Abstract:

Using Xiaolu Guo’s *UFO in Her Eyes* (2011), Liu Shu’s *Lotus* (2012), and Vivian Qu’s *Angels Wear White* (2017) as case studies, this thesis analyzes the ways in which contemporary Chinese women directors depict and address rising gender inequality and violence in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 1979. Although they vary in style and narrative, these three works share similar themes and all focus on female protagonists struggling with authority and contradictory societal expectations against the backdrop of China’s ongoing socioeconomic transformation. Moreover, they not only draw attention to how gender is specifically affected by political and economic change, but also directly question and criticize the mainstream gender discourses of the Chinese commercial media and Hollywood films with which they are in dialogue. By closely reading these films and placing them in conversation with each other, I hope to unpack and to clarify the relationships they address between gender, economics, and politics in an increasingly globalized and capitalized PRC.
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Introduction:

Since Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 socioeconomic reforms, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has transitioned through various stages of postsocialism and until evolving into a system referred to as “state neoliberal capitalism” by the early 2000s.¹ Under this system the Chinese economy has rapidly expanded, but it has also led to “rising unemployment, economic insecurity, inequality, intensified exploitation, declining health and education conditions, exploding debt, and unstable prices” in addition to environmental devastation and a growing tension between urban elites and the working class.² Under these conditions of an “economy-first model, the management of population…[has] become ever more central to governance generally,” and by extension the role of Chinese women has become more central to national image and policy.³ While men outnumber women in China as a result of cultural norms and laws like the One-Child Policy, women are increasingly being pushed out of the work force through discrimination and harassment, prevented from gaining financial independence by lingering traditions and the laws they shape, and pressured by state media to quickly marry and have children before becoming “剩女” or “leftover women.”⁴ It is the vast numbers of unmarried men and their politically disruptive potential that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is predominantly concerned, but it is women who are targeted by legal and social interventions as a solution.⁵ Combined with the conflicting societal pressures of traditional Confucian values, socialism, and globalized capitalism, these postsocialist policies enable and perpetuate gendered violence by discursively situating women and their bodies as secondary to men, a process that both subordinates the needs of women and reinforces the idea that women are primarily objects of heteronormative desire. Moreover, much of this process is driven by state-promoted slogans and media that rely on the
soft cultural power of narrative to restrict and manipulate the identities and lifestyles Chinese women perceive as viable or desirable. In this discursively manipulative environment, independent films made by Chinese women offer potential forms of resistance to this gendered inequality and the violent ramifications it has for both men and women.

Film is a particularly fruitful medium through which these conditions may be analyzed because of the relationship between cultural production and socioeconomic policy in the PRC. As part of the 1979 reforms, the PRC gradually reduced restrictions on domestic film production and foreign film importation over the course of the 1980s and 90s until China’s box office became essential to international film production. While domestic Chinese filmmaking faltered during the 90s without as much government support and in direct competition with Hollywood blockbusters, the financial value of Chinese audiences was leveraged by the party-state into what is now a huge amount of influence over Hollywood and international filmmaking at large.

During Hu Jintao’s presidency from 2003-2013, the PRC began to use this influence to actively pursue more control over the cultural discourses and national imagery within both foreign and domestic films as part of a global campaign in which the party-state “consolidated its authoritarian power through both an alliance and a tug-of-war with global capital and through the advancement of film-inclusive cultural industries.” While the types of narratives and themes officially discouraged or encouraged vary over time and circumstance,

As defined by Chinese president Hu Jintao in his October 24, 2007, speech to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese version of soft power is composed of four aspects: (1) a ‘socialist core-values system’ that highlights Marxism, ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ patriotism, and collectivism; (2) a “harmonious culture” and a morally uplifting society based on honesty and integrity; (3) the exaltation of traditional Chinese culture to foster ‘a spiritual home commonly identified with by the entire Chinese nation’; and (4) the innovation of culture and the liberalization of the ‘cultural production force.’

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In other words, the cultural discourses promoted under postsocialism draws on both global capitalism and traditional Confucian values in addition to socialism. More than anything, however, they perpetuate an image of China as a unified and peaceful nation-state worthy of patriotic sacrifice and devotion. Film is a vehicle for the mass transmission of these nationalist concepts, as in the “main melody” films from the late 1980s onwards or the contemporary fantasy and martial arts films of directors like Zhang Yimou, but by extending those concepts into Hollywood films they gain even more legitimacy as international movies confirm the messages of Chinese state media.¹¹

However, while state-sanctioned films embed nationalist subtext into unrelated action movies and romantic comedies, there remains a significant number of independent or underground filmmakers who actively resist and confront these ideas from a critical standpoint instead. With the loosening of regulations in the 1980s and the spread of cheaper more mobile digital film technology, many new independent film movements arose in the late 1980s and 1990s like the New Chinese Documentary Film Movement and the Sixth Generation.¹² As Paul Pickowicz notes, however, “allowing underground film production in China, along with turning a blind eye to the overseas screening of underground films made in China, makes China look good.”¹³ Many underground filmmakers maintain a tenuous balance between compliance and dissidence, censoring themselves to avoid major issues with the party-state as well as to appeal to international audiences. However, even if they are complicit in the party-state’s actions through self-censorship, independent Chinese filmmakers still push the boundaries of what is acceptable, while the party-state’s reactions to these films reveals their policy priorities over time.
Independent Chinese films gradually draw the margins of Chinese society into the spotlight, constantly fighting for progress and change over time.

