Chinese and Japanese Female Film Directors: Could They Hold up Half of the Sky?

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When looking at the past century of Chinese and Japanese cinema, I find a few intriguing paradoxes concerning women’s film and female directors. First, in both cinemas and as early as the 1920s, the woman’s film became an important genre—partly thanks to audiences’ eagerness to see female stars; but the early masters of this genre are all male. Second, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Mainland China surpasses Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan greatly in terms of the proportion and position of female directors in the film industry—largely thanks to the Communist enforcement of gender equality; but a majority of works by Mainland Chinese female directors lack any sort of feminine consciousness. Finally, under the influence of Western feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, scholarly concerns and various studies on the works by female directors began in both Chinese-language territories and Japan in the mid-1980s; but in-depth and systematic analyses on these works are still missing.

In Japan, the major force in promoting female directors is the Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival began in 1985, which produced an anthology, Films of the World Women Directors (2001), edited by Yoshida Mayumi and others, and a documentary by Kumagai Hiroko introducing nearly 30 female directors and producers from Japan. The festival has showcased over 200 films by female directors worldwide including almost all of the most important Chinese directors. Also in 1985, over half of the government film awards in Mainland China were given to works directed by women. This fact triggered a 1986 Beijing forum attended by ten female directors and a number of film critics and scholars. Participants compared the Chinese notion of “woman-theme film” to “woman’s
film” and “feminist film” used in the West. They also discussed issues such as whether or not works by female directors should be studied as a separate entity. The Forum stirred up more writings afterwards, but so far the only book that is entirely devoted to the study of female directors and women’s film in Mainland China is Yang Yuanying’s Voices of Ten Chinese Female Directors (1996).

These paradoxes first led me into the study of cases in Mainland China, where the woman’s film has continued for decades. Female directors there have a relatively distinct trajectory, and a remarkable body of works produced from 1984 to 1994 formed a wave of women’s cinema. I then expanded my studies to cases in Hong Kong, where the woman’s film tradition can be traced, and important women directors are usually not studied as a group. The research on cases in Taiwan and Japan turned out to be very difficult, as women directors only seem to emerge by chance or with a particular trend related to their gender. I hope to share my findings in this paper, which includes two parts: the first will introduce important names and tendencies if not trends, and the second will highlight Chinese and Japanese women directors’ contribution to women’s cinema and world cinema at large.

1. Film History and Women’s Trajectory

   - Pioneer Women: 1920s to 1940s

In both China and Japan, as women could not be seen in public before the advent of cinema, many film actresses achieved their star status in the early 1920s, and their popularity increased throughout the silent film period all the way through the 1940s. Women directors, however, were very rare. Chinese film history maintains Xie Caizhen to be the first female director. She wrote and directed a film titled A Orphan’s Cry (1925), a family melodrama by Nanxiong Film Company and with a rather complicated plot. This film caused a sensation at the time, partly because it was directed by a woman. Another woman who directed a film in the 1920s was Wang Hanlung (1903-78), but no official film history includes her as such. Wang Hanlung became a top star after her first screen appearance in Orphan Rescues Grandfather (1923)—a box-office hit that saved its production company from bankruptcy. Her films made the producers rich, but she did not get paid. She won a lawsuit against the production company, but all she received for compensation was a bad cheque. In 1929, she set up the Hanlung Film Company, bought Bao Tianxiao’s screenplay, The Revenge of an Actress, and invited a renowned director—Bu Wancang—to direct the film. As the director liked to gamble on horses and was often absent from the shooting set, Wang Hanlung was forced to direct and edit the film herself. She then took the film on tour and screened it in over a dozen cities. She made a fortune and left the film circle in 1930.

The only woman directing Chinese language films in the 1930s and 1940s was American-born Esther Eng (1914-70), who is regarded the first Hong Kong female director. “Still in her teens, with no background for such a venture, Esther went to Hollywood, rented a studio in Sunset Boulevard and made her first picture for Chinese markets here and in China” 1 Shanghai Film Documents and 1930s’ newspapers from Hong Kong also record this venture, a Sino-American production Iron Blood Fragrant Soul (1935). After China entered into a war with Japan in 1937, she directed National Heroes (1937), which was followed by a “social education drama”, Ten Thousand Lovers, and a love tragedy, Storm of Envy, in 1938. Her films were successful, partly thanks to press interest in her. In 1939, she made an all-actress film titled Women’s World, which portrayed 36 women in different professions and related their conditions of existence and their encounters in society. This film was completed before MGM’s Women (1939), another all-actress film with a crew of 130 women.2 She left Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation and made Golden Gate Girl in 1941 in San Francisco. The film received a favorable critique by Wern of Variety on May 28, 1941. She returned to Hong Kong and made a romance titled Blue Lake Green Jade in 1949. Her last piece was co-directed with Woo Peng and was titled Murder in New York

