

Becoming a Woman: Image Practice and Cultural Expression of Chinese Female Directors in the New Era

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Abstract:

This article introduces the concept of *becoming-woman* from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of *becoming*, exploring how contemporary Chinese female directors dynamically construct their female identities in film, highlighting the process of identity fluidity and cultural agency. *Becoming-woman* emphasizes the incompleteness and diversity of female identity, challenging the notion of a stable female essence. In the works of directors Wen Yan, Jia Ling, and Li Yu, female characters continually break free from patriarchal norms, moving from silence to expression and from passive to active control of their bodies, showcasing multiple pathways to *becoming-woman*. The article argues that these creations not only reflect the evolution of female consciousness but also highlight unique ways of female cultural expression in the Chinese context, playing a significant role in gender equality, social reflection, and the redefinition of cultural values.

Key words: becoming-woman; female director; Chinese film; Deleuze; Gattari

Introduction

In recent years, the rise of women in film creation has become a significant phenomenon in global cultural production (Bielby, 2009; Crane, 2014; During, 1997). As the concept of gender equality deepens, more and more female directors are beginning to bring unique perspectives to visual storytelling, highlighting women's experiences through their choice of themes, character development, and camera work (McClean, 2007; Panayiotou, 2015; Wang, 2024;

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Zhang & Yin, 2025). In the new era, Chinese cinema is witnessing an increase in the number of female directors and a stronger focus on women's issues (Cui, 2003; Hurbis-Cherrier, 2012; Malone, 2018). Despite these advancements, female directors still face structural challenges in the film industry, such as uneven resource distribution, persistent gender biases, and limited creative freedom (Joshi et al., 2015; Rao et al., 2015). In this context, how female directors can use film language to challenge mainstream perspectives, express women's experiences, and redefine the female subject has become a key issue in academic research. Traditional feminist film criticism often focuses on "female representation" and "male gaze," but there is a lack of research on how women's identities dynamically form and how they achieve breakthroughs and transformations in visual media. This article introduces the *becoming-woman* concept from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of *becoming*, using it as a theoretical foundation to analyze how contemporary Chinese female directors express and reshape women's consciousness in their visual practices.

Theoretical Framework: *Becoming-Woman* in Film Studies

Becoming-woman is a central philosophical concept elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Holland, 2013). This concept aims to challenge the stability and essentialization of identity, emphasizing that the subject is not pre-established but is in a continuous process of change, generation, and differentiation (Lattas, 1991; Pringle & Landi, 2017; Wellner, 2022). According to them, *becoming* is not about imitation or transformation into a fixed type; rather, it is a process of escaping existing power structures and classification systems—a process of producing difference and displacement (Cowan, 1996). *Becoming-woman* is a fundamental threshold within the *becoming* series. It does not refer to the biological confirmation of female identity, but rather a symbolic and political decentering process.

This process involves the subject continuously breaking free from the disciplinary logic of "male-centric norms" in social, cultural, linguistic, and power systems, generating a marginal, open, and resistant state of existence (McWeeny, 2017). Deleuze and Guattari stress that *becoming-woman* is not about becoming "like a woman," but about transcending humanism

and hierarchical structures to open pathways for more complex forms of existence. Introducing *becoming-woman* into women's film studies means we no longer view women as stable narrative objects or themes, but focus on how female identities are constructed, dismantled, and reconstructed in films (Cîrlig, 2022; Yang, 1999). Furthermore, it enables us to analyze how female directors achieve subject escape, shifts in gender politics, and the active construction of cultural identity through their film practices.

Literature Review

Feminist Film Studies and Chinese Context

Research on women's films has produced a wealth of achievements both domestically and internationally (Kuhn & Radstone, 1994; Tolentino, 2009; Van Hemert, 2013). Since the 1970s, Western scholars have delved into topics such as the "male gaze," "women's viewing positions," and "the writing of women's bodies," developing various strands of feminist film criticism (Mulvey, 1975; de Lauretis, 1987; Smith et al., 2015). In recent years, concepts like "post-feminism," "queer perspectives," and "sensory politics" have further enriched the theoretical resources of women's film studies (Gill, 2007; Benschhoff & Griffin, 2006; Marks, 2000).

In China, research on women's films primarily focuses on several areas: first, examining the emergence and development of female directors from a social history perspective, such as the work of Yang Yuanying and Niu Biling on the history of Chinese female directors; second, analyzing how female directors reflect women's experiences and identity oppression in specific historical periods through textual analysis, such as Dai Jinhua's influential interpretation of Huang Shuqin's *Woman·Demon·Human*; third, exploring the expression of gender awareness and "writing about women" in women's films, discussing how female directors use visual language to tell women's stories and empower women as subjects (Su, 2016). However, existing research still has several shortcomings: first, most studies focus on the gender identity of female directors as "female creators," lacking theoretical analysis of their subject formation logic; second, they often concentrate on works from the late 20th and early 21st centuries,

neglecting the dynamic evolution of women's consciousness in the works of contemporary Chinese female directors; third, they rarely adopt non-essentialist perspectives such as the philosophy of *becoming* to analyze how women's identities evolve and are generated in films. Therefore, it is urgent to introduce new theoretical tools to deepen the theoretical depth and broaden the methodological scope of research on female directors.