For women filmmakers, this dynamic is further complicated by the discursive relationships between women, modernity, and socioeconomic development. According to Nira Yuval-Davis on women and nationalism, “Women especially are often required to carry this ‘burden of representation’, as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively. …Women, in their ‘proper’ behaviour, their ‘proper’ clothing, embody the line which signifies the collectivity’s boundaries.” As the Qing Dynasty was ending and the notion of nationhood itself grew in importance, this representational burden was shaped by Western imperialism and Chinese intellectuals’ insistence on women’s emancipation and education as an indication of modernity. Over the course of the twentieth century, Chinese women were conscripted into this modernization process in which nationalism, eugenics discourses, and socialism combined into a state planning system predicated upon the supervision and control of women’s re/productive capacities. As Yuk-Lin Renita Wong notes of an early CCP slogan, “The guiding frame of ‘grabbing production and reproduction together’ …provides the theoretical justification for the Chinese Communist Party’s Birth Planning Policy. The planners argue that production and reproduction are dialectically interdependent and mutually constraining.” Under socialism, women and their socioeconomic conditions became not just a representational measure of national progress, but a biopolitical technology manipulated to produce specific economic and ideological results. At the same time, the CCP’s insistence on gender equality and women’s education enabled an increase in workforce participation and an expansion of women’s political influence. The protective

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structures of this socialist system have since partially given way to the inherent inequality of neoliberal capitalism, but the representational and material significance of Chinese women remains crucial to the PRC’s postsocialist national image.

In this context, the three films chosen as case studies for this paper, *UFO in Her Eyes* (2011), *小河 or Lotus* (2012), and *嘉年华 or Angels Wear White* (2016), are all directed by women from a generation born during the Cultural Revolution and raised through the various stages of postsocialism. The director of the first film, Xiaolu Guo, was raised in a small southern Chinese fishing village before attending the Beijing Film Academy in 1993 where she worked primarily in documentary film. After immigrating to London, she writes and publishes primarily in English and her films are not screened in the PRC. Meanwhile, the second director Liu Shu was also raised in a smaller town before moving to Beijing to work in journalism. After becoming frustrated with her work and the inability to “freely express yourself,” Liu Shu turned to independent film as a less restrictive medium and wrote, directed, and funded her debut film by herself. Lastly, the third director Vivian Qu was raised in Beijing and left in the 1990s to study film in New York City. She has released several critically acclaimed films, and although *Angels Wear White* was funded through France, it received official permission from state censors to be screened in China. All three of these directors are highly-educated, globally-involved women of a somewhat privileged socioeconomic class, and they embed their own experience and understanding of postsocialism within their work in different ways and to different degrees. Moreover, their films all center on female protagonists struggling to make space for themselves in increasingly commodified and transactional circumstances that reflect the same conditions with which the filmmakers struggle in the production of the films themselves. As a result of this
subjective layering, these films can be read as commentary on both the processes and the outcomes of cultural production as they relate to gender.

These three films and their unique, but similarly critical, perspectives on postsocialist structural inequality counter state-promoted gender narratives by revealing the negative ramifications of the intersection of re/productive state planning and neoliberal capitalist financialization of human relationships. As opposed to mainstream commercial films that perpetuate gendered economic and political inequality by depicting urban women’s’ unrealistically seamless transition from working life to marriage, these directors each highlight the hypocrisies and fallacies of this false social harmony by depicting typical young women as they confront the spaces between their ideals and their realities. However, these films rarely receive the attention they deserve because they are limited in distribution and are often considered financially non-viable as a result of their marginalized subjects. By analyzing these films, extensive interviews with the various filmmakers, and the material conditions of filmmaking itself in a specifically Chinese context, this thesis attempts to provide access to a more nuanced reading of the sociopolitical questions raised by these films and the potentially disruptive effect they can have when audiences are able to view them. Created in dialogue with state-sponsored media and commercial films, contemporary Chinese women’s independent films actively contradict and deconstruct state-promoted narratives of gender and sexuality in order to open and maintain alternative discursive possibilities for gendered and financial equality.
Chapter 1: *UFO in Her Eyes* and Politicized Sociality

