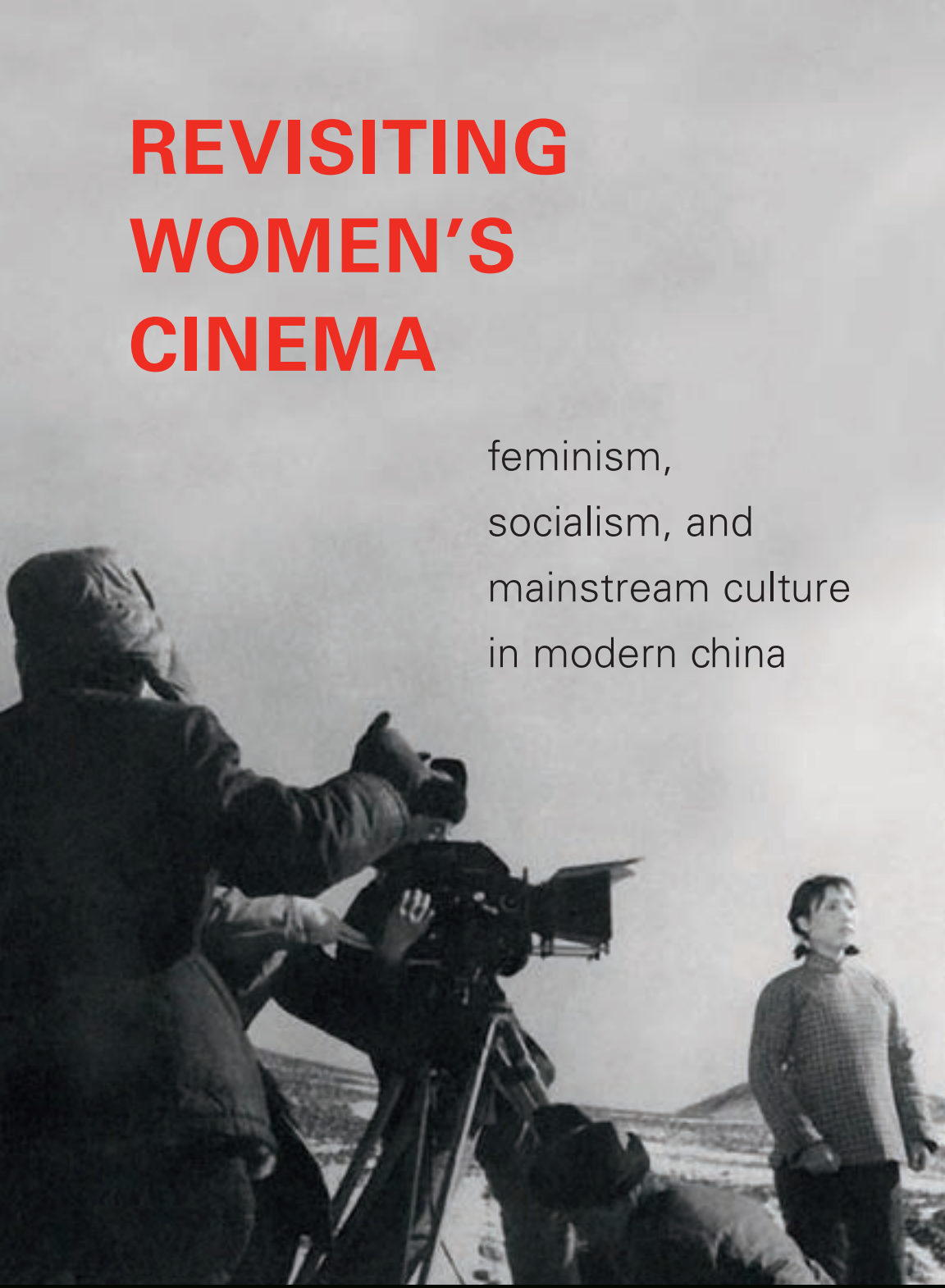
REVISITING WOMEN'S CINEMA

feminism, socialism, and mainstream culture in modern china



LINGZHEN WANG

revisiting women's cinema

a Camera Obscura book

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Cover art: Photograph of Wang Ping, circa 1958–1959. Photographer unknown.

To my parents, Wang Yaobing and Fang Ya

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INTRODUCTION

From the advent of the Maoist era in 1949 to the end of the first decade of the post-Mao economic reform around 1987, Chinese female film directors played a key role in producing popular and mainstream feminist visual culture. Working within the general socialist environment, where gender and class equality were considered institutionally foundational and where the publicly owned studio system promoted women's filmmaking, artistic experimentation, and new socialist values combating patriarchal consciousness, Chinese female directors demonstrated unprecedented individual and social agency. They stood front and center in the formation and transformation of socialist proletarian mainstream cinema, creating films that not only helped articulate socialist vision, ethics, and subject positions but also contributed to diversifying socialist cultural imaginations and aesthetics, reaching a broad mass audience. They exemplified an integrated socialist-feminist approach to cinematic representation during the first seventeen years of socialist China (1949–1966), before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命, hereafter Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976), and pioneered a socially engaged experimental filmmaking during the first decade of the post-Mao era (1976–1986). They produced many popular, sociopolitically engaged, and artistically experimental films, contributing significantly to global women's cinema and feminist culture.

Their great achievements, however, have long been overlooked and denied in feminist and cinematic studies inside and outside China since the late 1970s. This overall dismissal is neither purely cultural nor simply gender-related. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the world as a whole underwent a series of geopolitical and economic transformations: the launch of the Second Cold War

(1979–1985), the advancement of capitalist globalization and the subsequent decline of the global Left and rise of the new Right, and China's economic reforms. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought an end to the passive-aggressive geopolitics of the Cold War, but this "conclusion" actually represented the ultimate triumph of capitalism over socialism as it not only fanned the flame of capitalist Cold War ideology but also advanced the development of global neoliberalism. Together, these global movements have, by and large, caused a cultural turn in the transnational intellectual world, a shift from both the socioeconomic interrogation of capitalist systems and the insistence on the importance of geopolitical signification of aesthetic values and cultural practice.[1] These global changes also produced a profound impact on feminist movements. Not only was Marxist feminism questioned but the linkage between class and gender, as well as historical materialism, became gradually repudiated in the rise of radical and cultural feminism in the 1970s.[2] "Does socialism liberate women?" This Cold War–enhanced question, which early-1970s Western scholarship on Eastern Europe first raised,[3] was greatly revived in the early 1980s, particularly in Western feminist approaches to socialist China. The proliferating radical as well as liberal definition of feminism as an independent and individualistic endeavor put forward an unwavering negative answer to the question.[4]