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4) Yu Mayun, History of Hong Kong Cinema, Volume II: the 1930s (Hong Kong: Sub-cultural Books, 1997), 207.
Chinatown (1961). She had planned on a project titled Guerilla Heroes in 1962. After the production company dropped the film, she returned to the US and never made films again. Esther Eng was a pioneer filmmaker in many senses. She was the first woman to bring a feminist consciousness and concerns of American Chinese’s lives into her films. As early as the 1930s, she attempted to represent cross-cultural and trans-national themes in cinema. She was the first to make Chinese language films in the US and the first Chinese woman to make films in Hollywood.9

Shortly before the Sino-Japan War, Kyoto-born Sakane Tazuko (1904-75), the former assistant director of Mizoguchi Kenji (the most famous “woman’s film” master), directed New Year Finery (a.k.a. First Image, 1936). She stated in 1936 that she wanted “to portray the true image of women seen from the realm of women with a thoroughness combined with [her] own view of life.” Sakane’s crew members fiercely rejected her during the production process because she was a woman. Even though she finally managed to deliver the completed film, it was a critical and box-office failure.6 Sakane was never to direct another feature film. She went to Japanese-occupied Manchuria, became a director for Manchuria Film Association, and directed about ten documentaries. The only film by her that survives today is A Settler’s Bride (1943). When she returned to Japan after the war, she could not even find position as an assistant director. She worked as a script coordinator and editor for the rest of her career. Like her contemporaries Esther Eng and Dorothy Arzner, Sakane had short hair and often dressed in suits, and attempted to bring a feminine consciousness into her work.7

Splits under the Political Sky: 1950s to 1979

Seventeen years after Sakane Tazuko directed her first and only feature, Tanaka Kinuyo (1910-77), a top star from the silent film period to her last screen appearance in 1976, made her directorial debut with Love Letter (1953), whose hero is a man who writes love letters for Japanese wives left behind by American soldiers. When commenting on the challenge of taking up the director’s role at the age of 43, she said in an interview: “It was really a matter of knowing no fear.” After being treated like a star for decades, “it was human skills” that she “needed more than technique.” Tanaka’s directorial debut received lots of media attention thanks to both her status and the film’s subject matter in postwar Japan. She continued to work as an actress and directed five more films between 1955 and 1961, including The Moon Has Risen (1955), The Eternal Breasts (1955), The Wandering Princess (1960), Girls of Dark (1961) and Love under the Crucifix (1962). Male directors in her time, including Mizoguchi Kenji, made negative comments on Tanaka’s directing skill and style. I think these comments at least prove that she did have a distinct directing style. In Japan, her effort reveals a powerful challenge to the limitation of her gender and her primary role as an actress. Tanaka was the only woman who held a membership in the Directors Guild of Japan until her death in 1977; and for several decades, Tanaka had been mistakenly called the first woman director of Japan.8

After 1949, a large number of Shanghai-based filmmakers moved to Hong Kong and continued to make Mandarin films until the 1970s. Among these migrants, China’s Shirley Temple Chen Juanjuan and famous director Ren Pengqian’s daughter Ren Yizhi would become female directors in Hong Kong. The Japanese occupation of Taiwan also ended in 1945, and native Taiwanese cinema began to boom. At this point, Chinese-language cinema split into three separate streams of development.

In Mainland China, former stage and film actress Wang Ping (1916-90) was appointed as a film director in August First Film Studio—a unit under the People’s Liberation Army that specialized in war films—together with three other women Wang Shaoyan (1924-), Dong Kena (1930-) and Wu Guoying.9 Wang Ping’s earlier works, including The Story of Liu Jiao Village (1957), foregrounding the love between a young soldier and a country girl, and The Everlasting Radio Signals (1958), about a former Red Army soldier’s working in radio espionage, were great hits of the time. These films not only demonstrate her artistic maturity and personal style, but more importantly, set up a

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5) Law Kar and Frank Bruni, 96-9.
8) Kunugi’s documentary includes this interview. Also see Masumoto, 253.
9) This information comes from our interview with Dong Kena. There is no record of films made by Wu Guoying.
sexual-textual prototype for the “revolutionary/war genre.” As Yang Yuanqing points out, “The lovers or couples’ relationship is one between a leader and a follower. They meet in a specific historical time and space and develop an unchangeable love while fighting for their ideals. For them, the battlefield is the field of love, while revolution equates to love.”

In Wang Ping’s films, the leader is always male, although women’s growth is vividly portrayed with convincing details, which were drawn from her personal experiences. Her lyrical film language is often identified as feminine. She made thirteen features in her life including The East Is Red (1965) and Songs of Chinese Revolution (1990), two musical eulogies of the Chinese Communist revolutionary history. Her role as the General Director for both films was proof of her high political and cultural status.