Set in 2012 but first published as a novel in 2009, Xiaolu Guo’s *UFO in Her Eyes* (2011) is an absurdist allegory of China’s post-socialist transformation in which an alleged UFO sighting on September 11th rapidly transforms a rural Chinese fishing village into an urban tourist destination. The protagonist and sole witness of the UFO, Kwok Yun, is an unmarried, illiterate 35-year-old mine worker who suddenly finds herself the center of attention in an increasingly tense and violent conflict between ceaseless development and the villagers it displaces. However, unlike many other independent postsocialist films by Chinese women, this conflict is not depicted in a realist style, but in a blend of filmic styles and references that reinforce the ambiguity and multiplicity of the narrative. Relying on abstract visual metaphors and alternating between three different camera perspectives—full color third person; black and white first person interspersed with periodic still shots; and full color fisheye first person shots from various animals—the film refuses a single interpretation or privileged subjectivity, instead forcing the audience to engage more actively with the questions it continuously raises and leaves unanswered. Kwok Yun functions as an intermediary between these different narrative and formal layers of the film, while her intentionally unrealistic naïveté pushes the audience to question their own ideological beliefs as they observe her physically embodied sociopolitical conscription into postsocialism. As a result, the film’s socioeconomic conflict is embedded within Kwok Yun’s personal struggles and experiences and by extension within her gendered and sexual identity. This configuration not only emphasizes the relationship between gender and postsocialist development, but actively disrupts and interrogates the ways in which that relationship is discursively suppressed at the expense of not just women, but of everyone.
Opening with a meandering aerial shot through the Nanling mountains and the fictional Three-Headed Bird Village, *UFO in Her Eyes* introduces the protagonist as she bikes to a secret sexual affair with Yee Ming, a local married schoolteacher, in a sequence that both references and contradicts tropes of infidelity in other postsocialist films. As Jason McGrath writes, “postsocialist cinema of infidelity articulates both new desires awakened in the midst of urbanization and economic restructuring and the new anxieties aroused by private desire as well as collective anxieties over the very privatization and commodification of desire and fantasy—along with economic production—during the reform era.”²⁴ In the two types of postsocialist infidelity film McGrath discusses, the protagonist is either a wealthy urban man learning a moral lesson or a rural peasant woman cheating on her husband in which “the economic activities of the woman and her lover play a key role in the plot, and the liberation of sexual desire through an affair is in some fundamental way tied to an effort to liberate the woman’s entrepreneurial ambitions as well.”²⁵ In other words, the destabilization of the postsocialist transition on a national level is explored through the familial and particularly the collapse or restructuring of the familial, and marital transgression becomes a stand-in for either male moral failure or female empowerment. However, while Kwok Yun is a rural peasant laborer, she is neither married nor in need of financial liberation: she is employed at the mine, repeatedly expresses disinterest in marriage, and has no struggles with her romantic and/or sexual choices until after the village begins to urbanize. Infidelity is not an escape or act of liberation for Kwok Yun because she has nothing from which to be liberated, and it is actually the source of her confinement when the affair is discovered, and she is forced to marry Yee Ming. This reversal of infidelity tropes refutes the idea that Chinese female desire and liberation is predicated by capitalism or
Westernization, but acknowledges the destabilizing effects of globalization and late stage corporate postsocialism on the family.  

In fact, the film parodies the perceived relationship between postsocialism and female sexual liberation through the next scene in which Kwok Yun encounters the UFO as an abstract montage of animals writhing in the mud interspersed with close-ups of the sun and Kwok Yun’s face. Because the viewer only learns retroactively that this opening scene is a UFO sighting, the experience is visceral, jarring, and autoerotic—the writhing worms, fish, and oxen in muddy waters allude to cultural tropes of yin and yang and of male and female sexuality, while the images of Kwok Yun’s gasping face draw parallels to the sex scene prior. 

Immediately after this sequence and the title, however, the audience encounters Kwok Yun through the eyes of the police in a black and white first-person point of view. Red type across the screen identifies her as 35 and a “farmer / worker” and she is dressed in a construction helmet and a face mask, so indistinguishable from the man seated in the construction loader beside her that the officer asks her to clarify her gender. What began as an abstract and personal experience is suddenly a cold and detached official interview, and the eroticism of the initial UFO encounter is reduced to a series of pointed questions about her menstruation and her unmarried status. Moreover, the sighting actually subjects her sexuality to government investigation and interference because it draws attention to her non-normative status as an unmarried woman of a certain age. Kwok Yun’s encounter with postsocialist capitalism in the form of the UFO does not liberate her, but turns her personal life into a public issue just as Chinese postsocialism transforms the female body into capital.
The alternative the film seems to present, however, is not another man-made structure but something pre-human and animalistic. The initial moment of cross-species identification during the UFO encounter precedes a number of shots within the film from the perspective of animals, the first of which occurs during the officer’s second interview with Kwok Yun. Asked to describe the day of the UFO sighting without leaving out any details, the camera shifts to a highly saturated full color memory within the black-and-white interview scene. After telling the officer that both of her parents died in a mining accident—a fact that reaffirms the capitalist destruction of family, she recounts a dream in which her mother warned her that “if a woman doesn’t marry, the villagers think she’s a slut,” and later describes her fear that others would know she was menstruating that day and how cruel they are to say that her pain would be lessened if she had given birth, knowing that she has no one to marry. As she describes her period pain to the police officer, she talks about the two blood vessels in an earthworm’s body, and the camera depicts Kwok Yun’s memory of herself tilling the ground that day. Briefly and almost imperceptibly, the camera shifts to the perspective of the worms themselves in the mud beneath her watching as she works as if she and the worms shared the same consciousness in that moment. The use of zoomorphism is common in Chinese art and political discourse, but in this case the comparison is not used to dehumanize herself but to express a sensation of otherness through gender and biological difference. Her comparison is prompted by an acknowledgement that the male officer has no idea what menstruation feels like, speaking to the lack of understanding and compassion in male authority’s response to female experience as proven by the interrogation itself. The details of Kwok Yun’s marital and reproductive status are clearly unrelated to the UFO, but they are repeatedly connected to the incident by the police officer’s
need to sort Kwok Yun into a social category. Identification with the inhuman resists that social categorization by acknowledging the chaotic and disorganized aspects of life that do not fit neatly into a human ideology.