In the Chinese context, the Chinese party-state, while implementing economic reform, launched in 1978 the "thought liberation" (思想解放) campaign to reevaluate the Cultural Revolution and to relax the political control of cultural production. Chinese women's autobiographical literature and subjective experimental cinema emerged during this period of diverse sociopolitical imagination and cultural pluralism. As economic reforms solidified around the mid-1980s and more Western liberal theories and Cold War–influenced scholarship entered China, however, discourses promoting Enlightenment modernity (scientific truth, universal rationality, human nature, and individualistic subjectivity), economic development, and sexual difference (as opposed to gender equality) became mainstreamed. In the area of literature and cinema, the dynamic "cultural fever" (文化热) of the early 1980s developed into the "Root-Seeking" Movement (寻根运动) in the mid-1980s, pronouncing the power of the cultural (un)consciousness, masculine vitality, (male) intellectual reflection, and a detached avant-garde aesthetic.[5] Freud's psychoanalysis, Jung's collective unconsciousness and archetypes, Arnold J. Toynbee's philosophy of civilization, and Li Zehou's ancient Chinese thought and culture all worked together influentially to

promote an abstract and universal psychocultural structure indifferent to historical and sociopolitical changes.[6] Post-Mao Chinese feminism, which appeared in the early 1980s to address extant gender issues in socialist China, was also implicated in the newly mainstreamed economic and sociocultural trends. In its attempt to catch up with universal feminist values and more "advanced" feminist practice, mostly referring to liberal and post-second-wave feminist developments in the West, post-Mao feminism in the mid- and late 1980s advocated independent female consciousness, essential sexual difference, and a critique of patriarchal culture.[7] This post-Mao official and intellectual turn toward the universal (liberal and apolitical) standard of truth, humanism, and economic development occasioned a retreat from socialism's central endeavor—addressing structural injustice and socioeconomic inequality—and a dismissal of socialist feminism and socialist proletarian mass-oriented culture. Within the newly established framework of the universal market and cultural (post)modernity, Chinese socialism of the Maoist era was often represented and indeed critiqued as backward, feudalistic, abnormal, and patriarchal—a politically, economically, and culturally negative state from which China should depart.[8]

By the late 1980s and early 1990s when feminist and film scholars inside and outside China finally turned their attention to Chinese women's cinema, they had already employed a set of liberal and post-second-wave feminist criteria for measuring women's cultural practice, criteria that center on individual(istic) consciousness, independent female essence/difference, a critique of men, and the significance of artistic marginalization and subversion.[9] Disappointed by the research findings in their studies of Chinese women's cinema, these scholars invariably drew two conclusions. One, female directors of the Mao years had passively conformed to socialist politics, modeled themselves after men by repressing their female essence or difference, and produced mainstream and propagandistic—and thus nonfeminist—films.[10] Two, women's experimental cinema of the 1980s, despite its markedly subjective styles and individual consciousness, exhibited serious ambiguity about collective values, the role of the state, and the socialist structure of justice and thus failed to break away from socialist political ideology and mainstream culture.[11]

These joint dismissals of socialism and socialist feminist mainstream culture have raised serious questions about our world today and feminist practice for the future. What kinds of positions, visions, and imaginations have been rejected and lost with this global repudiation of socialist practice, particularly those related to feminism and media? How is rediscovering the

legacy of Chinese socialist feminist mainstream culture significant in today's world, where the globalized market and transnational media have marginalized women's cinema and other sociocultural endeavors? And how should we reengage with the history of Chinese socialist mainstream culture and work with renewed transnational and materialist feminism and media theories to forge an alternative and emancipatory vision for contemporary and future feminist film practice?

Indeed, since the early 1990s, when the end of the Cold War showcased the triumph of Western capitalism and when global neoliberalism and marketization caused multilevel sociopolitical crisis including the deterioration of both women's status and the emancipatory vision of women's liberation, feminist scholars and activists around the world have critically probed the dangerous liaison between contemporary (post-second-wave) feminist practices, neoliberalism, and free market fundamentalism.[12] The crisis-ridden situation has particularly spurred feminists to reconsider the socioeconomic insights and international legacies of the second-wave feminism and renew the practices of socialist feminism:[13] its systematic critiques of capitalism, its integrated socialist emancipatory vision of the future, and its promise for a transnational feminist political alliance confronting global neoliberalism.

The rise of transnational feminism in the early 1990s reflected both the "shared or common context of struggle due to common exploration and domination across the north-south divide" and the feminist needs to not only "destabilize . . . hegemonic boundaries of nation, race, and gender" but also remap feminist endeavors with a geopolitical anchor and historical materialist approach.[14] Critically revisiting the theory and practice of socialist feminism at this historical juncture would thus help forge new transnational solidarity among feminists, integrating cultural and ethical concerns with political-economic structural transformation and articulating an alternative feminist model for the post–Cold War world.

This book discusses geopolitical history, feminism, and women's cinema in Maoist socialist and post-Mao China by engaging directly with this revised transnational feminist framework. Carefully reassessing the practice of socialist feminist culture from the 1950s to the 1980s, I reveal the critical relevance of socialist institutionalized feminism and mainstream women's cinema to contemporary feminist media practice, foregrounding its mass-oriented spectatorship, multidimensional agency, and integrated approach to gender and culture. One of the most urgent and important tasks for contemporary feminism and feminist media studies is indeed to reconnect

seemingly autonomous areas or subject matters—such as aesthetics, technology, medium, textuality, sex and gender, and individual agency—to the "big pictures" of sociopolitical environments, global market movements, and transnational media and cultural forces. I particularly investigate the structural and institutional linkages between the autonomous matters and the big pictures, thus challenging the implicit beliefs that cultural, technological, or feminist practices could be independent from their political and economic systems and that these supposedly autonomous practices alone could bring significant changes to today's world. Cultural practice, technological innovation, and individual creations contain their respective potentials to challenge the status quo, but my research demonstrates that only an integrated feminist cultural practice can articulate an alternative vision for future sociocultural transformations. Further, only a multidimensional approach can critically probe these autonomous practices' political and institutional constitution, social and aesthetic effects, and historical limitations.