In 1957, as the female boss of Taipei’s San Chong Ming Theatre, Chen Wenmin decided to invest in a romance film titled Xue Rengui and Liu Jinhua, which she wrote herself. Her decision was largely due to the success of a Taiwanese dialect film with a similar theme, Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan, in 1955. Even though she received no formal training, she broke down the scenes following the method of the picture-story book at that time. After a dispute, the director Shao Luoshi, who was quite famous at the time, dropped the project. Chen Wen-min finished the production on her own, but still credited Shao Luoshi as the director and herself (with the name Chen Fen) as the writer. The next year, she wrote and directed a romantic film, Lost Bird (1958), which was followed by five more romantic films. Since she understood the audience’s psychology very well, all of these films did well at the box office. In 1962, she co-directed The Second Spring with Lin Fudi and retired from the film industry when Taiwanese-dialect film production reached a low point. So far, no female director in Taiwan has surpassed Chen Wen-min’s commercial success.

Also in the 1950s, Ren Yizhi (1917-79), the daughter of early film director Ren Pengian, worked first as an actress and then as a scriptwriter. Between 1955 and 1959, she co-directed eight films—mostly urban melodrama or light comedy—with other more famous and male directors. In 1960, she independently directed three films about love and marriage: An Unfulfilled Wish (1960), Ah, It’s Spring! (1961) and The Four Daughters (1963). She was the first native female director working in Hong Kong, and the only one active from the 1950s to early 1960s. According to Hong Kong Film Archive records, her films in this period were all black and white, and mostly produced by Great Wall and Phoenix Film Companies. In 1972, she co-directed her last, and only, color films Three Seventeen-Year-Olds with Malaysian born actress Chen Juanjuan (1928-67), who also co-directed four films with other male directors in the 1960s.

Two female colleagues of Wang Ping in August First Film Studio, Dong Kena and Wang Shaoyan, made their first films in the 1960s. Dong’s A Grass on the Kundan Mountain (1962) reveals a strong sense of feminine consciousness that was very rare at the time. It portrays believable details and psychological complexity that overwhelmed the audience at the time. Dong Kena received over one thousand letters from viewers. Wang Shaoyan’s most successful film is a revolutionary musical titled Red Coral (1961). Between 1966 and 1976, China suffered the chaotic decade of the Cultural Revolution, and filmmaking almost came to a standstill.

During the early 1970s, two more female directors emerged in Hong Kong, but they were soon forgotten. Former actress Cao Baoshu set up Baoshu Film Company in the early 1970s and produced Human Traffic (1974) and Low Society (1976). Tang Shu-shuen (1941-), an experimental film director and the first Hong Kong director to garner international attention, made four features in her short film career. Tang Shu-shuen was born in Mainland China and moved to Taiwan with her father when she was sixteen. In 1960, she studied film at the famous University of Southern California. Her debut work, The Arc (1970), tells a story about a widow and her daughter falling for the same man. Tang deals with “a woman’s inner emotional life”, and gained international recognition for “a slowly paced eroticism—filtered through a modern...”


11 According to Xue Haoling and Wu Junzhi’s film index of 1955-1981, Xue Rengui and Liu Jinhu and its sequel Xue Rengui Conquering the East are both directed by Shao Luoshi and written by Chen Fen (Chen Wenmin). Only Lost Bird is directed by Chen Wenmin and thus listed as first film by a female director. See The Era of Taiwanese Language Cinema (Taipei: National Film Archive, 1994), 332-3.


13 See The Ninth Hong Kong International Film Festival Special Issue (1985), 113-4.

14 This information also comes from our interview with Dong Kena in 2002.
temperament." Her second film, China Behind (1974), was shot in Taiwan with government support, and depicts a few young Mainlanders’ escape to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution. The film was never shown in any Chinese language territory and only went to some film festivals. It was soon forgotten. Her last two films were Sapi San Bup Day (1975) and Hong Kong Tycoon (1979). Hong Kong film scholar Yau Ching recovered a great deal of historical documents on Tang Shu-shuen in a 2004 book. Yau praised Tang’s last two films and rebuffs the view of critics in Hong Kong at the time, which indirectly ended Tang’s film career.

In 1977, the year of Tanaka Kinuyo’s death and fifteen years after she directed her last film, Hitomi Sachiko (1930-2001), another famous actress of Japan who was awarded from both Japan and Berlinale, directed a film titled The Far Road. This is Hidari’s only directorial work. The film depicts the building of Japan National Railway through the point of view of the worker’s wives. According to Sandra Brennan, in All Movie Guide, the film: “realistically chronicled the travails of working-class women” and offers a portrayal of women “historically rare in Japanese film.” Joan Mellen also published her review of 12 films about postwar Japan in The New York Times Review on April 22, 1979, stating that “Miss Hidari’s film deprives us of any illusion about this recourse for the besieged Japanese citizen.” There were a few other Japanese women who directed only one film in the 1970s, but no other work reached The Far Road’s achievement.