Industrial Context: Landscape of Female Directors in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

Development overview of Chinese female directors

In the contemporary society where gender equality is increasingly recognized, women's creative influence in the film industry has steadily increased, and the number and visibility of female directors have grown (Bielby, 2009; Liddy, 2020; Wang, 2024). However, from an overall industry perspective, female directors still hold a relatively disadvantaged position in China's film industry (Bielby & Bielby, 1996; Conor et al., 2015; Mahar, 2006). According to the 2017–2021 domestic film statistics released by the One International Women's Film Festival, a total of 1,499 domestic films were released during this period, of which only 148 were directed by women, accounting for less than 10% (9.87%). More concerning is that among these 148 films directed by women, only 23.65% focused on women's issues, highlighting the numerous constraints faced by female directors in expressing women's experiences and addressing gender issues. In terms of commercial success, the box office performance of female-directed works has been limited. According to the *2024 China Film Industry Annual Report*, from 2012 to 2024, only three films—Jia Ling's *Hi, Mom* (2021), Zhang Ziyi as co-director in *My Country, My Parents* (2021), and Jia Ling's *YOLO* (2024)—ranked among the top ten box office hits of the year. In other years, few works by female directors have gained mainstream market recognition. This phenomenon not only reflects the limitations imposed by the market structure on the acceptance of female directors' works, but also exposes the structural neglect of women's perspectives in capital and distribution channels.

Despite their lack of numerical and box-office dominance, the works of female directors

have demonstrated significant social and cultural influence (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 1979; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Skalli, 2006). A prime example is Wen Yan's *Carnival*, which won the Best Director Award at the 54th Golden Horse Awards. The film's profound exploration of underage sexual abuse has garnered significant public attention. It holds a high rating of 8.2 on Douban, reflecting audiences' strong recognition of the portrayal of women in realistic themes. The public discussions and social interventions sparked by these works highlight the unique perspectives and critical engagement of female directors in addressing gender issues within the cultural sphere.

Currently, in the male-dominated film industry, female directors still face multiple challenges. Firstly, the process of obtaining resources and decision-making power in filmmaking has long been unequal. Due to censorship, market expectations, and gender biases within production teams, female directors are often required to "self-censor" or compromise when expressing their perspectives. Secondly, gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted in public opinion (Johmår, 2023). For instance, during Jia Ling's nomination for the Hundred Flowers Awards, media and public discussions primarily focused on her physical transformation and appearance, while her directorial skills and the value of her work were largely overlooked—reflecting society's tendency to judge female creators by external standards. Additionally, Shao Yihui's film *Her Story*, which touches on gender issues, has already sparked "reverse resistance" from some male audiences, who accuse it of "generalizing from a biased perspective" and "furthering gender conflict," highlighting the structural tension in the current space for gender expression.

In this imbalanced industry ecosystem, national policies and industry platforms have gradually begun to offer systematic support to improve the creative environment for female directors. In 2024, the China Film Foundation established the "Women's Film Special Fund" and launched the "Shengfang Plan," which focuses on incubating genre films, animated short films, and documentary features centered on women aged 35 and above, aiming to increase the visibility of women's experiences across different age groups. That same year, the Beijing

International Film Festival introduced the “NEWHER·Feature Film Support Program,” providing comprehensive assistance throughout the creative process for films with a female theme, including curator involvement, collaborative development, and distribution support.

These policies not only provide substantial resource guarantees for female directors but also establish institutional pathways for gender narratives to enter the mainstream industry chain. Meanwhile, female-themed film exhibition platforms like the One International Women’s Film Festival continue to expand their cultural influence. As the only women’s film festival approved by the National Film Bureau in China, the festival will launch the “Female Director Feature Film Support Program” annually starting in 2025, offering up to 1 million yuan in production support and international distribution services to selected projects. Additionally, various women’s-themed forums and cross-border cooperation platforms are becoming increasingly active. For example, the “FIRSTFRAME: One Frame” forum focuses on the Chinese women’s film ecosystem; the “Creating Her” special unit of the ARTSHANGHAI European National Collection Exhibition showcases collaboration between Chinese and French female directors; and the China Women Filmmakers Summit, initiated by Professor Dai Jinhua, brings together multiple generations of female filmmakers to discuss contemporary issues.

These initiatives collectively foster a multi-layered and multidimensional gendered cultural space, laying a solid foundation for the sustainable production, broad dissemination, and critical study of female-directed cinema.

Table 1. Timeline of Major Institutional Supports for Female Directors in China (2012–2025)

Year	Initiative / Policy Name	Type of Support	Focus Area	Cultural/Industry Impact
2012	Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF)	Exhibition	Female directors,	Showcased female perspectives; enhanced

	“Women’s Microfilm” Series		women-centered themes	visibility of women filmmakers
2013	China Women's Film Festival (CWFF)	Exhibition	Women filmmakers, gender issues	Nationwide visibility; public gender awareness
2017	One International Women’s Film Festival (ONEIWFF)	National platform	All genres, women-led projects	China’s first major women’s cinema forum
2018	Jinpeng Award Female-Themed Short Film Competition	Short film Competition and development support	Female-themed short films	Platform for discovering and supporting emerging female directors
2024	“Her in Creation” Sino-French Women Filmmakers Program (ART SHANGHAI Special Section)	Exhibition, screening and forum	women in film production	Promoted international dialogue and visibility
2024	China Film Foundation “Women’s Film Special Fund-Shengfang Project”	Project incubation and funding	Female-themed projects; women aged 35+	Over 700 projects submitted; promotes mature voices
2025	Beijing International Film Festival “NEWHER Program”	End-to-end production support	Female-themed features	Supported 10+ releases; workshop, mentorship, project incubator

Overall, despite the challenges faced by Chinese female directors in terms of institutional, market, and cultural environments, their works demonstrate a strong desire to express and have

significant potential for social impact, cultural critique, and gender awareness. With the dual support of policy and public cultural environment, the visual practices of female directors are moving from the periphery to the center, marking a new chapter in the transformation of gender discourse in Chinese cinema.