With an emphasis on the geopolitical and integrated approach to socialist revolution, Chinese feminism(s), and women's cinema, this research has the following goals. First, I investigate the political and historical implications of the ways in which socialist feminism and socialist mainstream film practice has been dismissed. In the process I reveal the complicity among seemingly unrelated global forces, including international feminist practices that seek to erase this critical alternative sociopolitical and cultural practice in modern world history. Second, I redefine a set of important concepts—such as socialist feminism, mainstream culture, post-Mao feminism, and experimentalism—in Chinese contexts and offer a new approach to histories of Chinese feminism and socialist film. Third, I provide the first history of Chinese women's cinema: its emergence and development within the socialist institutional remapping of gender, culture, and the audience as well as the socialist collectivization of economic ownership and film studios in the 1950s and early 1960s; its return after the derailed Cultural Revolution; its pluralization in the early and mid-1980s with the state-initiated thought liberation movement and economic reform; and its marginalization and repudiation in the late 1980s and 1990s, when market globalization, universal modernity and postmodernity, and a detached masculine aesthetic became mainstream while post-Mao feminism moved in a combined liberal and cultural feminist direction. This study by no means simplifies or idealizes socialist feminism and its mainstream cinematic practice. Rather, revisiting Chinese socialist feminist history entails a critical reexamination

of its theoretical, historical and political problems: the limitations of Marxist theory on gender, the constraints Chinese agrarian and traditional culture—along with modern China's semicolonial and turbulent history—impose on Chinese women's liberation; and the complex geopolitical and socioeconomic causes for which socialist feminism is repudiated in contemporary China. Last but not least, this project focuses on four representative Chinese female directors and their films: Wang Ping (王苹, 1916–1990) and Dong Kena (董克娜, 1930–2016) in the 1950s and 1960s and Zhang Nuanxin (张暖忻, 1940–1995) and Huang Shuqin (黄蜀芹, b. 1939) in the 1980s and early 1990s. Through their work, I demonstrate how an individual woman's artistic agency along with the historical significance of her filmmaking is contingent on and embedded within dynamic interactions among geopolitical, socioeconomic, cultural, and individual forces and thus is by no means constituted exclusively from above or autonomously (independently). The four chapters on these female directors also explore the (trans)formation of gender, aesthetics, and socialist cinematic authorship, emphasizing Chinese women's important role in producing and diversifying mainstream culture and their negotiated imaginations for different feminist cultural practices. To better situate these directors in Chinese cinema from the 1950s to the late 1980s, the four chapters also discuss many other films by contemporary female and male directors.

Chinese post-Mao feminist film criticism emerged and became influential at the turn of the 1990s as China began to expand its market development and Chinese mainstream cinema rested on the cusp of formal privatization and commercialization. Post-Mao feminist film scholars, in their study of women's cinema from Mao's socialist era to post-Mao economic reform times, continued the post-Mao effort of the 1980s, moving further away from integrated socialist feminist practice and gender equality and toward a separatist gender approach and essentialized female difference. They also used Western cine-feminist and poststructuralist theories as major references to promote a marginalized, avant-garde, and subversive women's cinema, questioning socialist women's mainstream cinema as a feminist practice. Although this book is chronologically organized, the four chapters on female directors include discussions of film criticism and feminist scholarship published since the late 1980s in order to address issues raised particularly by post-Mao feminist film scholars and thus to forge a critical dialogue between historical Chinese women's film practice and contemporary feminist and film theories.

Transnational Concepts, Theoretical Issues, and Political Matters

Several major terms and concepts I use in this book require critical retheorization and historical elaborations to elucidate the significance of their important geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural differences. Whereas most critical conceptualizations and theoretical revisions are conducted in individual chapters, the following two terms, *socialist feminism* and *mainstream culture*, demand clarification in this introductory chapter—they either compete with other terms exploring specific geopolitical and sociocultural meanings in the Chinese context, or introduce radically different analytic frameworks when used in different political-economic environments or systems. As these two terms are also crucial to the book's overall structure and argument, I will briefly elucidate why I have chosen to use them and how reconceptualizing them can contribute to the study of Chinese feminism, culture, and women's cinema from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Socialist Feminism

The term *socialist feminism* was not used or circulated in the history of either the Chinese socialist revolution (also called the "new democratic revolution," 1921–1949) or Mao's socialist China (1949–1976). "Women's liberation" (妇女解放) was. I employ socialist feminism as a structuring concept in this book, rather than women's liberation, for two reasons. First, women's liberation, as a modern, progressive concept, refers to movements that aim to eliminate women's oppression and gender inequality in human history. Despite the term's universal appeal and usage, however, the specific framework, goals, and contents of women's liberation movements in different geopolitical locations, historical periods, and political-economic systems are not identical. Women's liberation in the Western capitalist context centers on bourgeois individualism, female independent consciousness, and equal legal rights between men and women. Third-world women's liberation usually ties itself to modern anticolonialism and bourgeois national independence movements. Finally, socialist women's liberation aims to dismantle the capitalist political-economic structure that (re)produces not only gender hierarchy but also class, racial, and regional inequalities. Most critically, the socialist theory of women's liberation does not separate women's issues from other structural inequalities; on the contrary, it argues that women's oppression cannot be resolved as long as other oppressions continue. As an extraordinary feminist movement that helped establish a socialist country where gender and class equality became

the norm, the Chinese socialist women's liberation movement distinguished itself by its multidimensional engagements: it participated simultaneously in the national independence movement, the proletarian revolution, and various international socialist anti-imperialist endeavors. Chinese socialist women's liberation, like the Chinese socialist revolution, is a long, complicated, and transnational process that consists of both bourgeois and proletarian revolutionary tasks and aims to achieve a socialist emancipatory vision by ultimately dismantling and transforming capitalist and other forms of patriarchal socioeconomic structures.[15]

Problems arose in the 1970s and 1980s when Western Cold War ideology joined hands with a radical cultural feminist repudiation of both Marxist theory and the left-wing movement to reassert the universal value of Western "women's liberation"—individualism, independence, and essential female difference—(re)orienting Western scholarship on socialist women's liberation in the world. The long dormant question "Does socialism liberate women?" was reinvigorated in the Western feminist scholarship of the 1980s to critically interrogate the practices of socialist countries, including China, by forging an antithetical relationship between socialism and feminism. Since the early 1980s, "much feminist inquiry, both in the United States and in China, has directed itself to this question," and the antithesis of socialism and women's liberation (based on the Western model) has formed and informed most of the feminist research.[16] As I elaborate in my first chapter, scholars who directed their research to the question "Does socialism liberate women?" often ended up searching for answers to the flip side of that question, "Why has socialism *not* liberated Chinese women?"[17] Similarly, scholars who argued that Chinese socialist women's liberation had been subordinated, postponed, or unfinished, also derived their criteria from Western feminist practice, Cold War ideology, and universal capitalist values. In the Chinese context, the new ideology of economic reform the party-state implemented toward the end of the 1970s, in an apparent delegitimization of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), swept aside some central socialist principles, including gender and class equality. In mid-1980s China, the state augmented reforms by further endorsing scientific objectivity, economic rationality, and technological progress—values granted the status of "universal truths" due to their place in Western modernity. At the same time, female activists and scholars also began to seek a universal model for feminist movements, embracing particularly post-second-wave, radical, and cultural feminisms. Li Xiaojiang (李小江, b. 1951), one of the best-known post-Mao feminist scholars, once stated, "It was after I compared the Western and Chinese feminist

movements that I began to question the assumption that Chinese women were liberated. Following the Western forerunners of women's liberation, I called for the awakening of Chinese women's female consciousness [in contemporary China]."[18] Taking Western women's liberation as the standard reference, post-Mao feminists began, in the 1980s, to either perceive socialist women's liberation in socioeconomic and political realms as an early stage of the feminist movement that must be surpassed and later negated, or pit socialist women's liberation against an essential female difference, consciousness, and cultural expression.[19]