The Golden Age: 1979 to 1994

The “Healthy Realism” promoted by the Taiwan government in the 1960s and 1970s was replaced by a wave of romantic films, in which the most prolific female director of Taiwan, Liu Lili (1936-), emerged. She began her film career as assistant director in 1963, and directed her first film in 1977. From 1979 to 1992, she directed nine films adapted from the bestsellers of the famous romance writer, Qiong Yao, including Love under a Ray Sky (1979), Wild Goose on the Wing (1979), A Love Seed (1979), Don’t Forget the Promise (1980), Marigolds (1980), Warm Winter Sun (1980), Errant Love (1981), My Cape of Many Dreams (1981), Wells up in My Heart (1982) and Light of Last Night (1983). She continued to direct TV dramas adapted from Qiong Yao’s works until the early 1990s. These films were all produced by Qiong Yao’s husband’s company, Grand Star Film Company, and mostly starred Brigitte Lin and Chin Han, the top box-office duo at the time. As Lu Yi points out, the romance genre is not helping “the establishment of the feminine consciousness, but provides an exit for the spiritual boredom and gives the audience a space for imagination.” In the 1970s, the films offered women with a chance “to leave their home and work for a break.” Such a film genre not only “resolves social anxiety, consoles women’s lonely hearts”, but also strengthens “the identification with nation and the traditional order of the patriarchal society.” Although the moralists often belittled the genre, its “contribution to the groups with vested interests was a lot more than the official renaissance movement.” After 1980, with the emergence of Taiwan New Cinema, “social realist films” became the mainstream of Mandarin films, which portrays sex, violence, gambling, gangs and underground societies. There also emerged a sub-stream of films that featured revenge-seeking girls. Female director Yang Jiayun also made two films in this vein—Crazy She Devil (1981) and Cold Killing (1982), both are about a weak woman bullied by bad men and swears revenge.” She also took part in the production of Crazy Girl Camp (1981), which combines comic scenes with the campus film genre, and features girls in skin-tight clothing whose “objects are men. They always finish off the male devils after having a good laugh at them.”

In 1979, Ann Hui left television and made her first feature, The Secret, a thriller starring Sylvia Chang. The film was immediately claimed to be a work of the Hong Kong New Wave. She then continued to make The Spooky Bunch (1980), The Story of woo Yuet (1981), and Boat People (1982), establishing her fame as a both a commercially successful director and one with serious political concerns. Once in a

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15) (Law, 2001, p.35).
16) Yau Ching, Filming Margins: Tang Shu-shuen—A Forgotten Hong Kong Woman Director (Hong Kong: HKUP), offers a close study of all her four films—the first two in Mandarin and the last two in Cantonese.

18) This information comes from Taiwanese scholar Lin Xingzhang’s unpublished research.

Macao-born Clara Law (1957-) emerged in 1990 and was considered an important director of Hong Kong's Second Wave. Her films, like those of other Second Wave directors, show a serious concern for cultural identity: *Farewell China* (1990) focuses on a Chinese couple's migration to the US; *Autumn Moon* (1992) presents a girl waiting for her grandma's death so she can join her family that has migrated from Hong Kong to Canada. Clara Law herself also relocated to Australia around 1994 and made *Floating Life* (1996), about a family from Hong Kong, and *The Goddess of 1967* (2001), about a young Japanese man's unexpected journey with a blind girl.


Taiwan-born and American-educated Sylvia Chang (1953-), who acted in more than eighty films, began to direct in 1981. Her directorial works are mostly concerned with women's choices in love and life. She has directed twelve feature films and her films are all set in Taipei, Hong Kong and New York. *Shao Yu* (1995) was another version of the Green Card story and co-written with Ang Lee. *Tempting Heart* (1999) is a story about first love, starring three youth idols of Hong Kong and Taiwan. *20 30 40* (2004) intertwines the stories of four women: two girls in their twenties dreaming to be singers, a stewardess in her thirties caught between two lovers, and a flower shop boss in her forties who just found out her husband has a second family in the same city. An earthquake that further shakes up everyone's already "shaky" worlds came in the middle of the film and connects the three subplots in a comic manner.

Another important female director from Taiwan is Huang Yu-shan (1954-), who had worked as an assistant director for veteran director Li Xing between 1977 to 1979 before studying film in the US. In 1982, returning to Taiwan with an MA from New York University, she began to make documentaries and also took up a teaching position. Her feature films include *Autumn Tempest* (1988), *Twin Bracelets* (1989), *Peony Bird* (1990), *Wild Love* (1999), *Story of Eastern Pond* (2005), and *The Song of Chount Mountain* (2007). *Twin Bracelets* was shown at international film festivals, and this enabled Huang Yu-shan to have in-depth discussions with American independent filmmakers and feminist directors. From then on, she began to consciously push forward films about women and to organize women's film shows and festivals, encouraging independent film/video productions by Taiwanese women.

In Mainland China between 1979 and 1989, according to an incomplete survey, "59 female directors made a total of 182 films." This is in part thanks to the fact that from the 1950s to the 1960s, at Beijing Film Academy and Central Theatre Academy, about 20% of the students admitted to every directing class were female. By 1979 more than fifty female directors were graduates from the two academies, about half of whom played important roles in their studies. Wang Hanwei (1940-), Zhang Nannan (1940-), Huang Shuqin (1939-), Shi Shujun (1939-), Wang Junzheng (1945-), and Lu Xiaoyu (1941-) are among the best known female directors. This generation is the first generation of women who enjoyed equal opportunity with men when they grew up, and
thus arguably are the firmest believers of gender equality, and who tried very hard to
“hold up half of the sky” and keep the balance between family and career.19 Since 1984,
an even younger generation of female directors (who were classmates of the so-called
fifth-generation directors), also began to direct. By the end of the 1980s, Hu Mei
(1958-), Peng Xiaolian (1953-), Li Shuochong (1955-), Liu Miaoqiao (1962-) and Ning
Ying (1958-) had all established themselves with impressive film works.

