feminist cinema. She has drawn a wide range of female types, and plumbed women's subjectivity very deeply. In sum, Shao has formed a unique feminist film style. Her filmic work engages with some of the fundamental premises of feminist film theory, while rendering new possibilities into its discursive field. In my analysis of *Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea*, I contend that gender representation in this male-centered film is problematic. Its clichéd female characters and use of lowbrow humor dull in comparison to Shao's nuanced direction. Another issue is how women can speak out within the new media dynamics. The battle for women's voices in film is one where creators, critics and audiences must work together. By constructing alternative narratives, Shao serves as a useful reference by which female directors draw strength and confidence. Meanwhile, the critical involvement and creative contribution of female audiences are transforming both the evaluative standards and production contexts of Chinese cinema. In the end, Shao Yihui's case serves as an example to prove that Chinese women directors are not only reflecting upon feminist theory but also creating it. With more and more female directors in the field, and as feminist theories develop further, these conversations will only get richer, creating a vibrant Chinese and world cinema. Feminist cultural practice does not attempt to substitute patriarchy with some other kind of dominance but focuses on how cultural discourse proliferates—only through difference can any real life in culture be generated.

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