Socialist feminism rather than *women's liberation*, therefore, effectively avoids the geopolitically loaded hegemonic usages of the latter term, highlighting instead the integrated and interdependent relationship between socialism and feminism in the context of Chinese socialist revolution and construction. Furthermore, whereas the term *women's liberation* often provokes ideological debates around criteria and the final point of completion, the term *socialist feminism* prioritizes the historical process of the socialist women's movement, particularly its complicated interactions with major socioeconomic, cultural, and geopolitical forces. Indeed, neither the founding of a socialist nation-state nor the establishment of an official organization of socialist women's liberation marks the end of the historical proletarian and feminist revolution in history. Socialist China of the 1950s and 1960s was only in the beginning stage of socialist transformations, and, as expected, new internal contradictions and international conflicts emerged to both condition and (re)orient its particular movement and process. Attention to the historical and geopolitical course of the socialist women's movement is critical as it helps us recognize the special negotiations and contributions a regional feminist practice has made, and at the same time enables us to probe the limitations shared between socialist feminism and socialist revolution situated in a specific national and international context. Moreover, it also questions the problematic assumption that the ultimate women's liberation should be and can be achieved independently and alone while other political-economic and sociocultural issues persist at local and global levels.

Second, the use of *socialist feminism* foregrounds a transnational feminist framework that highlights not only the socialist women's movement's international origin in the nineteenth century but also a global body of feminist theory developed in relation to Marxist theory, proletarian revolutions, socialist and left-wing movements, and other feminist endeavors across the world. This transnational dimension is crucial when we reevaluate the legacy of the Chinese socialist women's movement and gender policy today

in relation to historical feminist revisions of Marxist theory, seeking an alternative vision for future transnational feminism. Indeed, a comparative study of socialist feminism in different parts of the world is long overdue, as is a critical reassessment of Chinese socialist revolution in terms of its potential contribution to transnational feminist theory and political practice. I thus use *socialist feminism* in this book to trace and reflect on the theory, policy, and institutionalized practice of the women's movement and gender equality in the Chinese contexts of socialist revolution and the Mao era, especially from 1949 to the early 1960s, referencing international socialist feminist movements and reenvisioning future transnational feminist theory and politics.[20]

Mainstream Culture

During the post-Mao era, and especially since the early 1990s, China scholars have frequently used "mainstream" (主流) in such compound terms as "mainstream literature" (主流文学), "mainstream cinema" (主流电影), "mainstream culture" (主流文化), "mainstream ideology" (主流意识形态), and "mainstream discourse" (主流话语) to refer to cultural and sociopolitical practices in both Mao's and post-Mao China.[21] The term has also been deployed in English scholarship on Chinese cultural practices (art, literature, and film) in a similar way.[22] Like *socialist feminism*, *mainstream culture* did not circulate in the Mao era. "People's literature and art" (人民文艺) and "worker-peasant-soldier literature" (工农兵文学) were dominant terms at the time. At the turn of the twenty-first century, as China began to play an increasingly important role on the world stage and as commercialism further reconfigured China's cultural practice, "socialist mainstream culture" (社会主义主流文化) emerged as a new political and intellectual discourse to address China's international ambitions and domestic concerns.[23]

My decision to use the term *mainstream culture*, however, was initially prompted by some influential post-Mao feminist publications in the early 1990s on socialist women's cinema. These articles accused Chinese female directors, especially those of the Mao era, of making mainstream rather than marginalized or avant-garde films. Directly influenced by the Western cine-feminist theory of the early 1970s, which used *mainstream* to refer to Hollywood commercial cinema, especially its perpetuation of the dominant capitalist patriarchal ideology and male-centered pleasure, post-Mao feminist film scholars took *mainstream cinema* or *mainstream culture* as universally applicable and intrinsically conservative and patriarchal concepts.

Their radical conclusion that films by Chinese socialist female directors are not feminist because they belong to mainstream rather than marginalized or experimental culture spurred serious questions about the validity and the risk of accepting the concept in an undifferentiated way.

The problems exhibited in post-Mao feminist film scholarship attest to the reasserted global hegemonic power of Western discourses since the late 1970s. At the same time, post-Mao feminism's outrageous conclusions about socialist women's cinema have also inadvertently called for an urgent and critical inquiry into the central characteristics of socialist mainstream culture in the Chinese context. Although *mainstream culture* was not a term historically used in socialist China, it has emerged as a critical concept in the study of transnational culture, gender, and avant-gardism/experimentalism, thus demanding a serious historical analysis and geopolitical redefinition. Indeed, how do we reconceptualize mainstream culture in order to make it critically useful in the study of the Chinese socialist culture of the 1950s and 1960s? How does socialist mainstream culture differ from the mainstream culture mostly critiqued and sometimes reimagined by Western intellectuals in a capitalist system? How can this comparison help us understand the role of socioeconomic institutions in (re)configuring cultural practices? And how does the relationship between women's cinema and the dominant ideology and culture differ across political-economic systems? As scholars in Chinese studies have frequently used the term *mainstream culture* in their research on both Mao-era and post-Mao literature and cinema, it is also time to discern the difference, and the continuity, between the two period's mainstream cultures. How indeed has mainstream culture changed from the Maoist socialist period to the post-Mao market era? How did Chinese female directors fare in this transformation, and how did their filmmaking change in relation to the new mainstream culture in the 1980s and 1990s? This book investigates, among other important topics, the trajectory of Chinese women artists' relationship to the changing mainstream culture and cinema from the 1950s and 1960s to the 1980s and beyond.

