

The Self-consciousness and Identification of Chinese Me-Generation Women: A Case Study on *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) by Teng Congcong

Qingyue Peng, Chang Woojin
Ajou University, Suwon

Abstract

Send Me to the Clouds (2019) is the first film produced by the Chinese female director, Teng Congcong, who was born in 1985. The 1980s was a golden age for the development of feminist films in China. The film follows the journey of a Chinese Me-Generation woman as she tries to earn enough money to cure her cancer. Even before the film was released, the media advertised it as a feminist film. Therefore, this essay analyses two levels of the protagonist's journey based on a textual analysis. At the physical level, the female protagonist fails all of her missions. However, on a spiritual level, she succeeds in gaining consciousness in a patriarchal society. This essay argues that, for the first time, the female protagonist is the bearer of the gaze. Her gaze towards the opposite gender is interpreted through the perspective of the Chinese feminist concept, *nannv youbie* (男女有别). Through the self-consciousness and identification achieved by viewers on both sides of the screen, the film allows people to look at the world from a different angle. Additionally, the awakened feminist consciousness of the Me-Generation director sheds light on the development of feminist films in mainland China.

Send Me to the Clouds (2019)는 1985년 생 중국 여성 감독 Teng Congcong의 첫 연출작으로 Me-세대 여성이 암 치료비를 벌기 위해 떠난 여정을 다룬 영화이다. 1980년대는 중국 페미니즘 영화 발전의 황금기였으며, 이 영화 또한 개봉 이전부터 페미니즘 영화로 홍보되었다. 본 논문은 텍스트 분석을 토대로 여주인공의 여정을 두 단계로 나누어 살펴본다. 그녀는 신체적인 측면에서 모든 임무 수행에 실패하지만 정신적인 측면에서는 가부장제 사회 내에서 자의식을 얻는데 성공한다. 이 지점에서 저자는 여주인공이 응시의 주체임을 최초로 주장하며 이성을 향한 여주인공의 응시를 중국 페미니즘 철학인 '남녀유별(男女有别)'의 관점으로 분석한다. 자의식(Self-consciousness)과 동일시(identification)는 스크린 양쪽에서 바라보는 자들에 의해 성취되며, 사람들은 이를 통해 세상을 다른 각도로 바라보게 된다. 뿐만 아니라, 이러한 Me-세대 여성 감독의 각성된 페미니스트 의식은 중국 본토의 페미니즘 영화의 발전을 시사하기도 한다.

Key words

Chinese feminist film, Laura Mulvey, Me-Generation, *nannv youbie* (男女有别), *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), textual analysis.

Introduction

In 1978, the Chinese government implemented a domestic reform policy opening relations with foreign countries. Since the 1980s, theories of Western academics have entered China, as have a myriad of Western cultural and commercial products. In the same way, under the influence of Western feminist trends, Chinese feminist films have developed with the times. In the 1980s, the number of active Chinese female directors was over 30 at one point. They are listed as follows: Yan Bili (颜碧丽), Sha Jie (沙洁), Dong Kena (董克娜), Lu Xiaoya (陆小雅), Wang Junzheng (王君正), Zhang Hongmei (张鸿眉), Xian Biying (洗碧莹), Huang Shuqin (黄蜀芹), Wu Peirong (吴佩蓉), Zhang Nuanxin (张暖忻), Shi Xiaohua (石晓华), Shi Shujun (史蜀君), Lu Ping (卢萍), Hu Mei (胡玫), Sha Dan (沙丹), Qiu Lili (邱丽莉), Jin Shuqi (金淑琪), Guang Chunlan (广春兰), Li Shaohong (李少红), Jiang Shusen (姜树森), Wang Haowei (王好为), Peng Xiaolian (彭小莲), Pan Xia (潘霞), Wang Ping (王苹), Liu Miaomiao (刘苗苗), Bao Zhifang (鲍芝芳), Liu Guoquan (刘国权), Mai Lisi (麦丽斯), Wang Wei (王薇), etc.