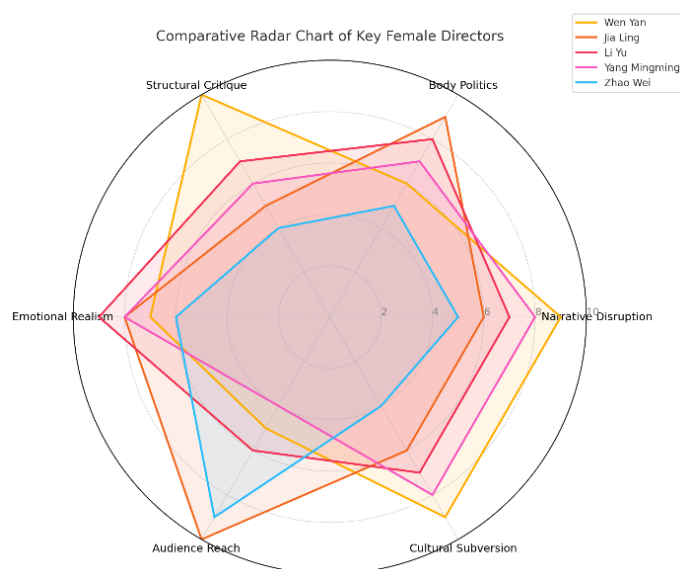


Figure 1 Comparative Radar Chart of Key Female Directors Across Feminist-Cinematic Dimensions

This radar chart visualizes five influential contemporary Chinese female directors—Wen Yan, Jia Ling, Li Yu, Yang Mingming, and Zhao Wei—evaluated across six key dimensions: *Narrative Disruption*, *Body Politics*, *Structural Critique*, *Emotional Realism*, *Audience Reach*, and *Cultural Subversion*. Each axis represents the intensity of a director's engagement with that specific theme, scored on a scale from 1 to 10 based on the thematic and stylistic analysis provided in the manuscript. The chart highlights the diverse feminist strategies and aesthetic approaches shaping women's cinematic authorship in China.

This stream graph illustrates the evolving distribution of five major thematic and institutional trends in Chinese female-directed cinema from 2010 to 2025: Drama, Feminist-Centered Narratives, Comedy, Policy-Supported Projects, and Experimental Films. The vertical width represents the relative frequency or level of institutional support for each

category in a given year. Since 2015, Feminist-Centered Narratives and Policy-Supported Projects have shown a steady rise, reflecting increasing governmental and public attention to gender-related themes. Meanwhile, Comedy and Experimental formats are gradually integrated, signaling a diversification in the stylistic and expressive modes of female cinematic authorship.

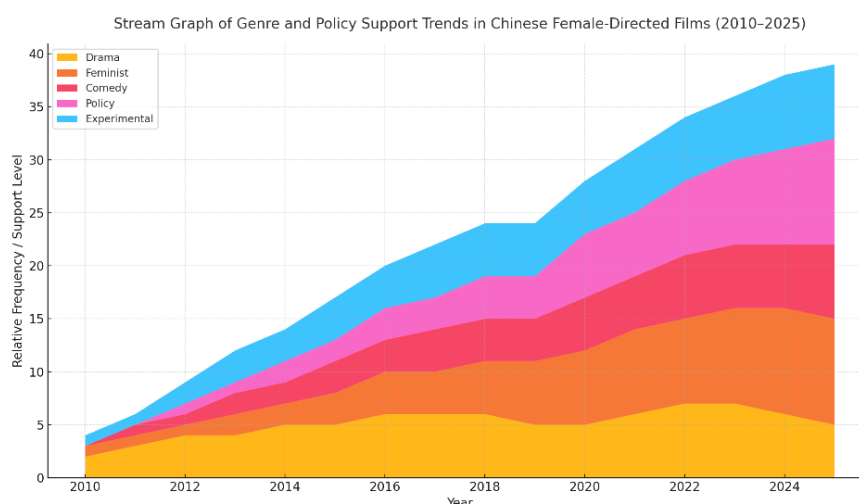


Figure 2 Stream Graph of Genre and Policy Support Trends in Chinese Female-Directed Films (2010–2025)

Table 2 Comparative Profile of Key Contemporary Chinese Female Directors

Director	Signature Films	Dominant Themes	Narrative Style	Visual Strategy	Key Feminist Interventions
Wen Yan	<i>Watermark Street</i> (2013); <i>Carnival</i> (2017)	Structural violence; urban marginality	Realist, critical	Spatial metaphors; muted palette	Deconstructs gendered power structures
Jia Ling	<i>Hi, Mom</i> (2021); <i>YOLO</i> (2024)	Family ethics; body politics	Comedy, inspirational	Popular visual grammar; bodily transformation	Subverts maternal and body norms

Li Yu	<i>Double Exposure</i> (2012); <i>Sunshine Robbers</i> (2021)	Trauma; emotional interdependence	Experimental, hybrid	Hallucination motifs; color symbolism	Exposes collapse and limits of female solidarity
Yang Mingming	<i>Female Directors</i> (2012); <i>Girls Always Happy</i> (2018)	Urban loneliness; female angst	Autobiographical, slice-of-life	Handheld camera; natural lighting	Challenges traditional domestic roles
Zhao Wei	<i>So Young</i> (2013)	Coming-of-age; memory narrative	Nostalgic, linear	Soft filters; youth motifs	Reframing female adolescence
Huang Ji	<i>Egg and Stone</i> (2012); <i>The Foolish Bird</i> (2017)	Rural abuse; silenced resistance	Slow cinema, observational	Static shots; minimal dialogue	Centers voiceless girls in rural patriarchy
Sylvia Chang	<i>20 30 40</i> (1995) ; <i>Love Education</i> (2017)	Generational conflict; love politics	Intergenerational drama	Multi-perspective editing	Highlights evolving female subjectivities

Methodology

Selection of Case Studies and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, close-reading methodology to analyze how contemporary Chinese female directors visually and narratively engage with the philosophical concept of

becoming-woman, as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari. Rather than relying on statistical data or genre-based generalizations, the analysis focuses on the detailed examination of visual language, character construction, spatial metaphors, and narrative rhythm within selected films.