At the same time, the film does not reduce gender to a mere biological function and acknowledges the effects of globalization and commercialized femininity in particular. When Kwok Yun sees the UFO, she also discovers a wounded American man and brings him back to her home before running to the village chief for help. By the time she returns he has disappeared, but he later sends a thank you check for $3,000 and returns to the village as a guest for Kwok Yun’s wedding. His money is used to develop the village and to host capitalist reeducation classes about billionaires like Warren Buffet and Carlos Slim, gradually bringing more foreign imagery into the film like a life-sized Barack Obama cardboard cut-out. In one particularly telling scene, village chief Chang hosts an event with the Miss Universe pageant in which a series of young women dressed in costumes like scantily clad cowgirls and Marilyn Monroe’s iconic white dress walk around a stage in front of the perplexed villagers and migrant construction workers. Cutting between the blank expressions of the laborers and the women’s dancing bodies, the film emphasizes the absurdity and strangeness of the juxtaposition between the late-stage capitalist display of the female body and the visibly exploitative labor conditions of the impoverished men. In another instance of animal perspective, the camera aptly cuts to the viewpoint of a peacock watching the event unfold before cutting to Kwok Yun as she examines an informational packet about the pageant. Seemingly intrigued by the image of womanhood she encounters there; Kwok Yun is next depicted going to a hairstylist for the latest Shanghai style and putting on make-up before visiting Yee Ming in his office only to be rejected and kicked out.
Globalization and Westernization thereby exacerbate Kwok Yun’s pre-existing insecurities over her alienation from the other women in the village, but they are not the only nor the most powerful influence in her life. It is not that Kwok Yun wants to emulate Western standards of beauty for their own sake, but that she feels increasingly pressured to alter her appearance as the villagers and the authorities pay more attention to her and her sexual activity.

Meanwhile, this female bodily experience is directly juxtaposed with male bodily absence and the patriarchal power dynamic it conceals. The beauty pageant scene actually begins with a transitional shot out the window of the police officer’s hotel room in a sequence that emphasizes the disembodiment of the male officer. Opening with a black and white tiled floor littered with cigarette butts and crushed beer cans, the camera pans up the bed in one continuous shot while he speaks to his wife on the phone, lingers over his folded uniform in a partially packed suitcase, and eventually drifts out the open window to a group of children running towards the event. Only his side of the conversation is audible, but it is about mundane topics like his mother-in-law, how much he hates the village, and reminding her to pick up his hemorrhoid cream. He is visually separated from his uniform in this moment of quotidian humanity as if to say literally anyone could be in his place, and yet there is a specificity to his vague patriarchal authority that marks this privileged bodily absence as male. As Peter Lehman writes of Western cinema, “Since it is in the interest of patriarchy to ensure that men’s bodies remain what Rosalind Coward has called the ‘dark continent,’ it is important to turn the light on those bodies. Only after thus centering the male body will it be possible truly to decenter it, for it is precisely when the penis-phallus is hidden from view in patriarchy that it is most centered.”

That is to say, the default of male authority is concealed by the lack of acknowledgement that
legitimates it as such, but while the police officer’s body is intentionally obscured in this film, its marked absence actually draws attention to its presence especially when it is clearly announced by the shift to black and white first-person peripheral perspective. In this off-duty scene the officer’s body is still invisible, but the empty male uniform on the bed marks that absence and the authority it carries as something external that is worn rather than intrinsic. Moreover, his body is still acknowledged through the mention of hemorrhoid cream in its off-duty capacity as something frail and human, vulnerable to health issues just like anyone else. Patriarchal authority is neither concealed nor naturalized, but clearly established as an aspect of a particular sociopolitical system as represented by the uniform itself, while the mundane humanity of its bearer indicates both the hollowness of that authority and the power it has to fill said hollowness with the physical and symbolic weight of a body.  