Scholars who research on Western mainstream culture have argued that although the term *mainstream* is frequently used in relation to mass or popular culture and mass media, it is "rarely defined in Western literary, media or cultural studies."[24] At the same time, however, in Western intellectual and academic discourses, a general consensus about mainstream culture has long existed. The term usually refers to Western cultural commodification, which is tied to the marketplace or cultural industry, fraught with conservative (e.g., patriarchal and racist) values, marked by conformity and convention,

enhanced by mass media and new technology, associated with low taste, and perceived as a vulgar or inferior aesthetic. Mainstream is also often understood negatively as a streamlining of culture, "as a subordination of cultural specificity to one hegemonic cultural strand."[25] True, some Western intellectuals and artists have argued against the idea that mainstream culture is monolithic and have envisioned certain subversive or progressive potentials of mainstream or popular culture, but the liberating and subversive potential of new technology, media, and political movements in the practice of mainstream/mass/popular culture has yet to be realized in a meaningful way, structurally or sociopolitically.[26] For those artists who attempt to mainstream their progressive ideas and art practice and to diversify the mainstream culture, the stakes have been high. They constantly risk being appropriated and having their works commodified and reconfigured in the process. Sometimes, the compromises they have to make to reach a mass audience result in reinforcing rather than challenging existing sociocultural stereotypes and commercial power.[27] Many Western critical thinkers, leftist intellectuals, and feminists have thus continued to hold a negative and pessimistic view of mainstream culture. Instead, they endorse avant-gardism, minor/marginalized literature, and independent filmmaking for political resistance, intellectual nonconformism, individual freedom, and artistic autonomy.

This bifurcation of conservative commercial mainstream culture and radical independent avant-gardism, however, does not necessarily denote a true opposition. Socioeconomic factors, especially, constitute a key shared dimension of both cultural practices. The extant critique of most avant-garde or independent cultural movements concerning their open elitism (class and education) and sustainment of social hierarchy (gender and race) has clearly illustrated that conscious self-marginalization in cultural practice does not necessarily help change sociopolitically conservative values largely embodied in the commercial mainstream culture.[28] Both Western mainstream and marginalized cultural practices have corresponded, in different ways, to the dominant mode of socioeconomic and cultural production in the capitalist system.[29]

Some Western scholars and activists, seeking to bring sociocultural diversity to mainstream culture, have argued that the goal of implementing the principle of diversity (class, gender, race, etc.) in mainstream culture is not to showcase pure differences but to achieve a true state of equity: "A mainstream not based on the principle of diversity is essentially inequitable."[30] It is critically important to link mainstream diversity to the goal of socioeconomic equity, but it seems their relationship should be argued

the other way around; that is, not until we address issues of socioeconomic equity across different groups can we imagine and sustain a truly diverse mainstream culture. Diversity remains superficial when detached from the principles of equity and equality. Furthermore, the promotion of this seeming diversity only helps to express the very logic of the market, which works to enhance the capitalist mode of cultural production by tirelessly generating novelty and difference.

Chinese socialist cultural practice, which emerged on the premise of socioeconomic equity and political equality and in accordance with the socialist mode of cultural production, thus offers us an alternative historical model for mainstream cultural practice. My first chapter presents a concentrated discussion of Chinese socialist and feminist mainstream culture in the 1950s and 1960s, and chapters 4 and 5 elaborate on some fundamental changes taking place in mainstream discourses and culture in the economic reform era, especially the 1980s. But before moving into those discussions, I want to briefly highlight several major points concerning the changing trajectory of Chinese socialist mainstream culture.

After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the new party-state working under the principle of "people's democratic dictatorship" (人民民主专政) focused on economic modernization and took steps to transform formally private ownership of the means of production into socialist state and local collective ownerships (1949–1956). It also institutionalized socialist class and gender equality and promoted the spirit of serving the people. The role of literature and the arts was thus redefined in this new system. Socialist culture became an integral part of the overall socialist political and socioeconomic endeavor: serving socialist transformations, propagating socialist values, strengthening socialist international solidarity, and developing a proletarian (worker-peasant-soldier) public cultural space, where the mass population was not only the target audience but, more importantly, also a model figure and active participant in the cultural production.[31] This proletarian mass culture (people's literature and art or worker-peasant-soldier literature), as I discuss in chapter 1, was also feminist. The principles of equity and equality manifested in socialist cultural practice were not only advocated by the party-state but also concretely supported by socialist cultural and industrial institutions. Socialist state film studios and the socialist system of film production, distribution, and exhibition, for example, were key institutional forces in the formation of the socialist proletarian and feminist mainstream cinema. Different from commercially or aesthetically (autonomously) driven culture, socialist mass culture was pedagogically oriented and sociopolitically engaged. It was

therefore neither independent of nor separated from the overall socialist political endeavors. At the same time, it also aimed to appeal to and entertain the masses by modernizing and revolutionizing both Chinese traditional popular culture along with foreign aesthetics.

As an essential part of the socialist revolution and construction, socialist mainstream culture played the most critical role in combatting traditional conservative ideas and bourgeois ideology and promoting socialist vision and ethics. Socialist socioeconomic transformations were foundational in establishing proletarian mainstream culture, but they did not automatically eliminate old ideas and influences. The ideological battle was thus perceived as one of the central and long-term tasks of socialist mainstream culture.

Unlike mainstream culture in the capitalist West, socialist mainstream culture did not entail a minor, marginalized culture that functioned as a separate or "ghettoized" domain for critical reflection or aesthetic innovation. As I illustrate in chapters 1, 2, and 3, Chinese socialist mainstream culture in the 1950s and 1960s integrated the political and the aesthetic, exhibiting a trajectory filled with critical revisions, individual creative imprints, varied sociocultural imaginations, international influences, and dynamic political and aesthetic experimentalism. Both Wang Ping's *The Story of Liubao Village* (柳堡的故事, 1957), discussed in chapter 2, and Dong Kena's *Small Grass Grows on the Kunlun Mountains* (昆仑山上的一棵草, 1962), analyzed in chapter 3, are good examples. In the first seventeen years of socialist China, Chinese women not only gained institutional empowerment to make films but also pioneered socialist mainstream cultural practice. The term "non-mainstream" (非主流) appeared in post-Mao scholarship to refer to those cultural works that were criticized or even banned during certain periods of Mao's China.[32] Most of these works, however, such as Wang's *The Story of Liubao Village*, both represented the socialist mainstream and received high recognition when they first appeared. Later criticisms reflect the changing dynamic of socialist mainstream culture, which was indicative of the existence of critical diversity and competing ideas in Mao's socialist China. In addition, as socialist culture during its own formation and development openly culled inspiration and resources from traditional (classical and folk) Chinese cultures and modern world literatures and arts, negotiations with and revisions of these other cultures constituted a critical and productive dimension of the mainstream cultural practice throughout the Maoist period. Indeed, scholars have already forcefully argued that both Chinese socialism in history and Chinese socialist culture of the 1950s and 1960s exhibited a distinctive character of revolutionary cosmopolitanism or transnational-

ism.[33] Socialist mainstream culture was, therefore, by no means monolithic, fixed, or exclusively managed from the top down, whether from a political or an artistic perspective.