The case studies—Wen Yan, Jia Ling, and Li Yu—were selected for their contrasting stylistic signatures, genre orientations, and degrees of mainstream integration. Wen Yan represents a realist and politically critical approach rooted in structural exposure; Jia Ling embodies feminist reconfigurations within the realm of commercial comedy; and Li Yu exemplifies emotional introspection and aesthetic compromise in hybrid cinematic forms. Together, they offer a diverse yet thematically coherent spectrum through which to examine the multifaceted trajectories of *becoming-woman* in Chinese cinema. Their works provide fertile ground for exploring not only how female subjectivities are generated, contested, and destabilized, but also how feminist strategies emerge, adapt, and evolve within varying industrial and cultural constraints.

Wen Yan: From Metaphorical Existence to Structural Revelation — The Genesis of *Becoming-Woman*

In Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of *becoming*, *becoming-woman* is not about confirming a specific gender identity, but rather a process through which the subject continually breaks away from established norms, gravitates toward the margins, and generates difference. This concept emphasizes the escape from centrality, the rejection of sameness, and the deconstruction of classificatory logic. Wen Yan's visual works exemplify this generative trajectory: from the silent and marginalized existence of women, to the overt exposure of structural gender oppression, and ultimately to the construction and affirmation of female agency.

In *Watermark Street* (2013), although Wen Yan served as the producer rather than the director, her creative vision was already apparent. The film centers on a reticent woman living on the margins of the city, moving through liminal spaces such as demolished alleyways, subway

stations, and underground passages. Her life is marked by instability, hesitation, and fragmented narrative structures, reflecting a mode of existence that is both obscured and unnamed. The protagonist's silence and invisibility are not mere voids but act as subtle forms of resistance to the cultural logic that dictates women must be seen and spoken for. By refusing to conform or explain herself, she asserts a quiet rejection of normative gender codes. Her silent exits and unexplained actions serve as embodied refusals. The final disjunction between self-perception and external recognition further underscores the ongoing difficulty of subject formation. In Deleuzian terms, this is a *becoming-subject* that has not yet undergone full transformation—existing in a state of fluid identity and ambiguous recognition, harboring latent anti-disciplinary potential.

Unlike the vague metaphors in *Watermark Street*, *Carnival* (2017) offers a direct and confrontational view of gender violence and structural oppression. By meticulously depicting a case of female sexual assault, the film reveals that mechanisms of oppression are not confined to individual perpetrators but are deeply embedded in systems, contexts, meanings, and spatial configurations. The narrative trajectories of Xiaomi and Xiaowen illustrate the multifaceted evolution of women's agency. Xiaomi transforms from a silent observer into an active participant, while Xiaowen evolves from a victim resigned to her fate into a resistant subject who refuses reconciliation. Each emotional expression and decision they make represents a concrete process of *becoming-woman*. This is not a linear path of growth but a continual unfolding through trauma, rupture, isolation, and resistance. The director's portrayal of power structures is particularly incisive: the perpetrator, President Liu, never appears on screen; his power is instead manifested through spatial settings (hotels, resorts), surveillance technologies (access controls, cameras), and operations of control (bribery, coerced testimony), revealing the invisible institutional logic behind gendered violence. This narrative choice shifts the focus from isolated acts of aggression to the cold, impersonal operation of an encompassing social apparatus.

The visual symbols that echo throughout the film are rich in critical implication. At the

beginning, Xiaomi secretly takes a photo of a Marilyn Monroe statue with her phone, mimicking and internalizing the *male gaze*. At the end, the statue is dismantled, symbolizing the deconstruction of a cultural icon that objectifies women's bodies. Through this image-breaking process, women begin to free themselves from being the objects of the gaze, gaining the potential to reposition themselves amid the disintegration of symbolic structures.

From this, it is evident that Wen Yan's visual practice has made a leap from symbolic concealment to structural revelation. *Becoming-woman* is no longer merely an emotional stance born of marginalization but has evolved into a narrative strategy and a form of cultural expression that actively intervenes in the real order. In her films, women are no longer situated as the "other" of discourse; instead, they embody the full process of subject formation—transforming in silence, generating under oppression, and reversing the dynamics of the gaze.

Jia Ling: From Domestic Roles to Bodily Autonomy — The Embodied Practice of *Becoming-Woman*

Compared to Wen Yan's realist-critical approach, Jia Ling's visual practice demonstrates a unique trajectory of *becoming-woman* within the framework of commercial genre cinema. By navigating ethical tensions embedded in family structures and actively reshaping women's bodily presence, she integrates the process of female identity formation into mainstream narratives in a gentle, humorous, and accessible way—making *becoming* both a psychological posture and a physical enactment.