Furthermore, while the film acknowledges this patriarchal default of authority, it still strives to portray a nuanced portrait of how this system also disadvantages men—particularly the impoverished and marginalized men of the village—and the effects of globalization on masculinity. Most obviously, the leader of the village is an old woman named Chang who is labelled as “twice divorced” when interviewed by the police officer and who is often depicted eating. Moreover, her character perfectly embodies and satirizes the party-state itself in her approach to managing the village. While in the first police interview she proudly declares the village’s proximity to Mao Zedong’s birth place and the number of party members in the area, in the next interview she is announcing her five year capitalist development plan and declaring that she is following her own ideology in the same way as China itself. In her pursuit of both economic development and a publicly socialist image, it is Chief Chang who pressures the most
marginalized members of the community to comply with her vision including orchestrating Yee Ming’s divorce and remarriage to Kwok Yun as a publicity stunt. Her hypocritical leadership behavior compliments the rote authoritarianism of the police officer performing his duties, allegorizes historical shifts, and reveals the localized corruption and selfishness rampant within postsocialist China through carefully crafted set ups like the scene in which she goes to evict the migrant bicycle repairman from his home while accompanied by a cadre of migrant security officers to make room for a construction project also built by migrant laborers to encourage even more migrants to move to the area.³¹ In this twisted economic and political system, Chief Chang’s womanhood in the film acknowledges the convoluted operations of gender inequality as enforced through complicity and the valuation of appearance over all else, simultaneously indicating the ways in which complicit female leadership can conceal patriarchal discrimination.

The effects of this overall system on men are also explored through the ironic false equivalence of independence and Western modernity. For example, while Kwok Yun struggles with the shame of being an unmarried woman, Yee Ming struggles with the gendered familial expectations of a husband and son-in-law in an unhappy marriage that are compounded by the introduction of Western values and his own interpretation of them. After the ceremony in which Kwok Yun is declared a “Model Peasant,” a montage of the village set to music made from construction sounds cuts to adult education classes led by Yee Ming in which he teaches Western art and literature. Since Three Headed Bird Village happens to be located on the Tropic of Cancer, he assigns Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, a sexually explicit novel most famous for sparking a legal battle over censorship and obscenity laws in the United States.³² Not only does this reasoning explicitly comment on an underlying sinocentric discourse, but it also reinforces
the films’ satirical position on Western gender and sexual norms as a source of liberation when Yee Ming goes from discussing Miller’s novel to leading the class in nationalistic military songs. It is clear that Yee Ming fundamentally misunderstands the novel on some level because he confuses the subject of the novel, human consciousness and male sexual desire, with the effect the novel had, a loosening of legal restrictions. When the police officer asks a young student reading the novel to describe it, he says that Yee Ming told them it is about “freedom” and precedes to read a quote from the novel: “Not a prick in the land big enough for her. Men went inside her and shriveled up. She wanted large pricks, self-explooding rockets, hot oil made of boiling wax. She would cut off your prick and keep it inside her forever.” The police officer aptly asks, “What’s a dick got to do with freedom?”, drawing attention to the fact that while this novel did result in a loosening of censorship laws in the U.S., it did so for a male-centric sexuality in which women are objectified and dehumanized as outlets for male identity exploration.

In fact, it is Yee Ming’s unnamed wife and father-in-law, Carp Li, who experience the harshest repercussions of Yee Ming’s interpretation of Westernization. Immediately after the montage of adult education classes including both Kwok Yun and Yee Ming’s wife as students, Yee Ming attempts to obtain a divorce from his wife at an absurdly labeled government building with one door reading ‘marriage’ and the other ‘divorce.’ This coldly bureaucratic building is contrasted with the emotional reticence of Yee Ming’s wife lingering by the stairs to marriage while he quickly climbs to divorce, her visible but unspoken feelings of shame and inadequacy expressed on her face. Yee Ming’s wife is intentionally portrayed as one-dimensional and unattractive, visualized for the audience as “fat and angry” like Yee Ming sees her, but her humanity and suffering are still manifested in visual cues like the red lipstick she begins to wear.
and her reluctance to eat. A foil to Kwok Yun, Yee Ming’s wife’s marriage is the only thing she has aside from her father who repeatedly berates her and comments that he cannot take care of her forever. Their divorce may be liberating for Yee Ming, but it is counterintuitively devastating for her because she was raised in a social system that expected her to be a wife and a mother and now, she has no skills or education to pursue an alternative. Even worse, the capitalist development of the village has also polluted Carp Li’s fishing pond and destroyed his only source of income. This economic loss combined with the social loss of his daughter’s divorce leads him to commit suicide, further ruining Yee Ming’s wife’s life while also inspiring even more criticism and hatreds towards Kwok Yun as the scapegoat for these events. The death of traditional familial patriarchy as represented by Carp Li is not a liberating moment, but a regime change: in its place rises the disinterested patriarchal authority of bureaucracy and the dehumanizing sexual objectification of global capitalism.