However, while highlighting the sociopolitical and experimental nature of socialist mainstream culture, we should bear in mind that socialist mainstream culture encountered its own share of problems in history. Similar to socialist feminism, as a practice integrated with the overall Chinese socialist endeavor during this period, socialist mainstream culture exhibited problems when China's entire socialist practice either stalled, due to domestic and international political-economic constraints, or suffered from a loss of an integrated vision and strategy for China's socialist development. When socialist practice wrestled with internal divisions concerning areas of priority in development (e.g., the political or economic) and struggled to cope with the global effects of the Cold War and neoliberalism, Chinese mainstream culture exhibited corresponding radical tendencies ranging from dogmatic practice to elitist individualism as well as market commercialism. Chapter 6 explores exactly how Chinese female directors like Zhang Nuanxin critically negotiated the different mainstream cultural trends formed during the Cultural Revolution and in the market-oriented era of the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, respectively, questioning the uniform dogma of the former and resisting the rising individualism and growing social inequality of the latter.

Indeed, since the implementation of economic reform in the late 1970s, China's mainstream culture has undergone some most significant structural transformations, moving toward a depoliticized and masculine aesthetic, which formally turned commercial in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to some scholars, as early as in 1984 when the Chinese state moved to expand its economic reform and retreated from its previous full support for socialist mainstream cinema, Chinese film production became redefined "as a *cultural industry* rather than a *propagating institution*."[34] In 1987, as "commodity economy" (商品经济) and the market were officially promoted as part of socialist development in the report of the Thirteenth People's Congress, the first wave of Chinese commercial film production emerged, including films by the Fifth Generation filmmakers, who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982 and became known for their avant-garde experimentalism and art-house cinema in the early to mid-1980s. In 1992, "socialist market economy" (社会主义市场经济) was formally circulated during the Fourteenth People's Congress. In 1993, after China embarked on its path to a market economy, the Chinese film system was formally restructured. The Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television moved to decentralize its decades-long monopoly of

distribution. This decentralization accelerated the privatization of the film industry and "pushed film production further toward the market economy."[35] To boost theater attendance, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television in 1994 issued a document announcing the planned annual importation of ten international blockbusters, mostly big-budget, high-tech Hollywood fare.[36] Chinese mainstream cinema consequently transformed itself along with China's socioeconomic structural changes and became comparable to the mainstream film industry in the capitalist West, although it maintained certain distinctions. Chapters 4 and 5 critically trace and discuss the radical changes taking place in mainstream feminist and cultural discourses in the 1980s. Chapter 7 further explores and illustrates how Chinese women's cinema, represented by Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human* (人鬼情, 1987), responded to the new mainstream culture's demands toward the end of the 1980s, resolutely departing from the women's mainstream cinema practiced in both Mao's times and the early economic reform era. Female directors themselves, however, whether resisting or supporting the new universal market logic of mainstream culture, became significantly marginalized or "disabled" in the mid- to late 1990s, a period when Chinese male directors began to dominate commercial-mainstream, "main melody" (主旋律, officially sponsored), and art-house cinemas. Although the term *socialist mainstream culture* has emerged in contemporary China to defend and renew certain Chinese socialist values at both national and international levels, its significance and effect have yet to be examined as China's participation in the global market and commercial culture increases.

Outline of the Book

Over seven chapters I remap Chinese feminist and mainstream cultural practices in relation to a series of major sociopolitical and economic transformations occurring in both local and global contexts. Particularly, I trace the history of Chinese women's cinema, offering an in-depth study of four Chinese female directors. Chapter 1, "Socialist Feminism and Socialist Culture Reconsidered," tackles the geopolitical ideology and elitist cultural centralism behind three research paradigms entrenched in the study of socialist mainstream culture and women's cinema: the patriarchal character of the Chinese socialist revolution, the political and propagandistic nature of socialist cultural production, and the conception of women's cinema as a marginalized, subversive practice. By resituating socialist feminist and cultural practice in its historical and international contexts, this chapter provides a

revisionist history of Chinese socialist feminism, reevaluates the nature and significance of socialist proletarian public space, and retheorizes socialist film practice as a mainstream experimental cinema.

In particular, the chapter offers a critical, in-depth analysis of Judith Stacey's *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (1983), one of the most influential English-language books on Chinese women's liberation and socialist revolution. I question the book's Cold War and radical feminist stance, its definition of feminism as primarily individualistic, and its conclusion that Chinese socialist revolution is inherently patriarchal. Through tracing the history of socialist feminism in relation to modern China's anti-imperialist, antifeudalistic, and anticapitalist endeavors, this chapter reconceptualizes socialist feminism as a proletarian, mass-oriented, integrated, and multifaceted practice. I particularly highlight the critical interdependence between socialist revolution and Chinese women's liberation—a nonnegligible factor that contributed greatly to both the Communist victory in 1949 and to subsequent socialist constructions, including the formation of a feminist mainstream culture.

Chinese cinema was dominated by men from its inception in 1905 until the early 1950s, when socialist state film studios actively recruited and helped train women for film directing. My second chapter, "Articulating Embedded Feminist Agency in Socialist Mainstream Cinema," turns to mainland China's first female director, Wang Ping. I examine her life story as a modern woman, left-wing artist, and socialist feminist filmmaker, analyze one of her most representative socialist films, *The Story of Liubao Village*, and reevaluate her multidimensional contributions to socialist mainstream cinema.