The Independent Era: After 1995

In the 1990s, two notable younger female directors emerged in Japan and became
important women directors. Masuura Masako (1960-) made her first feature film, Secret
Liasons (1995), ten years after her completion of the film script. With the success of
her first film, she made her second feature, Deborah Is Rival (1997), and her most
acclaimed work to date, Platonic Sex (2001), which was adapted from former porn star
Iijima Ai’s autobiography. The protagonist of the film, Ai, is gang-raped at the age of
17. Instead of showing her sympathy, her father beats her and throws her out of the
house. She begins to work as a “comfort girl” in bars and then signs a contract with a
pornography film company. The film touchingly reveals Ai’s encounters in a
male-centered society, taking the audience to a world where innocence can easily be
traded and destroyed. Masuura’s films are mostly produced by major film studios such
as Toho or Shochiky. Her most recent work is Moyu: Star of Heart (2007).

Kyoto-born Kawase Naomi (1969-) won Camera d’Or at the Cannes International
Film Festival with her first feature, Suzaku (1997), becoming the youngest winner of
that title. Her second feature, Shade (2003), received the Grand Jury Prize from Cannes,
and her most recent feature, The Mourning Forest (2007), won the Grand Prix from
Cannes. Her films are all set in the ancient capital Nara and in the countryside near Nara,
revealing the beauty of the Japanese landscape and the understated emotions between
people. Kawase’s cinematic language carries a special sensitivity that is more obvious in
her documentary for which she often holds the camera and narrates in a more compelling
manner. Her films reveal a strong sense of self-awareness that is very much at odds with
the patriarchy of Japanese society and film industry. Kawase is the first female director
from Japan to receive major international recognition and the only woman whose films
are screened in Tokyo’s small theatres with other avant-garde young directors.

Two veteran women filmmakers made their first features during the independent
era. With the help of female producer Okamoto Minako, long-term scriptwriter Takayama
Yukiko (1945-) made the award-winning feature, After Wind Has Gone (1996), and her
beautiful and intriguing second feature, Mushamedoji (a.k.a. Love of Snake, 2004), in
which a woman attempts to find out why her twin sister committed suicide by re-living
her sister’s experiences of love, desire and dance. After working in the porn film
industry for nearly 30 years as the only female director, and with over 300 films to her
director’s credit, Hamano Sachiko (1948-) finally realized her dream of presenting real
women in films with her first feature film, In Search of a Lost Writer: Wandering in the
Seventh World (2001), which represents the life and work of Osaki Midori from a
perspective different from those of mainstream male critics. Hamano’s second feature is
Lily Festival (2001), a comedy reflecting the issue of the sexuality of the elderly. Her
directors, The Cricket Girl (2005), goes back to works by Osaki Midori, travelling
between the world of her fiction and the world of her fictional character’s imagination.
She is a unique and significant figure in Japanese and world cinema.

In Hong Kong, three younger women made great achievements as independent
filmmakers. Barbra Wong (1967-) graduated from Hong Kong’s Academy of Performing
Art before furthering her studies at New York University. She was first known to Hong
Kong and international audiences for her feature documentary, Women’s Private Parts
(2001), which has women from different professions talking about their view on sex and
men. Her two urban comedies, Truth or Dare: 6th Floor Rear Flat (2003) and Six Strong
Guys (2004), are both ironic and funny. Her most recent feature Wonder Women (2007)
received controversial criticism. Carol Lai (1966-) studied marketing before turning to
filmmaking. Her first feature, Glass Tear (2001), tells the story of a relationship between
a lonely old man and a run-away girl. Her second feature, Floating Landscape (2003),
focuses on a girl who cannot forget her dead lover and searches for a landscape in one
of his paintings. Another man begins to fall for her, and she helps him to recreate the

19) Chairman Mao Zedong’s words, “women can hold up half of the sky,” had been cited all the
time from the 1950s through the 1980s, even though this sentence could be misinterpreted to
women’s disadvantage.
landscape. Her two most recent features are two thrillers: The Third Eye (2006), shot on HD, and Naraka 19 (2007), involving a lot of CGI shots. Yan Yan Mak (1971-) went to The Venice Film Festival with her first feature, Ge Ge (2001), which won several awards around the world. Her second feature, Butterfly (2004), was adapted from a novella, The Mark of the Butterfly, by the Taiwanese woman writer, Cai Xue. It tells the touching story of Flavia, and cuts between her memories of her first love, Zhenzhen, with the 1989 Tiananmen Incident in the background, and her love affair with the singer Yip, which shakes her seemingly happy marriage. This is a well-made indie film that does not simply issues women face in today's Hong Kong.