The almost comical nature of the tragedy and unlikability of the characters involved further complicates this incident. When Carp Li is first introduced as a weathered old man smoking in front of his fishing pond, he is depicted in the starkness of his rural poverty while accepting without protest the assessment that his daughter is a fat, angry woman. In the background of the same scene, a traditional funeral procession walks by and foreshadows his death and that of the old Confucian ideological system he represents. As the pond gradually fills with trash and pollution, Carp Li turns to Chief Chang for help and she tells him about how Chinese shellfish are being found in France to which he responds with horror. In his mind, his life is being destroyed by a Westernization and modernization embodied in the natural destruction of the fishing pond, but it is his rigidity and unwillingness to adapt that ultimately
leads him to suicide. As the audience watches his daughter sob over his crawfish covered corpse—knowing how he treated her while alive—the scene is still tragic, but in an almost repulsive way that reminds the viewer that she is mourning his death not out of love but because of what his death means for her future. Without Carp Li, there is no longer any pressure to stop Yee Ming and Chief Chang from pursuing divorce and without a husband, a father, an education or a job, his daughter has nothing left. The tragedy the film presents is not the death of Carp Li or of the system he represents, but the lingering consequences of that death and the changing role of the family at large.

On a structural level, this familial melodrama also places the film in dialogue with both Chinese commercial films and Hollywood. As Zhang Zhen argues of early Chinese cinema, there is “a kind of family ethic melodrama that would become the staple repertoire of Chinese cinema (and TV soap opera) for years to come [since the 1930s]” in which one could process the “emblematic and painful sociopolitical experiences caused by the contradictions of modernity since the Opium Wars.” These films explored the collapse of traditional family structures and the seemingly fated tragedies generated by the conflicting values and expectations of tradition and modernity, but they are also deeply rooted in a May Fourth Movement sense of Chinese inadequacy and Western superiority. In *UFO in Her Eyes*, however, this inadequacy and predetermined tragedy are subverted by the situation’s absurdity and its blanket refusal to align itself with any particular political ideology. While the film does explore the conflicting values of modernity and tradition, it actually emphasizes their similarities as in a later interrogation scene when the police officer asks Yee Ming about the divorce and its possible role in Carp Li’s death. The police officer criticizes Yee for his “individualism,” but more striking is Yee Ming’s
justification that the divorce could not have been a contributing factor because it was an arranged marriage. Depicted wiping off a female anatomical model for the duration of the interview, the irony of Yee Ming’s comment goes completely over his own head as he fails to see the similarities between his former marriage, arranged in a traditional manner by their parents, and his upcoming marriage, also arranged, but by the government. Much like the many May Fourth intellectuals who abandoned their wives in the name of modernity, Yee Ming is simply benefiting from a new sociopolitical system in which he is afforded new freedoms while the women around him are subjected to the restraints of both the old and new system.35

While investigating this contradictory dynamic, the film actively addresses this dehumanization through male desire with a reversal of the male gaze.36 As Kwok Yun is pushed towards Yee Ming and the marital legitimation of their affair to “demonstrate our nation’s ideology: an illiterate in alliance with an intellectual to create a modern citizen,” her romantic and sexual desire is redirected to the migrant bicycle repairman. Although he does not speak during the film, he and Kwok Yun bond through their mutual alienation from the village and are connected to each other through the UFO sighting. It is implied that although he did not report it, the repairman also witnessed the UFO that day when he is depicted in a flashback observing Kwok Yun that day and picking up the same piece of quartz from the ground. When they are shown together as in the scene in which he attaches a red umbrella to her bicycle, they share a silent but physical synchronicity as they walk together in circles or as Kwok Yun sneak glances at him working. While Yee Ming represents a scholarly wen masculinity tormented by a psychological inferiority to Western men, the repairman is a self-assured wu type of masculinity that privileges bodily action over language.37 Moreover, unlike the police officer who is marked