The socialist transformation of property ownership, the film industry, and gender, together with socialism's new concept of authorship, worked in the early and mid-1950s to empower Chinese female cultural workers, enabling the emergence of the first generation of female filmmakers in mainland China. An individual woman's historical agency and cinematic authorship, as Wang's case reveals, originates from neither individual autonomy nor an independent experience of gender. Rather, it is contingent on and embedded within the dynamic interplay of political, institutional, cultural, and individual factors. Wang's extensive collaboration with the original story writer and scriptwriter in adapting "The Story of Liubao Village" into film not only reflected the productive socialist collective authorship but also manifested the experimental nature of socialist filmmaking, which involved intense negotiations among different participants and often resulted in distinctive individual imprints in the final product. This chapter particularly studies

Wang Ping's interactive cinematic authorship and her individual initiative in making *The Story of Liubao Village*, a successful socialist mainstream film that exhibited distinctive Chinese national and folk styles, reached a mass audience, and articulated both left-wing intellectuals' sentiments of the 1940s and socialist feminist ideals of the 1950s. This chapter challenges the persistent feminist assumption that feminist cinema should occupy only a counter-, minor, marginalized, or independent position regardless of its specific geopolitical and sociopolitical contexts and the nature of its contemporary mainstream culture.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the introduction of radical and cultural feminism, cine-feminism, and Western discourses influenced by Cold War ideology indirectly joined China's embrace of the market economy in reinforcing a universal model for gender, culture, and modernity. Feminist film scholarship singled out Mao-era female directors for making mainstream, propagandist, and masculine films that suppressed female difference and critical consciousness. Chapter 3, "Socialist Experimentalism, Critical Revision, and Gender Difference," addresses these issues by focusing on another important socialist female director, Dong Kena. In studying her popular 1962 film, *Small Grass Grows on the Kunlun Mountains*, I closely analyze her cinematic practice in relation to such theoretical and historical concepts as political conformity, cultural diversity, critical reflection, and gender difference.

This chapter presents close analyses of the film's aesthetic innovation, gendered voice, and critical revision in adaptation. The purpose of foregrounding these aspects of Dong's film is not, however, to prove the *presence* of what feminist scholars from the 1980s forward have claimed absent from Chinese socialist women's cinema. Rather, it is to interrogate the political and artistic binary paradigm underpinning most of the Cold War–influenced research on socialist culture, and challenge the Western middle-class-centric feminist framework often used to measure women's cultural practices across geopolitical locations. Furthermore, this detailed study of the film also aims to illustrate that not only do conformity and critique coexist in integrated socialist cultural practice, but the former also constitutes the very foundation of the latter. Dong's film clearly adheres to the emancipatory vision and pedagogical function of socialist mainstream culture. This commitment, however, enables rather than inhibits the film's critical and creative interventions in the adaptation process. It is with socialist principles and ethics that the film critiques the official (mis)representation of the local situation and targets the implicit prejudice against women among male model workers.

Like Wang Ping's films, Dong's *Small Grass* significantly showcases the diversity and individual creativity in the practice of socialist mainstream

culture. Most significantly, the film transforms the story from a fixed, progressive narrative to an overdetermined structure where different temporalities, multiple discourses, and various imaginations are manifested and sustained. In addition, Dong revises the two heroines' relationship in the film, a choice that has enriched the dynamic socialist feminist culture by foregrounding intersubjectivity, female bonding, and individual differences in the context of socialist construction.

Chapter 4, "Feminist Practice after Mao," turns to the economic New Era (新时期, the late 1970s and 1980s) to study the rise and development of post-Mao independent feminism. Resituating post-Mao Chinese feminism in its political-economic, historical, and global contexts, this chapter critically explores three primary aspects of the movement: its personal, institutional, and transnational origins; its initial promises for revising Marxist theory and improving socialist feminism; and its subsequent development in the mid- to late 1980s into a universal and cultural discourse implicated in contemporary capitalist globalization as China marched toward a market economy. These changes in Chinese feminist practice reflected broader transformations: China's expansion and deepening of its economic reform, the rise of global neoliberalism, and the cultural turn of global intellectual movements.

Specifically, this chapter moves from a discussion of the gendered personal, a concept articulated in women's autobiographical literature and culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, to an examination of post-Mao independent feminism and its central theoretical arguments made by its most influential figure, Li Xiaojiang, around the mid- and late 1980s. It closely examines post-Mao feminism's entanglements with the overall official promotion of economic reform, the newly mainstreamed intellectual discourse on science, Enlightenment modernity, and cultural independence, and Western post-second-wave feminism, particularly radical feminism. In the context of 1980s China, I argue, post-Mao feminism joined other historical forces, contributing to the formation of a separatist-, cultural-, and difference-oriented feminist practice that represented a significant departure from integrated socialist feminism.

As China under Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) began to move away from previous sociopolitical policy and implemented economic reforms toward the end of the 1970s, the cinema of the New Era also critically reacted to the Cultural Revolution, especially its class-struggle ideology and politicized cultural practice. My fifth chapter, "Film Theory, Avant-Gardism, and the Rise of Masculine Aesthetics," discusses the transformation of Chinese mainstream culture, particularly the rise of film theory and masculine avant-gardism in the

1980s. This transformation, combined with the gradual privatization of the film industry, repudiated earlier socialist traditions and endorsed a liberal, humanistic, and aesthetic direction for cultural development. In the hands of the emerging Fifth Generation filmmakers, New Era experimental cinema reached a pinnacle of abstract cultural reflection, stylistic renovation, and masculine reimagination of a teleological future.

This chapter also critically reassesses the global significance of post-Mao Chinese experimental cinema by comparing it with its initial inspiration, the French New Wave, from the perspectives of sociopolitical history and gender. Despite different historical and political situations between France in the 1950s and China in the 1980s, similar concerns emerged in the two countries and led to the rise of cultural elitism, artistic autonomy, a universal aesthetic, and the repudiation of previous left-wing or socialist cultural practices. Drawing on recent feminist scholarship on French New Wave and Chinese experimental cinema, this comparative section also illustrates how female directors became marginalized in both movements and how the claim to the universal value of the aesthetic and artistic genius is not only individualistic and elitist but also male-centered. The chapter concludes with a close examination of avant-garde cinema's rapid commercial turn in the late 1980s, revealing an internal logic that was shared by experimental and commercial cinemas as the market finally gained the upper hand in contemporary China at the turn of the 1990s.

Chapter 6, "Alternative Experimental Cinema," returns to Chinese women's mainstream cinema by focusing on Zhang Nuanxin and her experimental films in the 1980s. Women's cinema flourished in the early post-Mao era, exhibiting intriguing characteristics especially in relation to the changing mainstream film trajectory and the rise of the independent feminist movement. Zhang was a pioneer in both the theory and practice of post-Mao new experimental cinema, but was dismissed later as nonessential when the New Cinema turned abstract, depoliticized, and masculine toward the end of the 1980s. This chapter investigates that dismissal and argues that she was ousted mostly due to her sociopolitically engaged, feminist experimentalism.