Among them, Huang Shuqin is the most famous due to her film, *Woman-Demon-Human* (人鬼情, 黄蜀芹, 1987), which won the Award for Best Film at the fifth Rio de Janeiro International Film in 1988, the Public Award at the eleventh Craudel International Women's Day in France in 1989, and Best Director at the seventh Santa Barbara International Film Festival in 1992. (Wang 2002, 53) This film has been recognized both domestically and internationally as the first feminist film in mainland China. In the 1990s, most commentators interpreted the film as from the perspective of a woman's consciousness and as a women's film, obscuring the complicated nature of this layered artistic work. (Wang 2011, 119) This subject has long been a research topic of great interest for feminist film scholars. Until 2019, some scholars argued that this film had been over-interpreted, and questioned whether it was appropriate to use Western feminist film theories to interpret a Chinese film from 1987. (Zhang 2019, 10) For instance, some scholars have said that the reception of feminist assumptions in the 1980s was not friendly or positive in mainland China. (Cui 2003, 171)

In 1989, scholars and readers witnessed the appearance of the first series of women's studies publications in China. One scholar, Li Xiaojiang, suggested that the concept of women's liberation originated in Marxism, not feminism. The former focuses primarily on class rather than gender differences (Cui 2003, 173). Additionally, in discussing Western feminist film theories in China in the 1980s, another film should be mentioned. This work is *Golden Fingernails* (金色的指甲, 鲍芝芳, 1989), in which the female director openly denounces the male/active and female/passive viewing mechanisms in mainstream mov-

ies by having the unpleasant-looking heroine directly face the camera. However, this film has been largely ignored by scholars since its release. Only two articles in 1990 have mentioned it. One of these pieces is from the perspective of women in patriarchal society, and the idea of the other is written in relation to marriage issues. Beyond this, a third such article was written in 2004, which criticized this film as an incomplete feminist film because its happy ending is too classically happy. (Li 2004, 14) The director created an ugly female protagonist in a patriarchal society, which directly opposed the female image as a to-be-looked-at-ness in mainstream films. Additionally, this film gives the female protagonist a chance to hold the position of erotic gazing at a male. This position responds to Laura Mulvey's 1975 theory of the male/active (gaze) and female/passive (gazed at) in her summary of Hollywood films, which began the use of psychological analysis among Western film academic scholars during the 1980s. (Ying 2005, 10) Since then, this article has been cited repeatedly and has become one of the most commonly used feminism theories.

With the spread of Mulvey's theory, some negative criticisms appeared. Her theory was criticized as to only focusing on the relationship between male audiences and female images on screen, ignoring the relationship between female audiences and the on-screen female images. And she overemphasized gender and ignored the influential social factors on feminism, such as race, culture, and nation. And it is also criticized for focusing solely on Western white women. However, until now, Laura Mulvey's theory in her most famous article, the 1975 piece, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," has been her most referenced feminist film theory topic in mainland China since Zhou Chuanji (周传基) translated it into Chinese in 1988. Although more than forty years have elapsed since Laura Mulvey's pioneering essay, many of its insights still apply to film criticism today. Since writing this article, Laura Mulvey has published three other important academic books, including *Visual and Other Pleasure* in 1989 and *Fetishism and Curiosity* in 1996, which were introduced and discussed in Qin Xiqing's book only. (Qin 2014, 187-192) Also, her book, *Death 24x a Second* in 2005, has seldom been mentioned by contemporary scholars in mainland China.

In actuality, Chinese women have discussed the ideas of feminism since the beginning of the last century. For example, the Chinese American scholar Lydia H. Liu has paid special attention to He-Yin Zhen (何殷震) (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013, 8-9). The basic tenet of her feminist theory is nannv pingdeng (男女平等), which means gender equality in English. However, she used nannv (男女) as one word. The concept nannv cannot be simply translated as 'gender' or as 'man and woman. Translating nannv literally word for word — nan (男) for "man" and nv (女) for "woman" — into two or several English words, "man and woman" or "male and female," is just as unsatisfactory, es-

pecially since this literal translation could contradict He-Yin Zhen's theoretical project, which approaches *nannv* as the singular conceptual mechanism, used as both noun and adjective, that lies at the foundation of all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction. Thus, the ideology of *nannv youbie* (男女有别), with a similar meaning of differentiation between man and woman in English, makes the separation of man from woman its conceptual priority. The concept of *nannv* is also a mechanism beyond time, capable of spawning new differences and new social hierarchies across the boundaries of class, age, ethnicity, race, and so on. The philosophical abstraction of *nannv* is always-already justified by cosmic principles or the laws of nature. He-Yin Zhen proposed her theory during 1908-1910. Although this theory has not been well developed in mainland China since He-Yin Zhen, due to the turbulent times, this concept is rooted deeply within Chinese culture, both men and women, unconsciously or consciously. That is the reason why Chinese female rights are fought for by both women and men. That is also the reason why some Western feminists complained about the difficulty of inspiring feminism in the minds of Chinese women.