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by disembodiment, the repairman is nothing but embodiment and the physical manifestation of masculinity as a marked experience rather than an invisible default. Unmediated by culture or ideology, he is a physical presence to which Kwok Yun can direct the female sexual desire that has been suppressed by social constructs and expectations. He is also undocumented, unnamed, and without clear origin, meaning that he is located outside the social systems in which the other characters operate and therefore is representationally more of a pre-societal fantasy than a real three-dimensional person. In relation to class and environmental concerns, he also represents a different type of desire for an imagined future of renewal and revaluation particularly through the symbolism of the bicycle. While bicycles were once symbols of modernity within China as part of the “三转一响” or “three rounds and sounds” required items to own along with a wristwatch, a clock, and a sewing machine, after 1980 they became more symbolic of Chinese backwardness in comparison to owning a car. By the early 2000s however, growing environmental concerns added a new globalized symbolic layer to the bicycle as opposed to the excessive consumption and pollution of cars. As someone who does not sell new bicycles but fixes old ones, the migrant repairman is doubly established as an alternative model of social, economic, and environmental modernity through recycling rather than disposal. When extended to human sociality, this model also intrinsically places value in individual life as opposed to the ethos of replaceability in capitalism that reduces human beings to interchangeable parts. In her desire for the bicycle repairman, Kwok Yun also expresses a desire for the cooperative and resourceful values of socialism without the ideological hypocrisy of postsocialist reality. This exploration of female desire both sexual and otherwise as Kwok Yun is repeatedly forced to confront the consequences of male desire and authority culminates in the climax of the
film in which Kwok Yun’s wedding is intercut with a violent local protest typical of this period. After a long shot of Kwok Yun in a ruffled red dress walking to the wedding with her grandfather, the camera cuts to the raucous welcoming celebration of the American man, Steve Frost, featuring a massive but poorly constructed waving statue of Mao Zedong and a misspelled billboard reading “Welcome UFO & American Friend.” Frost, conspicuously played by German actor Udo Kier, kisses Chinese children dressed as angels on the head while flowers are placed around his neck and a marching band bungles its way through the Star-Spangled Banner, until eventually the entire wedding procession makes its way to an outside reception at which he and the Chief give speeches in a scene reminiscent of Connie’s wedding in The Godfather (1972).

Although he understands no Chinese and the villagers do not speak English, he proudly declares that “China is the country of the future” before the camera cuts to the first shot of the growing protest nearby. This protest is the result of a several smaller but interrelated plotlines within the film of locals losing their livelihoods, including the butcher and the farmer in whose field the UFO sighting occurred. As the film progresses, the butcher’s encounters with local law enforcement are gradually depicted in brief business interactions and conflicts over new health code regulations that end with the defiant slaughter of his last suckling pig before dumping it on the red carpet in front of the restaurant to which the wedding procession is headed. Similarly, the film depicts the gradual loss of the farmer’s land as part of it is seized to build a memorial to the UFO and the rest is gradually filled with garbage. During the police officer’s final visit to the village, he encounters the farmer crouched amongst the garbage as he complains about what he has lost for the sake of the “collective,” to which the officer responds that he “should be proud to sacrifice himself for [his] country.” Against the backdrop of this economic and environmental
devastation in the name of capitalist development disguised as nationalist sentiment, the
gendered violence of the forced wedding is established as a consequence of the same
sociopolitical forces.

Cutting back and forth more rapidly as the protest escalates and the wedding party
becomes increasingly drunk and rowdy, loud banging sounds punctuate both scenes until it
becomes clear that they are gunshots and the film recreates a scene reminiscent of the Tiananmen
Square incident as a man throws himself in front of a construction vehicle. This chaos, however,
of drunken capitalist revelry and violent labor protest are never resolved just as real-life
economic protests continue to escalate in the PRC. Instead, the film returns its focus to Kwok Yun
as she escapes from her own wedding, strips off her dress and make up, and follows the
bicycle repairmen to a strange, Noah’s ark/UFO-like structure he has built in the middle of
nowhere. Constructed out of strange plastic balls reminiscent of fishing buoys and containing the
various animals seen in the film and moving metal parts, the structure is painted in red with the
English phrase, “THIS IS THE FUTURE,” as if responding to the question asked by Kwok Yun’s
shirt at the start of the film, “Is this the future?” The central conflicts of the film remain
unresolved, but in this moment, Kwok Yun finally encounters the manifestation of the UFO as
she saw it, something which has been repeatedly distorted and destroyed by others throughout
the film, but which is now somehow materialized in front of her. In the final shots of the film,
Kwok Yun and the repairman step into the UFO before the camera pans out in a reverse aerial
shot of how the film began. Already alienated from their community, they literally become aliens
themselves as they escape to create something new and inhuman like the strange animal-machine
hybrid in which they are contained. In this way, the film does not offer solutions or answers to
the societal problems it presents, but instead argues that there is something completely new to strive for instead—but it must be actively made just as meaning must be made in the face of the absurd.⁴¹

In her rejection of the financialized wedding in favor of an unknown and alien frontier, Kwok Yun unites the disparate thematic threads of the film into the vague outline of an economically cooperative, environmentally conscious, and socially equalized future space that is still distinctly Chinese. When Kwok Yun steps into the animal/machine hybrid labelled as “the future,” the film acknowledges that humanity has been transformed by modern life and technology, but rejects the limitations of that transformation and insists on the protection and maintenance of the pre-human and the non-human as equally important. As Donna Haraway writes of modern life, “The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation…The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination.”⁴² In reimagining that border and the role of gender in negotiating it, Xiaolu Guo does exactly as Haraway suggests by taking pleasure through satire and comedy in the process itself rather than giving way to the illusion of powerlessness in the face of that change. By insisting that there are alternative forms of modernity in which social equality and communal care outweigh financial gain or political control, the film resists and refutes both Chinese postsocialism and Western neoliberalism.
Chapter 2: *Lotus* and “Wenqing” Individualism