The film *Hi, Mom* (2021) explores the instability of the maternal role within historical contexts through a time-travel narrative between a mother and her daughter. When Jia Xiaoling travels back to 1981, she encounters Li Huanying before she becomes a mother—when she still possesses youthful physical vitality and unfulfilled emotional desire. She plays volleyball, pursues romantic freedom, and eagerly shops for a television at the mall. Her agile movements and determined eyes signal embodied agency and challenge the stereotypical image of the self-sacrificing, nurturing mother. In this context, Li Huanying's body is no longer a vessel of

traditional maternal roles, but rather resembles what Deleuze describes as a “body without organs”—a structurally fluid and self-generating form. By 2001, however, she has internalized the ethics of maternal duty, becoming the archetypal traditional woman: child-centered, economically frugal, and domestically focused. The contrast reveals that motherhood is not a natural state but a historically constructed identity. Greater narrative tension arises when Li Huanying abandons the courtship of the factory manager’s son to pursue a relationship with Jia Xiaoling’s father. Though seemingly rebellious, this choice remains bound by conventional ethical norms—supporting one’s husband and raising children—and constitutes a form of weak resistance ultimately reabsorbed by the system. Nonetheless, the film’s portrayal of generational fracture opens a fissure—a rupture in the reproduction of maternal identity—that gestures toward the possibility of *becoming-woman*.

The film *YOLO* (2024) shifts the focus of *becoming-woman* to the physical dimension. The protagonist, Yue Ying, transforms from a “failure” who is constantly scrutinized, evaluated, and excluded into an active agent through her boxing training. At the beginning of the film, the overhead shots, reflections in mirrors, and whispers from others collectively depict the violence of the gaze against her obese body—the female body is portrayed as unqualified, undisciplined, and in need of correction. As she progresses through training, the pain and sweat in the boxing ring challenge the cultural stereotypes that equate “female bodies = weak” and “skin = tender.” Scenes of blood on the punching bag, worn-out joints, and fat layers soaked with sweat transform the body from a “display object” into a “field of creation.” Fat is no longer a symbol of failure but becomes the material basis for strength transformation. Yue Ying’s body, through repeated falls and rises, undergoes a reconfiguration—not to become more beautiful or conform to norms, but to reclaim the right to use and decide her own body. The slow-motion shots of Yue Ying losing hundreds of pounds in the film do not highlight a focus on beauty but rather represent a visual transformation akin to a *metamorphosis*. Her line—“It depends on my mood”—is neither a display of coquettishness nor a sense of triumph, but a refusal to let value judgments be dictated by external standards. This shift in subjectivity marks her detachment

from relational identities and the evaluative system, initiating a redefinition of her self-worth.

Through the physical reconfiguration and redefinition of her body, Jia Ling explores how *becoming-woman* begins from the physical dimension. In the Chinese context, this practice faces a paradox: on one hand, she enters the mainstream discourse in a form that is widely accepted; on the other hand, individual breakthroughs still require ongoing negotiation between mainstream ethics, family values, and aesthetic expectations. *Becoming-woman* is not stable but oscillates between moments of reaching and being absorbed. Jia Ling's work demonstrates that female writing can reflect on serious real-life themes and also deconstruct gender roles, bodily power, and self-awareness through light comedies and inspirational films. This "physicality of creation" is one of the most noteworthy developments in the visual practices of contemporary Chinese female directors.

Li Yu: The Dilemmas and Compromises of *Becoming-Woman* — Individual Collapse and Collective Illusion

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that generation is not only an individual process but also a form of associative action—a potential political act that constructs a "symbiotic entity" through decentralization. Compared to the more distinct trajectories of female subjectivity construction seen in Jia Ling and Wen Yan, Li Yu's work foregrounds the multiple challenges and structural compromises involved in being a woman within the context of Chinese commercial cinema. Her female characters oscillate between collapse and mutual support during their development, often becoming entangled in the mechanisms of emotional ethics.

The film *Double Exposure* (2012) centers on the protagonist Song Qi, whose childhood was marked by witnessing her mother's murder and her subsequent mental breakdown in adulthood. The narrative unfolds in a non-linear fashion, creating a highly subjective psychological space. Song Qi attempts to reconstruct her experiences and escape the shadow of the patriarchal family structure by reweaving her memories. However, she spirals out of control between

memories and hallucinations, ultimately descending into a state of mental disintegration. From the perspective of *becoming-woman*, Song Qi's individual development reveals her vulnerability in the absence of connection. She fails to establish stable relationships with others or achieve continuity in her actions. Her resistance is primarily cognitive—denying reality and rewriting memories—rather than enacted through practical agency. Ultimately, her "development" cannot continue, and she collapses into fragmentation due to the lack of a supportive structure. This failure underscores the limitations of individualistic developmental paths in a society where gender power is highly structured: self-reconstruction without social support eventually depletes one's energy. In this film, Li Yu presents a form of "developmental failure": the female subject attempts to break free from patriarchal narratives but is ultimately trapped by institutionalized cold violence and isolated psychological mechanisms, leading to the collapse of her illusions. While this visual narrative powerfully reveals the challenges faced by women, it does not provide a practical path for transformation.

Unlike the oppressive atmosphere of *Double Exposure*, *Sunshine Robbers* (2021) adopts a comedic-adventure format that aspires to build a network of mutual support and emotional connection among women. The story follows Xiaoxue, who is searching for a stolen tiger and gradually forms a cooperative bond with the female members of the "Sunshine Squad." This set-up overturns the commercial-cinema paradigm in which women are typically cast as "waiting to be saved" or as mere "emotional dependents," granting them both agency and relational power. Within the film, each woman possesses a distinct skill, and together they track and rescue the tiger—seemingly creating a *generative community* that transcends individual limitation. On the surface, this symbiotic collaboration recalls Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a *becoming-ensemble*, in which subjects dissolve fixed identities and form fluid alliances around shared risks and goals. Yet the alliance ultimately remains confined to the framework of emotional ethics. Their actions spring chiefly from the desire to heal personal trauma or to achieve emotional compensation, rather than from any impulse to confront broader structures of gendered oppression. Although the narrative touches on father-daughter relationships,

loneliness, and animal ethics, it offers no direct challenge to the gender-power system. Consequently, the film's female bonding lacks true political potential: it functions more as "warm-hearted mutual aid" than as a *line of flight*. In other words, the "Sunshine Squad" never coalesces into a Deleuzian *war machine*; instead, it extends the emotional logic of the family into a slightly larger—but still domesticated—sphere.