The director of the first Chinese feminist film, which was made in 1987, once said in an interview that she had no intention to make a feminist film in the beginning. However, she developed a feminist consciousness during the shooting process. (Wang 2002, 37) The director made *Send Me to the Clouds* (送我上青云, 滕丛丛, 2019) with the clear purpose of speaking for women. As the first film directed by the young director, Teng Congcong, who was born in 1985 and graduated from Beijing Film Academy, writing the script took her three years. Although this work was Teng Congcong's first feature film, the director had the clear vision of expressing the problems of women as early as the script-writing stage. (Cheng 2019, 14) In an interview, she once said she had written a story about a woman with cancer. In a book she read while she battling thyroid cancer, she was struck by one particular sentence: "Cancer is different from such external causative agents such as tuberculosis or flu invasion. It is our gene mutation, a variation caused by our repressed desires." (Sun 2020, 31) In contrast to the 1989 film, *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019) is richer and more multi-layered in its exposition of feminist film theories. When *Send Me to the Clouds* first debuted at the Shanghai International Film Festival, it was labeled as a feminist film because it has a female protagonist, director, and producer. (Huang 2020, 12) It was nominated for three awards at the 32nd Golden Rooster Awards and won the Best Supporting Actress award in 2019. It won the Critics Award for Best Screenplay at the Dublin International Film Festival and the New Artist of the Year Award at the 28th Shanghai Film Critics Association Awards in 2020.

In this film, the protagonist, who was born during the 1980s, begins her quest to save herself in Guizhou province in midwestern China. She accepts an assignment to help an older man write an auto-

biography to earn enough money for the surgery she needs. Additionally, she wants to take advantage of her last chance before her surgery to find a man for creating one last sexual memory. Some scholars have said the role of the female protagonist is incompatible with all prior mainstream images of women in the Chinese film and television industry (Xu 2019, 38). At the beginning of the film, the character is set to break the traditional image of a virtuous wife and mother, as portrayed in the many mainstream male-directed films in the Chinese film industry. In this film, the female protagonist is even more rebellious than female characters who had appeared in the works of earlier Chinese female directors (Su 2020, 127). Most audiences, especially male ones, initially felt uncomfortable with this film's scene showing the female protagonist's masturbation. Furthermore, some audiences thought that this movie was taking a stand against males (Xu 2019, 39). The latter is also the main reason why this film has been called a feminist film by the media. Under this categorization, the film has been discussed in thirty-two academic articles by scholars and critics since its appearance two years ago. Referring to Laura Mulvey's famous theory in her 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," this article argues for the first time that the female protagonist is the bearer of the gaze in the narrative, provoking the identification of the spectators on the other side of the screen. Additionally, this article also analyzes the protagonist, who is the only girl in a patriarchal family, based on the psychoanalytic principles outlined by Laura Mulvey's other two important academic books, *Visual and Other Pleasure* in 1989 and *Fetishism and Curiosity* in 1996. Mulvey was the first scholar to divide film into two levels of narrative: textual analysis and the study of audio-visual style. By analyzing *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), this paper demonstrates the self-awareness of Chinese Me-Generation women, including the female protagonist, the female director, and the spectators.

The Protagonist of the Me-Generation

The protagonist, Sheng Nan, was born in the 1980s, thus belonging to the Me-Generation. In 1980, the Chinese government established the one child per family policy. Each family could have only one child, no matter the gender of the child. China has been a patriarchal society for a long time and attaches great importance to the succession of male children, who can pass down the family name. According to He-Yin Zhen's feminist theory, the concept of *nannv youbie* is rooted in the minds of Chinese people. It has oppressed not only the female but also the male. Man and woman are expected to display certain personalities, hobbies, desires, and jobs. This is merely due to the gender of their birth.



Figure 1. Sheng Nan in her patriarchal family

As the single child of a family, daughters have experienced more oppression than males in Chinese society.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, a single female child in a patriarchal family usually has difficulties developing self-consciousness as a female. For Freud, femininity is complicated by the fact that it emerges out of a crucial period of parallel development between the sexes; a period he sees as masculine, or phallic, for both boys and girls (Mulvey 1989, 30). On the one hand, single daughters born in the 1980s are under the patriarchal gaze of the older generations of their families, who may still hold the belief that daughters are not as good as sons. On the other hand, girls are considered equal to boys by national policy. Psychologically, many women have been affected since birth by this complex and contradictory environment. That is, they feel that something is missing when interacting with their fathers. Meanwhile, they were educated with the knowledge of being equal to boys. Thus, throughout world, only Chinese Me-Generation girls have this combination of psychological characteristics. For instance, as the only child of her parents, Sheng Nan cannot pass down her father's family name. Thus, her father does not pay much attention to her, and her feelings toward her father are complicated. At one point, her father leaves her mother and has had an affair with another woman for ten years, a woman who was Sheng Nan's junior high school classmate. For this reason, Sheng Nan hates her father, and the film's cinematic language expresses this sentiment by shooting each character in a separate frame (Figure 1). Next, she fails to borrow money from her father and burns the luxury bag that he buys for his girlfriend. When her father then notices a wound on her face after being attacked by a thief, he asks, 'Who won?' Wearing a proud expression, Sheng Nan replies, 'I won.' It is easy to see her unconscious wish to gain her father's love and become closer to him. Unconsciously, she wants to be the ideal child for her father. Sheng Nan dresses like a boy and acts like a

