

# The Voice of Women from China

Kristina Inčiūraitė in conversation with Lingzhen Wang

**Contemporary artist Kristina Inčiūraitė, as part of her research on Asian women's identity for her new art project "The Echo of a Shadow", asks Professor Lingzhen Wang, Brown Director of the Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities (Brown University, USA), about the Asian identity, women's consciousness in the Chinese context, Chinese filmmakers, and censorship in China.**

*Kristina Inčiūraitė: It seems that Asians are "infected" with the Western aesthetic. This year, I am developing a contemporary art project on Tianducheng, a small-scale Paris in China, located on the outskirts of Hangzhou. We can find more examples of real estate projects in China that are replicas of London or Venice. The Japanese philosopher Yoko Arisaka says that the Asian colonised consciousness, which adopted Eurocentrism/Orientalism as its own culture, makes itself even more invisible and acknowledges that invisibility is the way it ought to be. If you agree with this, how do you think Asians themselves should get rid of their self-identification related to the Other in order to become more "visible"?*

**Lingzhen Wang: There has been no period in modern China when Western aesthetics and ideas were the norm. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, while capitalism had already developed in China, it was weak, both as an early form and under Western economic colonisation, and it did not transform China from an agrarian country into an industrial one. Western aesthetics only became visible in certain metropolitan areas, and even in those cities traditional practices continued. During socialist China (1949-1976), the effects of the Cold War were strong, and China successfully developed Chinese national aesthetics in virtually all cultural productions. During the early post-Mao period (1976-1989), Western styles returned, but so did pre-modern Chinese aesthetics and ideas. As the global market economy deepens in contemporary China (from the 1990s), all sorts of cultural and aesthetic ideas can coexist, as long as they help the market to grow. The market is allowed to promote Western styles, the traditional Chinese character, or local flavour, for as long as these elements increase consumption and profit. It is also a little too simple to continue using the binary framework "Western versus Asian" to understand the complex situations of history and the present. Furthermore, there are serious geo-political differences between different countries in Asia, such as India (once colonised), China (semi-colonised), and Japan (a regional coloniser). It is indeed problematic to assume any coherent identity under the term "Asia".**

*KI: We mentioned problems related to the Asian identity. In general, the modernisation of China and the adoption of Western values at the beginning of the 20th century emancipated society, and it was especially important for the woman. Even if she was still an object of desire for men, and created the image of a femme fatale, she escaped from the isolated private space into the public sphere, and became a heroine in dance halls.*

*Let's go deeper. Modern women have sometimes needed to make a sacrifice for future generations. For example, the film "New Woman" (1935) shows a modern woman, Wei Ming, who encounters many problems in pursuing her career as a writer, and is pushed by the patriarchal society to take her own life. It is interesting that "New Woman" is based on the life of the Chinese actress Ai Xia, who committed suicide in 1934. Ruan Lingyu, a star of Chinese cinema, who was the main heroine in this film, also repeated the same scenario, and committed suicide shortly after the film's release. This film, as well as the life of Ruan Lingyu, was remembered in the film "Center Stage" (1992), where the contemporary actress Maggie Cheung portrayed the former prima donna of the silver screen, and among other awards received the Best Actress Award at the Berlin International Film Festival. Suicide by famous women manifested the collective suffering of Chinese women, and achieved a huge resonance across society.*

*The Taiwanese scholar Zhou Huiling compared the lives and suicides of both actresses, and found some significant differences. Ai Xia's suicide was a modern girl's protest against the left-wing mainstream culture of the 1930s; while Ruan's suicide and her character Wei Ming's tragedy were reconstructed by the left-wing director to fit the ideology. Inspiring and dramatic stories quite often become a tool for different political platforms.*

*Such interlaced dramatic stories of Chinese women are only one example in the history of modern times in China. Can you give us a brief history of the modernisation of Chinese women's consciousness? How is it expressed in Chinese cinema?*

**LW: The concept of the "modern Chinese woman" before 1949 is still defined largely in relation to a small percentage of the population, who resided in a few urban centres and had a rather modern education. Given that China's rural population comprised more than 80% of the total in the first half of the twentieth century, and that of the 20% of urban dwellers, only a fraction, most of whom were men, received a modern education, we might want to restructure our framing of women in modern China. Both Ai Xia and Ruan Lingyu belonged to the tiny percentage of quite educated, relatively elite women in Shanghai, although Ruan had only received a rudimentary education.**

**"Women's consciousness" does not contain a universal, self-evident truth, as this concept originated from the (white) middle class, liberal feminism of modern capitalist society. However, in the history of Western imperialist expansion, "women's consciousness" (and women's individual independence) became a universal standard for measuring the extent of modernisation in other parts of the world. This universalisation itself was a political move, as it promotes a white, middle class, liberal ideology in the service of the expansion of capitalist markets. That is to say, from both its origin in Europe and its spread over the world, the concept of "women's consciousness" has always been politically oriented.**

**In the Chinese context, "women's consciousness" as a modern feminist idea, like its counterpart in the West, has never achieved an autonomous status, and was usually attached to other modern ideas embraced by urban elites at the time. For**

example, it was associated with nationalism in the late Qing period, with anti-Confucianism in the May Fourth, with commercialisation in the late 1920s and 1930s, and with the class struggle and class-consciousness in the left-wing movement of the 1930s and 1940s. What complicated the Chinese situation from early on was the fact that different types of feminist ideas, with conflicting values, including anarchist feminism and Marxist feminism, were all introduced to China since the late Qing period. As a critique of capitalism, both Marxism and anarchism challenged liberal ideas, and commercial modernity in general. The influence of the Russian socialist revolution, as well as women's emancipation there, also played a significant role in imagining an alternative modernity in the Chinese context.