Li Yu aims to advance the portrayal of women within the framework of commercial films. However, in terms of visual style, narrative structure, and character motivations, her films exhibit a reliance on and concession to mainstream emotional logic. This negotiation process absorbs the potential for *becoming-woman* into an emotional-ethical framework, forming a *controllable image of generation*—one that is gentle, positive, and healing, but lacks the power to truly subvert due to its avoidance of structural critique.

Li Yu's creative practice highlights the tension faced by Chinese female directors in promoting *generative femininity* within the mainstream industry system. On one hand, she strives to free women from passive roles, granting them space for action and emotional agency; on the other hand, in order to achieve dissemination in a commercial context, the generative process must repeatedly negotiate with public emotional aesthetics, ultimately transforming some radical potential into a more moderate expression.

Comparative Analysis: Theoretical Alignment and Visual Strategies

The case studies of Wen Yan, Jia Ling, and Li Yu reveal distinctly different, yet philosophically resonant, strategies in portraying female subjectivity and resistance. While each director employs unique narrative devices, visual grammars, and genre conventions, their works collectively engage with Deleuzian and feminist ideas in nuanced ways. This section synthesizes their cinematic approaches through the lens of key theoretical anchors such as *becoming-woman* and anti-gaze techniques. By mapping these strategies alongside representative films, we uncover how contemporary Chinese female directors translate abstract philosophical principles into concrete visual and narrative forms, enabling a richer

understanding of generative femininity within cinema.

Table 3 Feminist Film Strategies and Theoretical Alignment

Strategy	Philosophical/Theoretical Anchor	Director	Film Example	Feminist Outcome
Escape from central identity norms	Deleuze's <i>becoming-woman</i>	Wen Yan	<i>Carnival</i>	Articulates structural oppression from a marginal viewpoint; amplifies silenced voices
Bodily reclamation	Deleuze's <i>body without organs</i>	Jia Ling	<i>YOLO</i>	Reclaims agency by resisting bodily objectification; reconfigures the body as a site of transformation
Rewriting maternal identity	Anti-essentialist feminist theory	Jia Ling	<i>Hi, Mom</i>	Challenges the essentialist notion of sacrificial motherhood by revisiting generational choices
Identity fragmentation	Lacanian psychoanalysis	Li Yu	<i>Double Exposure</i>	Reveals the psychic disintegration under patriarchal trauma; highlights instability of the self
Marginal spatial aesthetics	Feminist spatial theory	Wen Yan	<i>Watermark Street</i>	Uses urban ruins and liminal spaces to metaphorically express female invisibility and displacement
Emotional agency as resistance	Ethics of care; affect theory	Li Yu	<i>Sunshine Robbers</i>	Reframes female bonding as a mode of resistance through cooperative emotional alliances
Visual	Mulvey's <i>anti-</i>	Wen Yan	<i>Carnival</i>	Disrupts traditional voyeuristic

defamiliarization	<i>gaze</i>			perspectives; denies the visual economy of objectifying women
Humor as critique	Post-feminist irony	Jia Ling	<i>Hi, Mom</i>	Embeds feminist critique within a humorous, nostalgic framework; subverts through irony and reversal

Cultural Expression and Localization of Feminist Aesthetics

While paying attention to gender issues, the new generation of female directors respond to and reshape the cultural structure of Chinese society through diversified visual languages and narrative strategies. Their filmmaking constitutes a form of cultural expression characterized by difference and critique, expanding the cultural boundaries of contemporary Chinese cinema.

Wen Yan’s works exhibit a high degree of restraint and calm in both form and style. Her cultural expression does not rely on grand narratives or direct criticism but instead constructs an *aesthetic of repressed female experience* through spatial metaphors, limited perspectives, and fragmented temporal structures. In *Watermark Street*, the recurring imagery of demolition sites, underground passages, and mirror reflections highlights the marginalized position of women in the urban power structure and symbolizes the emotional fragments and individual desires often neglected in the process of modernization. Her camera often captures subjects from low angles or partial views, making it difficult to clearly identify female characters. This anti-gaze visual strategy critically rejects the conventional image of women as “objects to be seen” in mainstream cinema. *Carnival* advances this critique by addressing social issues in a realist style, constructing female experience with both political and cultural depth through a narrative of “witness—silent resister.” The repeated appearance and eventual dismantling of the Marilyn Monroe statue in the film simultaneously parodies and critiques Western female iconography, serving as a metaphorical response to the entanglement of transnational capital, patriarchal culture, and visual hegemony.