one. She smokes, speaks dirty words, and has no fear of fighting with males. Again, she acts this way because her feminist consciousness has yet to be awakened.

When Sheng Nan refers to her mother, the psychic phenomenon of Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject applies. That is, these references reveal the revulsion that the small child projects onto the mother's body in order to develop self-sufficiency and subjectivity (Mulvey 1996, 14). The role of the traditional Chinese mother is to assist her husband and educate her child. In turn, the child must obey the mother. In this film, when facing her father, Sheng Nan's female identity is hidden. When facing her mother, her revulsion vaguely reveals her awakening feminist consciousness. Liang Meizhi, the mother of the protagonist, is vain and stupid in the eyes of her daughter. Additionally, this mother's appearance forms a strong contrast with Sheng Nan. She wears pink dresses, drives a pink car, and has received a lip augmentation shot. She has been separated from her husband for almost ten years, and even though she knows about her husband's extramarital affair, she still shows off the rich life he provides her when she has dinner with her relatives and friends. She cares little about her daughter and far more about her own feminine charm. There is an immense gap between the two women: the daughter does not understand her mother, and she also does not want to be like her (Li 2020, 61). The director used numerous double shots to illustrate the relationship (Figure 2). From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the protagonist, Sheng Nan, struggles to maintain her feminist consciousness in her family. She is repressed by both of her parents.



Figure 2. Double shots of Sheng Nan and her mother

The Narrative: Two Levels of the Protagonist's Journey

The main narrative in this film concerns the journey of the protagonist in Guizhou after she is diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She accepts an assignment to help someone write an autobiography for the purpose of earning enough money for the surgery. This study divides the narrative into two levels.

The first level of the narrative, the physical level, is her struggle to gather enough money for her surgery and her last chance to have sex with a man. In the beginning, the protagonist, Sheng Nan, thinks of asking her father to lend her money, but their conversation ends in quarreling. Next, she tries to borrow money from Si Mao, her closest male friend, who refuses because he is fearful that she will die in five or ten years. When he finally reveals this to her, the female spectator on the other side of the screen might despise him. However, after watching the entire film and re-explaining the situation, the spectator might realize that she has a gender prejudice formed by the concept of *nannv youbie*, which is deeply rooted in Chinese patriarchal society. This stereotype involves the ideas of male/strong and female/weak, similar to the male/sun and female/moon symbolism in Western culture (Mulvey 1996, 92). Si Mao, her closest male friend, is the one who provides help to Sheng Nan. He provides information on the part-time job that will earn enough money for the surgery: helping the old man write his autobiography. This old man is the father of Li Ping, a rich entrepreneur. When signing the contract with Li Ping, Sheng Nan quarrels with him. Both Sheng Nan and Si Mao have difficulties dealing with Li Ping. Outside the hot spring room, Sheng Nan is so angry that she tears up the treaty and mocks Li Ping, which shows how the inner world of Sheng Nan has developed a form of social and gender-based awareness. This is the first time Sheng Nan defends her female dignity in the film. However, this scene also evokes the main character's feminist consciousness for the first time, and the director speaks clearly through her cinematic language. In this scene, Sheng Nan stands outside the hot spring room while Si Mao is inside the room with other men. The frame is divided into two parts by different background colors (Figure 3). According to the philosophy of *nannv youbie*, the woman is made from water, with the implication of being clean and empty, whereas the man is formed from mud, turbid and lusty. Thus, the composition of the scene described here displays the developed feminist consciousness of the female director.

The other mission, on the physical level, is the protagonist's aim to have sex before her surgery. She tries with Liu Guangming but fails. However, he allows Sheng Nan to realize for the first time that she is a woman with a desire for love and sex. He is highly educated and displays a willingness to help others. He likes to photograph clouds and think about philosophy. Sheng Nan almost falls in love with him. She makes



Figure 3. Sheng Nan's gender identity (inner world)



Figure 4. Sheng Nan's gender identity (outward looking)



Figure 5. Sheng Nan gives a hug to Liu Guangming

herself up one night with red lipstick and meets him in the library (Figure 4). However, when she directly says, 'I want to make love with you', she frightens him away. And when she discovers that he is also the son-in-law of the rich entrepreneur, and witnesses his humble married life, she feels shocked and then pities him. That is, the female director shows her own pity for the male character through Sheng Nan.