In Mainland China, a group of female directors who were born in the 1970s became notable between 2000 and 2007. Li Yu (1973-) debuted with Fish and Elephant (2001), a 16mm work now regarded as the first lesbian-themed film from Mainland China. Her second feature Dam Street (2005) is about a teenage girl’s life after her untimely pregnancy. Her third and most recent film, Lost in Beijing (2007), depicts today’s Beijing, focusing on two couples’ complicated relationship after a rich man rapes another man’s wife, who is a girl working in his massage parlor. Li Yu has shown a constant interest in women’s fate and their choices in real life. Ma Xiaoying (a.k.a. Ma Liwen) made her first work, Gone Is the One Who Held Me Dearest in the World (2002), after four years of preparation. The film convincingly depicts a writer in her fifties, and her relationship with her mother who is in her eighties. The film is a rare case of using on- and off-screen voices of female characters. Ma Liwen also continued to make You and Me (2005), another woman’s film about a young tenant and her landlady in her eighties. Her most recent feature, Lost and Found (2007), is her first experience with a commercial film. Actress Yu Tingting (1974-) also directed three films: Me and My Father (2001), Letter from a Strange Woman (2003), and Dream into Reality (2006). Letter was adapted from Zoom’s novella by the same title and the film raised some controversy about women’s attitudes towards love. Li Hong was the only Beijing Film Academy graduate from the Directing Department in 1997 ever to direct a film. Her first feature, Tutor (1997), won both domestic and international awards. Her second feature was a television film shot in 16mm titled Black and White (2003) about a murder case in a photography studio. This film led the producer of her next feature to discover her potential in making thrillers, and thus her third film, Curse of Lola (2005), was advertised as a horror film even though she regards it as a thriller about the love between one man and each of his three lovers. This film was shown in Tokyo.

The most unexpected female director to emerge after 1995 in Mainland China was the famous dancer, Yang Liping, who wrote and directed The Sun Bird (1997) and played the leading role in it. The film is a semi-autobiography based on her life experiences. I think it is a very “complete” woman’s film, or even feminist film from Mainland China. Another surprise for the Chinese-language film audience was American-Chinese actress Joan Chen’s directorial debut, Xiu Xiu: Story of a Sent-down Girl (1998). Both films, and works by others, will be further discussed in the next section.

2. Contributions of Chinese and Japanese Woman Directors

After watching most feature films made by the above mentioned directors, I find their contributions to women’s cinema, or cinema in general, roughly lie in three aspects: theme, narrative and reflection. As indicated by the figure below, each aspect has at least three sub-dimensions.

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Figure: Nine Approaches to Women’s Films in China

Part 2 : Women’s Cinema in East Asia * 73
Her Ways of Storytelling

The three approaches marked by N1, N2 and N3 respectively refer to the use of women’s voices, POVs and “emotion” as a narrative drive. Dong Kena’s A Grass on Kun Lun Mountain (1962, later “Grass”) was a pioneering work, weaving together two women’s voices to order to represent their relationship and mutual influence. Li Shaoqiong’s Blue (1994) uses a female voiceover that carries a Shanghai accent and a chattering tone, and which challenges the male voice with a Beijing accent that represents official authority. This method of using double female voices is also used in several works by Haneda Sumiko—Japan’s first woman director of documentary features. Ma Xiaoying’s Gone Is the One Who Held Me Dearest in the World (2002, later “Gone”) blurs the boundary between the character’s voice and the narrative voiceover, permitting the emotional flow to cross from one woman to another and achieving what Bakhtin calls polyphony. In contrast to the use of voices, Kawase Naomi has some remarkable moments of silence that allow the audience to “hear” the “cry” of emotions suppressed.

Women’s POVs and gaze are key motifs in films like Grass, Hu Mei’s Army Nurse (1884) and Yang Liping’s The Sun Bird (1997), whose female protagonists never stop watching and observing. In Grass, the decisions of a young woman, Li Wanli, are all based on her vision. She sees a picture of the grassland under the Kun Lun Mountain and decides to become part of the landscape by working there. When she views the harsh conditions on her way to Kun Lun Mountain, she decides to give up her ambitions. In the end, the sight of another woman with an optimistic attitude encourages her to stay. She is the POV that the audience identifies with. In Army Nurse, Xiaoyu is also a quiet observer, whose eyes communicate that which words cannot. E. Ann Kaplan regards the film as different from most films made at the time because it raises the issues of women’s desire and subjectivity. Such a reading was a surprise to many Chinese critics at the time, but when they learn about Laura Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, they can see how desire is expressed through Xiaoyu’s gaze. In The Sun Bird, the female protagonist has problems with her eyes from the beginning of the film: she sees things in different colors, or her sight is related to her mind’s eye. After many examinations, the doctor suspects she has a mental problem. Through her gaze, we see a different world with different colors and cultures. In the end, she goes blind but continues to have visions in her mind. Her blindness can be read as her final refusal of the “reality” that she does not like.