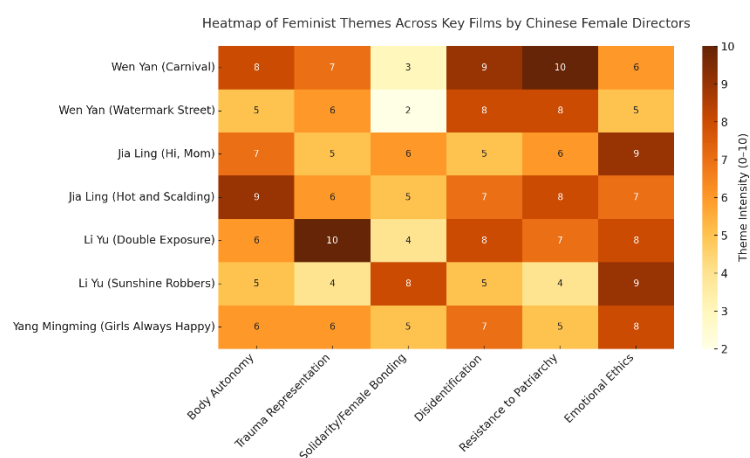


Figure 3 Heatmap of Feminist Themes Across Key Films by Chinese Female Directors

This heatmap displays the thematic intensity of six core feminist concepts—*Body Autonomy*, *Trauma Representation*, *Solidarity/Female Bonding*, *Disidentification*, *Resistance to Patriarchy*, and *Emotional Ethics*—as represented in seven major films directed by Wen Yan, Jia Ling, Li Yu, and Yang Mingming. Scores (0–10) were assigned based on qualitative analysis of narrative focus, visual strategy, and character development. The visualization highlights differing thematic emphases among directors and between films by the same director, offering a comparative framework for assessing feminist depth and stylistic orientation.

In contrast, Jia Ling’s cultural expression is deeply rooted in popular culture and the public emotional system. In *Hi, Mom*, she uses the fantastical concept of a mother–daughter time-travel narrative to reinterpret traditional filial piety, transforming motherhood from a one-sided sacrifice into an individual consciousness that embraces youthful desires and autonomous choices. In *YOLO*, Jia Ling introduces boxing into the narrative of female growth, shifting the body from a symbol of shame, vulnerability, and failure to a site of pain, strength, and transformation. Through long shots, close-ups, and symmetrical compositions, she highlights the agency and resilience of the body, creating a popular “female body culture” landscape. This landscape resonates emotionally with the audience and rewrites traditional gender grammar. Her cultural expression combines the commercial appeal of genre films with the agency of

gender narratives, expanding the space for female subjectivity in mainstream Chinese cinema.

Li Yu’s visual style embodies a cultural expression strategy that balances emotional and visual elements. She excels at visualizing women’s hallucinations, emotional outbursts, and psychological issues, transforming the female psyche into tangible and perceptible cultural forms in her films. In *Double Exposure*, the protagonist Song Qi oscillates between hallucinations and reality, reflecting the continuation of childhood trauma and revealing the societal pressure on women’s role identity. Through this, Li Yu explores the complex dilemmas faced by women as they navigate memory, reality, and cultural norms. In *Sunshine Robbers*, she attempts to create a network of connections among women through adventurous plots and animal imagery, crafting a warm and supportive cultural landscape for women. Despite being constrained by commercial considerations—which somewhat diminishes its cultural radicalism—the film still uses the fantasy device of “Tiger Nana” to express the resonance between women’s emotional attachments and their original vitality. This emotional visual expression highlights Li Yu’s sensitivity to the cultural reception habits of Chinese audiences and reveals the expressive tension of women’s cultural imagination within the mainstream context.

Table 4 Representations of *Becoming-Woman* in Narrative Trajectories

Film Title	Initial Female Condition	Generative Process	Mode of Resistance	Final Outcome
<i>Watermark Street</i>	Muted and marginalized in urban spaces	Silent nonconformity through everyday acts	Spatial detachment—moving, splitting off	Ongoing ambiguity; subjectivity remains open
<i>Carnival</i>	Victimized within patriarchal	Trauma triggers activism and exposure	Speaking out through testimony and public	Partial justice achieved; public resonance amplified

	systems		revelation	
<i>Hi, Mom</i>	Trapped in inherited mother-daughter roles	Time-loop revisiting family dynamics	Narrative revision via past engagement	Awareness of inherited roles; transformed maternal bond
<i>YOLO</i>	Subject to fat-shaming and ridicule	Physical training, bodily transformation	Boxing as bodily reclamation	Increased confidence and bodily autonomy
<i>Double Exposure</i>	Psychologically fragmented post-trauma	Memory reconstruction, self-denial	Internal hallucinations reveal trauma	Subject collapses under persistent pressure
<i>Sunshine Robbers</i>	Emotionally detached, lonely women	Formation of women's ensemble	Emotional bonding through group unity	Group cohesion emerges; critique remains limited
<i>Egg and Stone</i>	A silenced, rural girl	Passive endurance in oppressive contexts	Non-verbal acts of defiance	Open-ended disappearance—no clear resolution
<i>Girls Always Happy</i>	Codependent ties between mother-daughter	Verbal confrontations with generational tension	Use of irony and cynicism as distance	Circular, unresolved emotional tension persists

Reception and Public Engagement with Gendered Narratives

While critical theory and stylistic innovation offer valuable analytical perspectives, the public reception of feminist narratives provides an equally crucial dimension. Chinese female-directed films navigate a complex ecosystem shaped by audience expectations, cultural norms, and market dynamics. This section examines the extent to which feminist narrative depth

aligns—or diverges—from audience engagement, as indicated by box office rankings, Douban ratings, and media discourse. By mapping key films along these axes, we trace the cultural resonance of gender-themed storytelling across both mainstream and independent cinematic spaces in China, illuminating the evolving dynamics between feminist aesthetics and public acceptance.