After this journey, Sheng Nan comes to better understand Liu Guangming by putting herself in his shoes and giving him a big hug (Figure 5). As a man, Liu Guangming feels pressure from both his family and society. Men are always referred to by adjectives such as powerful, smart, and successful. Liu Guangming's wife shows him off for the sake of his strong educational background, and his talent for reciting the digits of pi. However, as a man, being smart is not enough to prove him successful.

On her physical journey, Sheng Nan fails at all of her missions. She has not got the money she wants after Lao Li's death, the old man she has planned to write an autobiography for. She has not had sex with Liu Guangming, for whom she seems to have feelings.

However, within the second level of the narrative, the spiritual level, the protagonist succeeds in gaining experiences of self-awareness. Aside from Liu Guangming, Sheng Nan also has three sexual interactions with Si Mao. During the first time, Si Mao is verbally harassing her, but Sheng Nan does not defend herself (Song 2020, 90). Her attitude of acceptance reflects how often women experience gender violence in society. During the second encounter, Sheng Nan forces Si Mao to meet her sexual needs after being refused by Liu Guangming while they are on a date in the library. However, she fails because, as Si Mao says, she cannot compare with him physically. At this point, she finally has sex with Si Mao but can only satisfy herself through masturbation (Figure 6). The latter scene challenges the binary of the sex-gender system. According to Western feminist theory, the female is the Other. On the other hand, in Chinese feminist philosophy, *nannv* (male/female) makes *nan* (the male) the Other to *nv* (the female), and meanwhile, *nv* (the female) the Other to *nan* (the male). People do not choose their sexes or genders. However, the way one is born determines the way that one is treated by society. In the film, the scenes of climbing up the mountain and the first years of Si Mao's career as a journalist follow the masturbation scene (Figure 7). Thus, the awakened consciousness of Sheng Nan helps her understand Si Mao.



Figure 6. The scene of Sheng Nan's masturbation



Figure 7. The scene of the beginning years of Si Mao's career

On this spiritual journey, the mother-daughter relationship moves from binary opposition to gradual reconciliation. While collecting Lao Li's autobiography material, there is a love story between Lao Li and the mother of the protagonist, Liang Meizhi. Additionally, the story between Lao Li and Liang Meizhi intersects with the story between Sheng Nan and Liu Guangming. One is a mother with a failed marriage and the other is a daughter with a masculine appearance. This is a very interesting plot creation by the director. A montage is used to express the parallels between the two love stories (Figure 8). At this stage of the journey, the daughter has a chance to better understand her mother. In the end, Lao Li passes away, and at the same time, Sheng Nan's love story with Liu Guangming comes to an end. However, Sheng Nan's attitude towards her mother changes. In the beginning, Sheng Nan refuses to take her mother along, disagrees with her lifestyle, and conceals her illness from her mother. In contrast, as the journey develops, Sheng Nan gradually begins to see her mother in a different light. The director demonstrates this transformation through moments when Sheng Nan looks at her mother across a chair, in a mirror, and through the lens of her camera (Figure 9).



Figure 8. Parallel love stories



Figure 9. Sheng Nan's gaze towards her mother

After her self-consciousness awakens, Sheng Nan has a richer understanding of people and society. At this point, she remembers experiencing Si Mao at his first company. He struggled to realize his dream just like Sheng Nan, and he also suffered from social difficulties and discrimination. As colleagues and friends, they are the two most similar characters in the film. Furthermore, through double shooting, the audience might even feel that Sheng Nan is Si Mao and that Si Mao is Sheng Nan (Figure 10), she reconciles with the one who refused to help her.



Figure 10. Sheng Nan with Si Mao



Figure 11. The transformation of the protagonist



Figure 12. The only composition of Sheng Nan's parents in the same frame

On a spiritual level, Sheng Nan awakens her consciousness not only as a woman but also as a human being, a whole person, and begins to better understand other people and society in general. She succeeds in her ultimate journey. Standing on the top of a mountain in the final scene, Sheng Nan wears a soft sweater, with her loose hair blown by the wind. She laughs three times in the sunshine (Figure 11). Moreover, at this point, the director put Sheng Nan's parents in the same frame for the first and only time in the film (Figure 12).

