

BOOK REVIEW

Women Filmmakers in Sinophone World Cinema

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Over the past two decades, studies of Chinese women’s cinema have progressed as more research students embrace the topic; however, monographs devoted to the subject only add up to a rather short list. Zhen Zhang’s book reflects female directors in the broader “Sinophone global cinema” and as “an integral part of world cinema” (p. 12). She understands “Sino” as “a historical, cultural, and discursive construct” perpetually “in dialogue with other cultural and linguistic networks across the world” (p. 32); thus, Sinophone global cinema is “a multitude of place-based, trans-lingual, trans-media, trans-regional, trans-Asian historical experiences in global contexts” (p. 36). Behind such a paradigm is an ardent intention to deviate “from linear, vertical or diffusionist models of historiography” (p. 36) and embrace “Sinophone Cine-Feminisms” – a concept backed by feminist film scholars’ writings on “women’s cinema” as “world cinema” and the practices of international women’s film festivals.

The nine women Zhang selected for close readings are significant cultural figures, though not all well known, even to cinephiles and film scholars. Their work crosses the cultural borders of Sinophone territories and interplays between fiction and non-fiction while insisting and persisting, with courage and boldness, to depict women’s lives and struggles. The best-known of the nine is Sylvia Chang, a singer-actress who adopted writing, directing and producing and became a mother figure for the second wave of Taiwan New Cinema. Zhang contributed a chapter on Chang for Lingzhen Wang’s edited volume, *Chinese Women’s Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (Columbia University Press, 2011), and from there she began a journey of discovering and befriending other women by organizing forums and curating film festivals. Huang Yu-shan, a contemporary of Chang, studied at New York University in order to speed up the long process of working as assistant directors and log-keepers as experienced by more senior women filmmakers in Taiwan film industry. She returned to Taiwan in the late 1980s to direct her early features and co-founded the Women Make Waves International Film Festival in Taipei in 1993 (p. 30). Yang Lina, called “the godmother of DV [digital video] documentary” by Zhang (p. 111), directed her Spring Trilogy dramas to be free from the ethical concerns of filming real people. Huang Ji partnered with her Japanese husband, cinematographer Ryuji Ozuka, to create poignant portrayals of girls and women growing up in towns and cities in China, films which have been recognized by top international film festivals. Wen Hui, an avant-garde dancer, choreographer, theatre and video director from China’s Yunnan province, combines body, gender, history and female bonding with compelling visuals and energy. Jasmin Chin-hui Lee, a Taiwanese documentarian, devoted years to recording Southeast Asian female workers migrating from country to country. Yau Ching, a Hong Kong writer, filmmaker and film historian, documented the citizens’ dilemmas before and after the 1997 handover with unique images of women, queer and other marginalized beings. Ai Xiaoming, winner of the Simone de Beauvoir Award, and Zeng Jinyan, who wrote about Ai in her dissertation, are two radical activists/feminists from Mainland China and the subjects of the last chapter. They use video

documentation and documentaries as the media of activism/feminism, and their works deviate significantly from trained filmmakers.

Inspired by “sensuous scholarship’ intertwined with Bell Hooks’s vernacular feminism as ‘passionate politics,’” Zhang’s first-person scholarship comes from her composite role “as a fan, friend, scholar, curator, artist, and mediator or connector” who formed “deep friendships” with many women filmmakers through her involvement in women’s and independent film festivals and by initiating symposia and forums (p. 31). Her close readings are informed by these women’s life stories and creative urges, revealing vigorous interpretations of the layers and depth of their works and expressing genuine compassion for their struggles, ambition and anger. In several cases, Zhang depicts their working relationship with male partners and collaborators in the still largely male-dominated film industry, indie documentary scenes and critical circles. She regards the partnership between Huang Ji and Ryuji Ozuka as the most equal and ideal. However, she also exposes several occasions when male partners take credit for works initiated and carried out by women. Having been actively involved in the China Independent Film Festival and Taiwan’s Women Make Movies Festival, Zhang gained clear insights into how gender and power interact: democracy may be a noble fight, but it often gives way to gender bias. The sisterhood and energy at the latter festival encouraged Zhang to continue her cine-feminism through historiography and history, re-centred and re-focused on women filmmakers. I found her analyses of Yang Lina, Yau Ching and Ai Xiaoming very compelling.

An essential contribution of Zhang’s book is her critical expansion of the “intimate public,” initially defined by Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008) as a “shared worldview and emotional knowledge” adopted from “a commonly lived history,” including aspects of religion, class, nationality and sexuality (viii). While discussing Wen Hui’s documentary works, for instance, Zhang discusses Wen’s creative use of an “intimate-public camera” while filming how Wen and her Third Grandma bond after they have both experienced trauma: Wen’s is a fresh betrayal by a 30-year partner in life and work, while the grandma’s suffering is life-long, including being married at ten, pregnant soon after her first period, and witnessing her mother-in-law being tortured to death as a landlord’s wife. Wen gives Third Grandma a voice in her feature-length *Listening to Third Grandma’s Stories*. The 15-minute short, *Dancing with Third Grandma*, records a healing process for both. While holding each other’s hands, covering each other’s eyes and bending their bodies intuitively, they ask, “Do you see me?” And the repeated answer is always affirmative: “Yes, I see you.” With no one behind it, the camera stands there and witnesses the two women “form an unconventional kinship bond outside the patrilineal family tree” (p. 43). To Zhang, cine-feminism functions as “a viewfinder, a new methodological lexicon for revising historiographies of Chinese-language cinema, women’s cinema, and world cinema” (p. 29). She sees her writing as part of the collective effort towards “a transnational intimate-public commons” (p. 76), and rightly so.