Table 5 Audience Reception & Box Office of Gender-Themed Films (2012–2024)

Film Title	Director	Year	Gender-Themed	Douban Rating	Box Office Rank	Discourse Impact
Double Exposure	Li Yu	2012	Partial	6.1	100M+ RMB	Female trauma in psychological framing
Egg and Stone	Huang Ji	2012	Yes	7.2	Festival release	Visual critique of rural girlhood
So Young	Zhao Wei	2013	Partial	6.5	Top 10	Rewriting of youth and gender identity
Carnival	Wen Yan	2017	Yes	8.2	N/A	Structural critique of sexual violence
Girls Always Happy	Yang Mingming	2018	Yes	6.6	Limited	Mother-daughter alienation in modernity
Sunshine Robbers	Li Yu	2021	Yes	3.6	Low	Friendship and humor over politics
Hi, Mom	Jia Ling	2021	Yes	7.7	Top 10	Emotional reevaluation of maternal roles

YOLO	Jia Ling	2024	Yes	7.5	Top 10	Female body as site of strength
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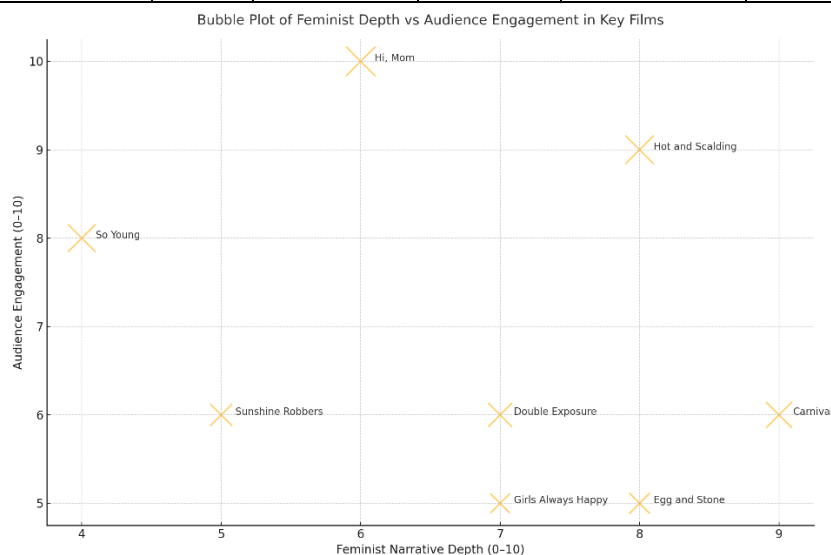


Figure 4 Bubble Plot of Feminist Narrative Depth vs. Audience Engagement in Eight Key Chinese Female-Directed Films

This bubble plot illustrates the relationship between *feminist narrative depth* and *audience engagement* in eight prominent films by Chinese female directors from 2012 to 2024. Each film is plotted along two axes: the horizontal axis indicates the extent of feminist critique and resistance embedded in the film's narrative and style, while the vertical axis represents its popular reception based on box office performance, Douban ratings, and public visibility. Bubble sizes reflect each film's cultural impact, determined by awards, media discourse, and long-term influence. The chart highlights how certain films (e.g., *Hi, Mom*) achieve high commercial success with moderate feminist framing, while others (e.g., *Carnival*) provide potent feminist critique with more niche public reach.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The works of contemporary Chinese female directors in their creative endeavors do not merely represent a singular gender expression or a narrative focused exclusively on women. Instead, they embody a dynamic subject practice and cultural stance. Through the language of

visual imagery, these directors reconstruct traditional gender paradigms, negotiating the tension between societal structures and individual wills, thereby highlighting the diversity, incompleteness, and resistance inherent in women's identities. In their visual narratives, *becoming- woman* is portrayed through three layers of cultural value:

First, it is a profound response to the gendered political structure. Female directors no longer focus solely on depicting gender differences, but instead employ formal strategies and narrative structures to challenge the gender norms embedded in mainstream film and television. For instance, the female body is no longer portrayed as a passive object of the gaze, but becomes a site of perception, pain, and strength; traditional roles such as *mother* and *daughter* are redefined within both historical and emotional contexts. This process reflects the subject's transcendence of, and repositioning within, power structures—highlighting the internal tensions and transformations occurring within gender politics.

Second, the localization and differentiation of cultural expression paths. Unlike Western feminist films that emphasize universal forms of resistance, these works do not rely on explicit theoretical awareness but are instead embedded within the specific context of Chinese society. They respond to gender injustice through every day, metaphorical, and emotionally resonant storytelling. This approach is not a concession, but a culturally generative choice—an artistic endeavor to discover and inhabit the fissures within dominant discourse.

Third, it involves the reactivation of the political potential of the film medium. Female directors are no longer merely portraying women; they are becoming-woman in their cinematic practice, continuously creating new subject positions that transcend the boundaries of gender, identity, genre, and style. This process constitutes a form of image politics, utilizing emotions, bodies, spaces, and structures as mediums to intervene in reality. Film, in this context, is no longer a mirror of reality, but an experimental ground for reconfiguring the gender order.

Becoming-woman is not an endpoint of identity confirmation but an ongoing process of creation. The works of Wen Yan, Jia Ling, and Li Yu, as analyzed in this article, demonstrate how female subjects navigate the gaps between real power dynamics, cultural norms, and

societal expectations, continuously reconstructing their meanings and positions. They do not regard *female identity* as a final destination, but rather as a method for actively constructing a form of aesthetics. The value of female directors' works lies not only in reflecting women's experiences, but also in raising critical questions about social structures through their unique cinematic paths. By reinterpreting the body within genre films, uncovering emotional fractures in family ethics, and attempting to establish connections among women in commercial contexts, these practices generate a distinct tension in the development of contemporary Chinese women's cinema. They avoid repeating the grand narratives of Western feminism and are not confined to the uncritical preservation of local traditions; instead, they search for new grammars of negotiation, resistance, and creation within cultural interstices.

Future research may further expand the range of textual samples to encompass a broader spectrum of themes and styles, exploring how the theory of *becoming-woman* manifests across diverse contexts and cinematic forms. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how female directors engage in dialogue with other cultural agents within the global visual ecosystem, thereby advancing the cross-cultural application and localization of Deleuzian feminist frameworks.

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