At the physical level, the female protagonist fails all of her missions; however, on a spiritual level, she succeeds in gaining self-consciousness in a patriarchal society.

The Female Protagonist, the Bearer of the Gaze

In the West, the tradition of visual centrism can be traced back to ancient Greece. Vision, out of all senses, is regarded as a noble gift given to mankind by the Creator. Gaze is a very important philosophical concept, defined as the psychological dynamics of visual activity. In 1972, John Berger discussed women as an object of vision in his book *Ways of Seeing*, based on his interpretation of European nude paintings and modern visual products. He says that men look at women and women relate to themselves as being looked upon (Berger 1972, 47). In 1975, Laura Mulvey published her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In the article, Mulvey used a political interpretation of psychoanalysis to analyze the influence of patriarchal social mechanisms on Hollywood movies. She also discussed erotic pleasure and its meaning in movies, especially the intricate relationship between female images on the screen. It is believed that, on screen, women are the objects to be stared at and are framed as in the passive position, while men are the gazers and are depicted in an active position. Although more than forty years have elapsed since Laura Mulvey's pioneering essay, many of its insights still apply to film production today.

Mulvey explains the phenomenon of woman as an image and man as the bearer of the gaze in mainstream films:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, ...; they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 1975, 11).

However, in *Send Me to the Clouds*, the female protagonist is the one who looks. She sees precisely what the audience sees. In this way, the

director often uses the subjective camera angle to display the point of view of the female protagonist, drawing the audience into her perspective.

First, the narrative occurs within the gaze of the female protagonist. After discovering her cancer, she begins to re-examine her life. At that point, she is hit by a thief and falls to the ground, and the upside-down composition of the scene foreshadows how she will later look at her world from a different angle (Figure 13). According to Jennifer Van Sijll's theory about orientation in the book, *Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know*:

Orientation is one of film's elements. When purposefully used, disorientation can be highly effective. As audiences, we expect the composition to make viewership simple. We expect that the movie world will come with enhancements but essentially present the world intact. When the basic rules of viewer orientation are broken, they draw attention to themselves. Consequently, when they are used, they need to mean something. Introducing a character upside-down breaks the rules. We are unaccustomed to this vantage point, we will move our heads trying to correct it (Sijll 2010, 26).

As the narrative develops, Sheng Nan goes on a journey and learns how to rescue herself from cancer. After all of the experiences described here, she returns to her normal life in the city where she lives, and where she reunites with her parents. However, something has changed. Although Sheng Nan was unsuccessful at saving her left ovary or enjoying sex with an ideal man, she appears to be born again. For this reason, the composition is again inverted when Sheng Nan is pushed into the operation room, symbolizing her inner change and her new perspective on the world (Figure 14). Recalling her memories of Si Mao, her best friend, Sheng Nan focuses on the moment when Si Mao fights for the same professional ideals as she did. Furthermore, she seems to have gained an understanding of her parents. She has never been so relaxed and comfortable.

Second, Sheng Nan's voyeurism has also been established through her work as a journalist, a captor of stories and images (Figure 15). The film opens with an investigation of a fire disaster on the mountain through her subjective lens. She watches Liu Guangming, the man she desires sexually, through her camera for the first time on the boat while discussing his philosophy on life. This scene is in full compliance with a stereotypical woman's fantasy of an ideal man, and the audience sees the same male image as the female protagonist. When Sheng Nan and Liu Guangming have the chance to meet again, the female protagonist also looks at the male character through her camera, through which she discovers that Liu Guangming has another identity as



Figure 13. Upside-down compositions of the protagonist, the angle of her gaze after falling to the street



Figure 14. Upside-down compositions of the protagonist, the angle of her look when being pushed into the hospital operation room



Figure 15. The female protagonist's gaze through her camera

the son-in-law of Li Ping, the rich businessman. Liu Guangming lives a privileged life in his father-in-law's house but is not respected by his wife's family. Additionally, the spectator on the other side of the screen can feel what the characters are feeling on screen. The female

protagonist's attitude toward her mother changes when Sheng Nan looks at her through her camera. After her journey, Sheng Nan gradually learns to see her mother from a different perspective. The director shows moments when the protagonist looks at her mother through her lens.

When Liu Guangming is asked to recite digits of pi in front of the guests of his father-in-law, Sheng Nan points her gaze toward him (Figure 16). From this moment, she begins to see from the point of view of the Other. When Sheng Nan recalls moments when Si Mao was frustrated in his first company, she remembers what she saw at that moment (Figure 17). At this point, the audience comes to understand Si Mao through a scene within Sheng Nan's memory.