During our interviews, several female directors mentioned that they often use emotion as the narrative drive. Army Nurse, Gone, and Peng Xiaolian’s Shanghai Women (2004) all exemplify such a storytelling method. Army Nurse employs a loosely-woven plot with fragments of memories that follow the emotional ups and downs of the protagonist. This emotional flow is in turn strengthened by the discrepancy between the visual and the voiceover. Shanghai Women weaves together “trivial” details of daily life rather than presenting “events” and successfully builds up the emotional and psychological ground for the understanding and final reconciliation among three generations of women. Gone traverses between real-life incidents, dreams and memories and knits them closely around the emotions of the protagonist, holding the audience in their seat with a well-controlled rhythm. Kawase Naomi’s films also reveal magic in the emotional flow even though her plot is usually loose.

Her Stories Left out by History

T1, T2 and T3 refer to the exploration of “unusual” themes. Sisterhood was once a theme that E. Ann Kaplan found missing in many Chinese films of the 1980s. Peng Xiaolian’s Women’s Story (1988) and Liu Miaomiao’s Women in the Long March (1987) make their own contribution in this respect. In both films, women’s relationships are subtle and complicated; while facing men and a man’s world, however, the sisterhood is represented as a strong partnership. This is rather uncommon in male directors’ works. In Xie Jin and Zhang Yimou’s films, for instance, women are often in competition. In Chinese-language culture, the intimacy between women could easily be accepted before “lesbian” became a familiar term to all. The lesbian relationship presented in Li Yu’s Fish and Elephant (2001) seems only one step forward from the strong sisterhood.
between two female protagonists as presented in Huang Yu-shan’s *The Double Bracelets*, where the bond between two women is eventually shattered by oppressive patriarchy. Yan Yan Mak's *Butterfly* (2004) also brings the traditional concept of “sisterhood” further into a lesbian relationship filled with desire and passion, only this time, the director allows Flavia’s triumph only after her failure in previous attempts to stay true to herself. Hamano Sachि’s *Lily Festival* (2001) begins with competition among five older women when a flirtatious old man moves into their apartment building, but the film ends with two of them going on a cruise and kissing each other. According to her, Japanese audience did not appreciate this ending at all.

In terms of “writing her stories,” Mabel Cheung’s *The Soong Sisters* (1997), Liu Miaomiao’s *Women on the Long March* (1987), Li Shaohong’s *Blush* (1994) and Zhang Nuanxin’s *Sacred Youth* (1986) all represent a period of modern Chinese history from women’s points of view. *The Soong Sisters* reveals the turbulent life of the three sisters with imagined details absent in the official history. *Women on the Long March* shows the fate of women soldiers dropped by the Communist army’s before the Long March in 1934. *Blush* lets a former prostitute speak out against a female Communist leader, who thinks all women are forced into prostitution and hard labor can effectively reform prostitutes. Zhang Nuanxin’s *Sacred Youth* (1986) focuses on the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, during which a Chinese girl in her Linen suit is sent down to the minority countryside for “re-education.” What the learns from the “primitive” people, however, is that the “civilization” that she comes from has eliminated her right to be like a girl—including her pursuit of beauty and her desire for love. Joan Chen’s *Xiu Xiu: Story of a Sent-down Girl* (1998) also poignantly and bravely depicts the desperation of the young urban Chinese in their escape from the rural regions.

For the “living and spiritual spaces”, *Shanghai Women* and *Gone* make significant explorations into women’s desire for “a room of her own.” *Shanghai Women* has a plot involving three “movements.” First, the father has an affair and the mother does not want to put up with it anymore. She moves out with her daughter and goes back to her mother’s. As her brother is getting married, she cannot stay with her mother for very long. A second marriage is arranged for her, and she moves to her new husband’s place with her daughter. Her stepson is disturbed, while her new husband calculates the cost of showers to the extent that showers are forbidden in order to save on the water bills. The mother leaves the second husband one day in rage. Having nowhere else to go, she again moves back in with her mother. This time, her sister-in-law is not happy, but her mother keeps her and her daughter. Under pressure, the grandmother encourages the mother to remarry her first husband, who is willing to accept her for their daughter’s sake. The daughter stops the mother from remarrying her father. In the end, the mother negotiates with the father and finally receives money to buy a small flat for herself and her daughter. *Gone* also has a plot in which the husband does not welcome the wife’s mother to live with them. In order to move her mother closer to her, she buys a new flat, but she has to deal with the renovation between her jobs. Her mother gets sick and spends her last days in the hospital and her husband’s living room, which leaves her with an irresolvable guilt. Both films deal with the issue of women’s living and spiritual spaces in great depth, both thematically and aesthetically. Other interesting exploration about cinematic space and human relation can be found in Hamano Sachि’s *In Search of a Lost Writer* and *Cricket Girl*, which traverses between different “realities”, especially between fictional world and “real” world.