“Women's consciousness” became negatively associated with the bourgeois class and values in the Chinese socialist revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was forced to relocate its urban base to rural areas after a bloody split between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party in 1927. Women's emancipation, led by the CCP, was then reconceptualised through a combination of Marxist theory and May Fourth anti-Confucianism. This version targeted a much larger and more diverse population of rural and lower class women, and it became integrated into Chinese socialist endeavours, including national independence, class emancipation and anti-capitalism from the late 1920s to 1949, and then into the socialist construct, nation building, and political movements from 1949 to 1976.

“Women's consciousness” resurfaced in the post-Mao era (after 1976), this time more as “female consciousness”, associated with sexual differences, female desire, love, and women's personal narratives. It was initially a reaction to the masculine model upheld for both men and women in the socialist period, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and then became a central concept of the “women's research movement”, a relatively independent feminist movement initiated and organised by a group of women intellectuals in the 1980s. This reemerged concept was also a key element in the 1980s mainstream discourse that emphasised universal and enlightenment modernity. As the market economy developed in China during the 1990s, “women's consciousness” became a common term in the popular discourse, while its content became more and more ambiguous, as it could refer to traditional, enlightenment, or commercial (re)configurations of women.

In Shanghai cinema of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, which was dominated by commercial rules and controlled by the Nationalist Party of the Republic of China, modern women were represented predominantly via commercial values. In the early 1930s, films emerged that were influenced by May Fourth cultural values, left-wing ideas and popular anti-war sentiments (regarding the occupation of Manchuria by the Japanese in 1931, and the formal Sino-Japanese war of 1937-1945). This was due to the establishment of a left-wing film organisation in 1931, and the direct participation of left-wing intellectuals in films sponsored by major studios. “New Woman” (1935) was one of these

influential left-wing films, and Ruan Lingyu starred in many other left-wing films at the time as well. Overall, as a modern concept that emphasises individual women's independence and self-reflection, "women's consciousness" did not do well in Shanghai cinema, because of the commercial configuration of the film industry at the time, and because of the turbulent history of modern China. In fact, "women's consciousness" was represented in both left-wing films and literature as a trap that could lead women nowhere in a semi-colonised and semi-feudal society. Ding Ling's "Miss Sophie's Diary" (1927) conveys similar insights and women's self-struggle. Modern women's consciousness was redefined in left-wing cinema in relation to anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. Li Ahying, in "New Woman", represents an avant-garde figure for the time, who overcomes all the shortcomings embodied by the individualist and desperate heroine, and works with female factory workers to fight for the futures both of China and of women.

Associated with Western individualism in socialist China (1949-1976), "women's consciousness" disappeared in the public discourse and the mass media, including socialist cinema. However, in the 1950s, China saw the rise of the first generation of female directors, as a result of the institutionalisation of socialist feminism and the national implementation of a gender equality policy. These female directors played a significant role in constructing a new collective and proletarian subject for both men and women. In early post-Mao cinema, as a reaction to the ultra-leftist fashion of the Cultural Revolution, women directors became especially visible in articulating female desire, subjectivity and individual consciousness. Hu Mei's "Army Nurse" (1984) and Zhang Nuanxin's "Sacrifice of Youth" (1985) are two examples. Whereas the female consciousness continued to play an important role in the 1980s intellectual feminist movement, it began to fade out of women's cinema around the mid-1980s. Both Hu Mei and Zhang Nuanxin focused their subsequent films on socially or historically oriented themes. That is to say, in the 1980s, even among educated women growing up in the socialist period, differences existed in their takes on the female consciousness and the socialist legacies of women's emancipation. Zhang Nuanxin, for example, quickly shifted her attention to gender and class issues, produced by China's development of the market economy in the early 1990s.