Figure 16. Sheng Nan's gaze towards Liu Guangming when he is reciting the digits of Pi in front of his Father-in-law's guests



Figure 17. Sheng Nan witnessing Si Mao's frustration with his career

Unlike traditional female images in mainstream Chinese films, the female protagonist here is neither styled according to the pleasure of the male gaze, as common in mainstream films, nor shown to uphold high moral standards. Instead, Sheng Nan smokes, uses profanity, and has a fight with a madman on the mountain. She wears a dark jacket and Doc Martens, a dark backpack, and a black hood, and she eats bread while walking on the street. She is not an ideal to-be-looked-at-ness on the screen for male audiences and thus does not signify male desire on either side of the screen. Compared with the previous female protagonists of Chinese feminist films, Sheng Nan is more complex. She behaves and dresses in stereotypically male ways and cannot hide that she was raised in a patriarchal society. She replies proudly "I did!" to her father when being asked about the wound on her face. She asks "I have not had sex for many years, how could I get ovarian cancer?" to her doctor when being given the hospital inspection report. She refuses to be like her mother who stands for the silent image of women as the bearer of meaning in a patriarchal society: beautiful, weak, and vain.

For instance, her mother gets lip enhancement shots and uses a face mask every day. Additionally, her mother is unwilling to carry heavy luggage, understanding that it is easier for a woman to show her weakness in society.

Self-identification of the Audience

In the film, the appearance of the protagonist lacks stereotypical femininity, and she has already been unconsciously molded by patriarchal society. It is difficult to judge the attitudes of female audiences toward this style of protagonist, but there must be a reason why the box office numbers moved from a steep low to a swift rise. That is, the audiences, especially female ones, began to identify with Sheng Nan, encountering their own curiosity and wish to look intermingled with a sense of fascination, likeness, and recognition (Mulvey 1975, 9-10). The director also said that this film is about the life of a woman of her age (Su 2020, 129). Additionally, Sheng Nan's age is significant. That is, the one-child policy, was officially established by the Chinese central government in 1980. The word, Me-Generation, refers to the generation born after 1980. The people of the generation are now aged from thirty to forty. They are also the main consumers of this kind of film. Thus, the protagonist shares common traits with the Chinese Me-Generation. She is in her thirties, has a job, and holds a master's degree and a Ph.D. This is all that the parents asked for their Me-Generation children to achieve in contemporary society. Most Me-Generation girls were repressed both at home and in school (Wang and Cai 2020, 41). The idea of *nannv youbi* has influenced Chinese culture over the generations. The government announced a policy to control the growth of the population and promote the idea of gender equality. However, political action and economic improvement cannot eliminate the original cultural law. These measures make the situation of Me-Generation women even worse. They bear more pressure than previous generations. In one interview, the director discusses the common experience of growing up in this era, as follows: "the education we, the Me-Generation, have received since childhood is to study hard, go to a good university, find a good job, and be independent. We have never been educated in dating or how to get along with boys. When we reached a certain age, the standards from parents and society changed suddenly to push you into the marriage stage." (Xu and Shi 2019, 74).

Sheng Nan's father had wished to have a son. He even gave his child a name conveying the idea of being better than a son, as Sheng means win, and Nan means male. However, he left his wife and had an affair for ten years. Furthermore, the protagonist's feelings towards

her father are complex. She hates the way her father treats her and her mother, but she also wishes to be accepted by him. Thus, the relationship dynamics in this patriarchal family prevent the feminist consciousness of the protagonist from developing.

In this patriarchal society, Sheng Nan's mother must make sacrifices for the family while raising her child into the symbolic world. For female-themed films, the mother-daughter relationship is important because it is directly related to the construction of the female subject. These characters' self-consciousness and autonomous choices are all completed through the relationship with their mothers. And in this film, the mother of the protagonist plays this role as well. Sheng Nan's mother, Liang Meizhi, is a woman who lacks insight in the eye of her daughter. She never forgets to discipline her child according to the doctrines of the patriarchal society. And the protagonist does not understand her mother, and she sneers at some of her mother's behaviors. There are many differences between the daughter and the mother, and Sheng Nan does not want to be a woman like her mother to any degree. Thus, in the family, Sheng Nan neither stands by her father nor agrees with her mother. This quandary has also been a real situation for most Chinese Me-Generation women.

Through the two male characters, Si Mao and Liu Guangming, the audience can see the influence of the philosophy of *nannv youbie* on each of them. For example, when Si Mao refuses to lend money to Sheng Nan, a spectator might feel pity for Sheng Nan and shame for Si Mao. Furthermore, at first glance, female audiences might fall in love with the smart, handsome image of Liu Guangming. However, it would likely be harder for the audience to forgive Liu Guangming than it would be for Sheng Nan to forgive him. Undergoing the journey of the female protagonist, the audience identifies with Sheng Nan and feels their own feminist consciousness gradually awakened.