Women’s Self-reflections

Approaches concerning women’s reflections on their bodies and on desire, their coming-of-age, and the relationship between their life and art are also very important in women’s film works. Through the cinematic representation of personal experiences and gender difference, self-reflexivity is significant for digging into the relationship between narrative form and symbolic meanings. In my opinion, the “complete” woman’s films by female directors often incorporate these three concepts. Two examples can be found in Mainland Chinese cinema.

*Women Demon Human* tells the story of Qiuyun from her childhood until she becomes a mother of two. Her coming-of-age story parallels the process of becoming a great artist—a male impersonator in the Hebei Opera. Her mother runs away with a man in the middle of a show, leaving her father on stage to be humiliated by the angry
audience. This incident hurts Qiuqun deeply, and as she grows up, she constantly attempts to escape from her gender role. She cuts her hair short and chooses to be trained as a male impersonator. When she gets caught as a boy in the female toilet and is asked to take off her pants to prove that she is a girl, she can do nothing but cry. A teacher from the provincial opera school comes around and takes her away from the crowd. A few years later, she is in love with him and dresses as a girl to win his heart; but he says, "you can be truly beautiful only when you become an excellent male impersonator." When she later gets married, her husband is jealous when she plays woman’s role and attracts male fans. In such a way, her entire coming-of-age is like a continuous “masquerade” as defined by Mary Ann Doane.23) Her costume and make-up function as Mulan’s amour in helping her to realize her value. The film is a collaboration of two mature woman artists: director Huang Shuqin and opera actress Pei Yanling. The self-reflexivity is expressed on two layers: Qiuqun’s story is based on Pei Yanling’s life story, but Pei Yanling plays the role of Zhongkui instead of Qiuqun in the film. Qiuqun and Zhongkui, while being played by two actresses, are two subjects; on the level of meta-drama, however, the two become one towards the end of the film. Zhongkui also says to Qiuqun: “I am you. And you are me.” This split is what makes the film interesting, as it creates the possibility of a dialogue between one self and the other, and for many, dialogue always works better than a monologue.

In The Sun Bird, the protagonist adopts the true name of the girl who played her teenage character, and Tina, the adult dancer, is a reflection of Yang Liping. Such a design lends the film a double-layered autobiographical set up: on one layer, Tina recalls her childhood memory of a remote village with a vital primitive culture; on the other layer, Yang Liping is writing her autobiography through the film. I think this film can be a prime example of women’s film, not only because it tells the story of a woman from the woman’s point of view, but also because all its levels of narrative are filled with feminine consciousness: adult Tina is a famous minority dancer who lives in the limelight and has to face problems that she does not want to face; when dancing, she has a different world that is far more attractive than the one she actually lives in;

when asked where her inspirations come from, her memory wanders to the past, when she lived in a different world. Through interweaving the three layers of narrative, Yang Liping created an extreme example of its kind in Chinese cinema. Her narrative is personal and feminine, fully representing what her unique cultural identity brings to her, her constant conflicts with mainstream culture, as well as the conflicts between her mind and her reality.

After interviewing fifteen female directors from Mainland China (who belong to four generations of filmmakers), five from Hong Kong, two from Taiwan and nine from Japan, we have learned that the production of such “complete” woman’s films need very specific social and financial conditions. In all of the Chinese language territories and Japan, women writers are prominent in number and significance to an extent, which far surpasses that of female directors. The once promising wave of woman’s cinema in Mainland China between 1984 and 1994 was cut short by the State’s decision to turn all film studios into private enterprises. Now, the independent era promises women new chances in the film world. In both Japan and Taiwan, independent women documentary filmmakers are already holding up half of the sky, offering their own social critiques and documenting their personal views on people, culture and life. I hope that closer attention to the female directors and scholarly evaluation of their works will enhance the awareness of their importance and encourage women to produce more films in the future.

프로그램 Program

10:00-10:10  10회 서울국제여성영화제 국제학술대회 개회사
   Opening Remarks
   이혜경 서울국제여성영화제 집행위원장
   LEE Hyae Kyung (Festival Director)
   주진숙 영상예술학회 회장
   JOO Jin-sook (President, Association of Image & Film Studies)

10:10-10:50  기조발표 Keynote Address
   테레사 드 라우레티스 (캘리포니아 산타크루즈 주립대학교, 미국)
   Teresa de LAURETTIS (University of California, Santa Cruz, USA)

Part 1: The Sustainabilities of Women's Cinema

사회: 남인영 (동서대학교, 한국)
   Moderator: NAM In-yang (Dongseo University, Korea)

10:50-11:20  페트리샤 화이트 (스워스모어 대학, 미국)
   Patricia WHITE (Swarthmore College, USA)

11:20-11:50  미건 모리스 (링난대학교, 홍콩)
   Meaghan MORRIS (Lingnan University, Hong Kong)

11:50-12:20  포론: 주유신 (영산대학교, 한국), 권은선 (순천향대학교, 한국)
   Discussant: JOO Yoo-shin (Youngsan University, Korea),
               KWON Eun-sun (Soochunhyang University, Korea)

12:20-13:10  점심 Lunch time
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