For younger generations who had no experience of institutionalised socialist feminism and gender equality, as were practised from the 1950s to the 1970s, things are less complicated. The individualist consciousness, often with a self-centered world-view, largely accounted for the success of a small number of young women in the market era. A neoliberal sense of self-identity, economic independence, self-obsession, consumerism, individual desires, and middle class family values with no concern for social issues, has triumphed among well-educated and white-collar young women. In cinematic representation, "chick flicks" by both female and male directors became popular among young audiences. The two most famous examples are "Sophie's Revenge" (2009, directed by Jin Yimeng) and "Tiny Times" (a series, from 2013, directed by Guo Jingming). The Sophie in Ding Ling's 1927 story "Miss Sophie's Diary" rejects

**the seduction and attraction of capitalism, and individual desires associated with it, and thus ends her story in desperation and hope. The Sophie in Jin Yimeng's 2009 film "Sophie's Revenge" embraces all those values, concluding her story with a fulfilled love life, a successful career, and also a total disregard for society as a whole.**

*KI: We often hear that Chinese filmmakers encounter censorship in China. How strong is censorship in mainland China and Hong Kong? How hard is it for female Chinese filmmakers to reach the big screen there?*

**LW: Censorship of sensitive political topics remains a concern in contemporary China, but I think both male and female Chinese filmmakers face a greater problem on a day-to-day basis: the constraints of the market, which can greatly diminish independent film production. Since the privatisation of the film industry in 1993, filmmakers have learned that it is vital to secure sponsorship/ investment, and to make their films profitable. Investors and audiences have played increasingly important roles in the development of the contemporary Chinese film industry. American blockbusters have also posed enormous challenges to Chinese films. Female filmmakers these days often feel that, while they have the freedom to express themselves, finding an investor who is interested in their themes and ideas has become seriously difficult. The audience is another crucial factor in determining what type of film they consider making. Consequently, the question at present is less about whether their films can reach Chinese spectators, and more about whether they can find investors, and whether an audience (of significant size) is really interested in what they want to express.**

*KI: In the book "Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts" (Columbia University Press, 2011), you make a distinction between concepts of transnational cinema and transnational feminism.*

*On one hand, you say that transnational cinema, which emerged in the context of the technological revolution and economic globalisation, goes beyond the limitations of national cinema, and pays attention to films made by filmmakers living in cosmopolitan centres or in the diaspora. In transnational cinema, even apolitical, amoral and utopian visions of transnationalism appear in order to describe a real world shaped by a technological globalised future, rather than linked to its colonial past.*

*On the other hand, you point out that transnational feminism focuses on the problems of the "global village": racism, illegal border crossing, forced economic migration, political exile and xenophobia. We could conclude that transnational feminism assumes the role of the policeman in our problematic world, while transnational cinema expresses the dizziness of a globalised world which is driven by neoliberal logic.*

*Can you tell us about any films by female Chinese film directors who focus sharply on the problems of the globalised world? We know little about contemporary Chinese women's cinema in the Baltic Sea region.*

**LW: Zhang Nuanxin was one of the first female directors to look at the adverse effects of market globalisation in her film “South China 1994” (1995), shortly before she passed away in 1995. Both class and gender-related problems, in a transnational setting, are explored in this film. Li Yu’s “Lost in Beijing” (2007) is another example, focusing on migrant foot masseuses working for a company run by a Hong Kong businessman.**

*KI: I was quite surprised to see the recently released film “Longing for the Rain” (2013), by the Chinese woman director Yang Lina, where the sexual needs of contemporary woman are expressed in a very unconstrained way. The heroine speaks out about her sexuality, and her own needs, which is an important gesture from a feminist point of view. Actually, her film shows an emotional and spiritual crisis, loneliness in the contemporary, commercialised world. Yang Lina asserted critically in the media: “Women have become more passive in a social environment eroded by commercial values. Some young women now take a house and a car as a basic requirement before marriage, using money to value a relationship that follows in the historical concubine tradition.”*

*If we talk about women’s self-esteem and self-realisation, just imagine what direction Chinese women’s consciousness could take in the future? How could Chinese men’s consciousness change simultaneously?*

**LW: I think this is a global issue, limited neither to China nor to women. I have not watched Yang Lina’s film, but I am not surprised by its central thesis. In an era of global capitalism, when commercialism is a central part of everyday life, people’s self-worth and power are measured largely by what they own. Alienation is rooted in the economic basis of society. There is no need to go back to the traditional practice of concubinage: the capitalist market (re)produces a modern patriarchy and class hierarchy. Liberal feminism, which focuses on women’s individual self-esteem and consciousness, is blind to class and geo-political issues, and it cannot offer material help to women across class stratifications and geo-political regions. Some people’s self-esteem is achieved through the degradation of other people from different classes, races and geographical locations. The status of Chinese women has been declining since the end of the socialist period, but gender issues in contemporary China cannot be addressed independently, because they are closely tied to all other economic, political and social issues in the globalised market.**

**Professor Lingzhen Wang is Brown Director of the Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities, and a co-founder and co-editor of the journal “Gender, Theory and Culture” (in Chinese). Professor Wang has published four books, and numerous articles in journals or collections, on modern Chinese literature and culture, Chinese women writers, feminist theories and Chinese cinema. Her current book project is entitled “Women Directing Films: History, Cinematic Authorship, and Feminisms in Modern China”.**

In the projects space of the Lithuanian Interdisciplinary Artists' Association (Malonioji str. 6, Vilnius) the new artworks of Kristina Inčiūraitė will be presented: a few films and objects inspired by her research trip to China. The exhibition is on display from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015, from 3 to 6 pm.