Remarks on the Female Director

In one interview, Teng Congcong explains that she created this story with a conscious interest in telling a story about a woman. She had a very clear intent to speak for the women of her generation about what they have suffered, both in their families and in society. To this end, she consciously used cinematic language. At many times, she put her female protagonist in the same frame with male characters. Beyond this, she artficed certain plot elements to make the spectator on the other side of the screen aware of their prejudice toward the Other, especially the male towards the female. As a Me-Generation woman herself, the director has an awakened feminist consciousness. However, this innovation does not mean that the previous generation of female direc-

tors did not have an awakened mode of feminist consciousness. For instance, Huang Shuqin, the director of *Woman-Demon-Human* (人鬼情, 1987), once said that her feminist consciousness expanded during the process of shooting the film (Zhou 2015, 86-90). However, in contrast, Teng Congcong was aware of criticizing the law of patriarchal society from the start of her filmmaking process.

Born in 1985, Teng Congcong was thirty-one when she began writing this script. There were some limitations placed on her debut. Beyond Sheng Nan, there are four other female characters in this film: Sheng Nan's mother, the girlfriend of Sheng Nan's father, the strange woman with her boyfriend on the street, and the girl with whom Si Mao has a one-night stand.

Liang Meizhi, as the mother raising her child into the symbolic aspects of culture, plays a very important role in this film. When establishing the other female characters, the young director encounters certain limitations. For instance, these characters all represent the common images of women in a patriarchal society, which are too consistent and too simple. That is, these women act only as bearers of meaning in the patriarchal world on the screen. In one such example, the girlfriend of Sheng Nan's father only appears in a picture on his office wall. She is young and pretty and has had a relationship with a married middle-aged man for ten years, only because he satisfies her material desires. Elsewhere, the boyfriend of a strange girl on the street is telling this girl the definition of the word "leftover", which means a single woman over the age of 27, no matter how attractive she is or how much money she has. The one-night-stand girl with Si Mao is only a one-time sex object on this trip to a new city, and she seems to fit Si Mao's description of her: pretty and daft.

Because different women with different backgrounds might have different features, the director ignores the differences between women. The male characters in this film are treated with more sympathy due to the director's awareness of the philosophy of *nannv youbie*, but the treatment of these female characters seems to lack subjectivity.

Conclusion

This film was criticized when it premiered because it featured the first female masturbation scene in Chinese film history. On the day after the film's release, the number of nationwide screenings dropped by 3,000. However, public acclaim for the film continued to soar, and the attendance rate increased. Ultimately, the film had the highest domestic earnings for new films in a week. This success occurred partially because audiences identified with the female protagonist. From the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980 to the establishment of the two-child policy in 2016, a large number of Chinese people have expe-

rienced what Sheng Nan experiences in the film. That is, the patriarchy was apparent to audience members in both their patriarchal families as well as in society. As the first feature film of the young director, this work makes excellent use of cinematic language to let both the female protagonist and female audiences become bearers of the gaze. Thus, this director successfully created a female representation of the Me-Generation, although there are some limitations to her other female characters. Through psychoanalysis, it is possible to better understand the female protagonist within her patriarchal family. Through textual analysis, the narrative of the film can be fully understood. The female protagonist fails in her two main missions, earning money for her surgery and having sex with an ideal man. However, during this journey, she successfully awakens her sense of feminist consciousness.

This article analyzed how the female protagonist acts as the bearer of the gaze, based on Laura Mulvey's theory in the article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Additionally, this perspective applies the philosophy of Chinese feminism, *nannv youbie*, in analyzing a film for the first time. Furthermore, the origins of Chinese and Western cultures are quite different. The radical feminism of the Western world conceptualizes the two genders in a binary position. On the other hand, Chinese feminists do not fight against the Other for equal rights, but against the deeply-rooted patriarchal system that causes difficulties to both men and women. Knowing the childhood environment of the protagonist, one can understand her behavior. And from the perspective of the *nannv youbie* concept, one can more deeply appreciate how this film was made by a Me-Generation female director.

Based on the above analysis, the director presents a new perspective from which those on both sides of the screen can view the world. Thus, this film is worthy of further scholarly research as a text for studying the development of Chinese feminist film. That is, the gradually awakened self-awareness of the Chinese Me-Generation in the film not only occurs within the protagonist but also occurs among the female spectators on the other side of the screen.

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