This chapter offers a detailed study of Zhang's most representative film, *Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭, 1985). My analysis highlights both Zhang's critique of Cultural Revolution's ideological uniformity and her resistance to the new mainstream discourse that advocated sociopolitically detached individualism, naturalized sexual difference, and rising market value in the mid-1980s. This chapter also introduces post-Mao feminist film criticism formed at the turn of the 1990s, particularly reviewing the most influential publications

that, despite their initial interest in 1980s women's experimental cinema, charge Zhang and other female directors with an incomplete break from the socialist mainstream cinema of the Mao era. I end the chapter with a discussion of the trajectory of Zhang's films, particularly her last film, *South China, 1994* (南中国, 1994), a political melodrama centering on the socioeconomic and political struggles of women and migrant workers against transnational capitalists in one of southern China's special economic zones. Zhang's stylistic change from subjective experimentalism to political melodrama over the course of her career exhibits her continued engagement with the changing sociohistorical reality and her consistent refusal either to grant an autonomous status to cinematic style or to separate cinematic form from content.

Only one year after *female consciousness* appeared as a hotly debated topic in a symposium organized by the editorial staff at *Contemporary Cinema* and the Contemporary Film Studies Office in 1986, the concept became crystallized in Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human* (人鬼情, 1987), manifesting the beginning of another important transition in Chinese women's cinema. Huang's film has received critical acclaim, considered by many as the only feminist film in Chinese film history. The last chapter of my book, "The Black Velvet Aesthetic," offers a revisionist study of Huang's film and a close analysis of the general trend of Chinese cinema of the late 1980s, unveiling the underlying logic that ironically links women's cinema and post-Mao feminism to male-centered cultural movements.

A major part of this chapter explores the film's "black velvet aesthetic" (黑丝绒效果), a depoliticized revision of the socialist *xieyi* (写意) aesthetic. This artistic device functions to efface the significance of the sociopolitical transformations in socialist history as the film pursues a universal cultural feminism, transhistorical cultural mentality, an essential female inner world, naturalized sexual difference, and a neotraditional female self-salvation. The chapter also analyzes the relationship between the *xieyi* aesthetic embodied by an ideal patriarchal kinsman in the film and the mainstream revival of Chinese traditional culture in the late 1980s, illustrating how Huang's film redefines women's role primarily through men and the traditional ritual of arranged marriage.

The chapter ends with an in-depth exploration of female consciousness, the central concept in the post-Mao feminist practice of the late 1980s. If sexual difference laid a biological and psychological foundation for the concept's universal legitimacy and appeal, three other forces—namely, universal cultural feminism, the depoliticized liberal discourse of the 1980s, and the

restored and modernized Confucian tradition—worked together in China in the late 1980s to signify the layered meanings of female consciousness. Equally important, the global and domestic markets provided the very political and economic conditions that made the rise and articulation of this female consciousness possible.

NOTES

Introduction

1. For a discussion of the overall cultural and aesthetic turn in both Western and Chinese contexts since the 1970s, see Jameson, *Cultural Turn*; Baumbach, Young, and Yue, *Cultural Logic*; and Leenhouts, "Culture against Politics." For a discussion of the ahistorical, cultural, and identity turn in feminist practice, see Hennessy and Ingraham, "Introduction: Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism," 1–3; and Fraser, "Feminism Tamed: From Redistribution to Recognition in the Age of Identity" and "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History," in her *Fortunes of Feminism*, 139–88, 209–28.

2. Hennessy and Ingraham, "Introduction: Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism."

3. The question was first raised in English scholarship of the early 1970s on women's liberation in Eastern Europe. See Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women?*

4. Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution*, 1–5. See also my detailed discussion of the topic in chapter 1.

5. For a concrete discussion of the cultural movement in China in the mid- and late 1980s, see chapter 5. See also Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged?*

6. Yao, "Chinese New Cinema," 215.

7. Li Xiaojiang, *Eve's Exploration*; Yuan, "Feminism," 1–3. See chapter 4 of this volume for a detailed discussion of Western post-second-wave feminisms and their influence on the formation of post-Mao feminism.

8. These critiques or charges were vocally pronounced in the popular and influential documentary TV series *Deadsong of the River* (河殇), first aired in 1988.

9. See chapter 6 of this volume for a detailed discussion of the topic.

10. Yuan, "Feminism"; Dai, "Invisible Women"; Dai, "Gender and Narration," 134; and Cui, *Women through the Lens*, 171–99.

11. Berry, "China's New 'Women's Cinema'"; Kaplan, "Problematizing Cross-Cultural Analysis"; and Dai, "Invisible Women," 277.

12. See Eisenstein, "A Dangerous Liaison?"; Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 209–26; and Hennessy and Ingraham, "Introduction: Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism," 1–3.

13. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 9.

14. On shared context, see Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle," 4; on destabilization, see Grewal and Kaplan, "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practice." For a critical discussion of the significance as well as limitation of transnational feminist theory and its further development in the Chinese context, see Lingzhen Wang, "Transnational Feminist Reconfiguration," 11–22. For a critical reassessment of historical materialism in feminist studies, see Hennessy and Ingraham, *Materialist Feminism*.

15. Meisner, "Chinese Revolution."

16. Rofel, *Other Modernities*, 21. As I discuss in chapter 4, the first post-Mao feminist theoretical article published in 1983 by Li Xiaojiang concerns "women's liberation."

17. Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution*, 5, 10 (emphasis mine).

18. Li Xiaojiang, "Responding to Tani Barlow," 176.

19. See my detailed discussion of post-Mao feminism in chapters 4, 6, and 7.

20. *State feminism* is also deployed by some scholars in their research on gender and women in socialist China. Initially used by social scientists to refer to the political style of feminist practice in Scandinavia, the term, when applied to the Chinese context, also encountered a Cold War distortion, evoking the monolithic and all-controlling image of a state patriarch. See Zheng Wang, *Finding Women*, 7.

21. See Dong Xuewen, "Issue of Mainstream"; Dai, "Invisible Women"; Xu and Shi, "Path Selection."

22. There are numerous examples. For one related to the study of Chinese socialist women's cinema, see Cui, *Women through the Lens*, 171–99.

23. Lu, "On the Construction."

24. Korte and Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream?*, 7.

25. Korte and Sternberg, 8.

26. See Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema"; Williams, *Television*.

27. Korte and Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream?*, 10–11.

28. See, for example, Sellier, *Masculinity Singular*. See also chapter 5 for a gendered critique of the French New Wave and Chinese masculine avant-gardism.

29. For a discussion of the relationship among feminist avant-garde cinema, capitalist institution, and mainstream discourse, see chapter 1.

30. Khan, "Shared Space," 7.

31. The origin of this cultural configuration can be traced to the 1930s left-wing mass culture practiced in China's urban centers and to Mao Zedong's 1942 talk at the Yan'an forum.

32. Wu Di, "Exploration of 'People's Films.'"

33. Cheek, "Chinese Socialism"; Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism*, 191.

34. Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema*, 19 (emphasis in the original).

35. Ying Zhu, 20.

36. Ying Zhu, 21.