While *UFO in Her Eyes* envisions an imaginary fantasy of the future in which a city is built around the protagonist, Liu Shu’s *Lotus* (2012) depicts a bleak and virtually inescapable present in which an individualistic young schoolteacher leaves her small hometown for the city. In the titular character’s journey from one to the other she faces a series of obstacles and abuse that gradually crush her rebellious spirit, but just as the film ends with Lotus in her new commodified and complacent future, she is momentarily doubled on screen with a ghostly iteration of her naïve former self just arriving in Beijing. With the final moments of the narrative divided between these two selves and what they represent, *Lotus* depicts the typical life of a middle class female “文青” or “artistic youth” unique to the postsocialist period and the urban migrancy it encourages, and yet brutalized or at best neglected by the same system that enabled their existence. The film fits into a category of contemporary works in which a young woman’s “transition to the big city is not the beginning of an ascent, but of a spiral downwards,” and according to the filmmaker, it is also a deeply personal exploration of Liu Shu’s own experiences as a woman working in a creative field. In the film’s portrayal of Lotus and the postsocialist female experience she embodies, there is a noticeable absence of economic awareness and the intersection between gender and class in which China’s most marginalized communities and people exist. In its harsh juxtaposition of the urban and small town spaces unique to postsocialist China as equally oppressive, Liu Shu’s film challenges the hypocrisy of an ideological system that presents women like Lotus as symbols of modernity and equality while simultaneously subjecting them to economic and gendered violence, but it also reveals a societal failure to

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empathize with working class people that distinguishes *Lotus* from the other two case studies in its sociopolitical cosmology.

At the beginning of the film, Lotus is introduced as the epitome of a socialist agendered youth, happily and skillfully playing basketball with her students before teaching a class on imperialism and the importance of freedom. Not only is basketball a financially and culturally significant cultural import to China from the early days of the CCP as Mao Zedong’s favorite sport, but this display of physical prowess hints at a contemporary *wu* masculinity while her intellectual status as a teacher and mentor align her with traditional *wen* figures of China’s past. In some ways, this indicates what Kam Louie calls a “democratisation process” in which women are increasingly able to attain not only attributes associated with masculinity, but the social and economic benefits that are attached to said attributes. However, in other ways, this embodiment of certain masculine qualities and globalized political inclinations—as depicted in her interest in foreign literature and events like Hamas terrorist attacks—set Lotus up for the coming “spiral downwards” by othering her as a threat to social stability. Her socialist physical image is disrupted by her globalized ideologism in a reference to the 1980s pro-democracy movement and its imported discourse of individualism, marking her not just as an embodiment of socialist gender values but of the threat those values can present when translated to economic and political conditions. Lotus is a direct product of postsocialist modernity as an ideal continuation of socialist values and globalization, but the tragedy of the film arises from her confrontation with the gap between that ideal and reality.

In this context, the film sets Lotus into the postsocialist space of a mid-2000s small town as an intermediary between the rural and the urban that encompasses the possibilities and
restrictions of both. As a consequence of economic development and rural to urban migration, networks of small towns have formed across China that “remain an important determinant of China’s economic and human development…[and] play a decisive role in the promotion of social cohesion or what the Party-state calls a ‘harmonious society.’”

The small town is simultaneously a symbol of disruption in its transformation of Chinese life as well as of continuity in its preservation of social stability and the family by moving the rural home to the outskirts of urbanity. In film, as in Jia Zhangke’s hometown trilogy for example, small towns represent an intermediary space between the rural and the urban and between China’s socialist past and its capitalist future, rife with all the confusion and misunderstanding inherent to in between, undefined spaces of all kinds.

Relative to the small town in which they live, Lotus and her family are marked as privileged and middle class by their collective existence in this space that allows them to pursue white collar economic advancement without the familial sacrifice of working class families separated by migrant factory labor and impoverishment.

However, this privilege of familial unity and safety is accompanied by more traditional Confucian structures that also limit Lotus despite her proximity to the perceived freedoms of the city. In keeping with current social norms and officially promoted slogans—including “leftover women” and its positive male equivalent, “钻石王老五” or “diamond single man”—that “pressure urban, educated women in their mid- to late twenties to stop being so ambitious and get married,” Lotus’ small town life is also marked by her parents’ middle class desire for stability expressed in their insistence on Lotus finding a reliable line of work and getting married.

This relatively open but still oppressive space is a tenuously sustainable rural-urban intermediary that by extension creates the figure of the wenqing, a youth displaced in history by
transition from socialism to postsocialism who turns to the city for freedom and independence only to realize that the small town had also insulated them from the unchecked violence and precarity of modern capitalism.

This small-scale version of national conflict is exemplified in a scene immediately after Lotus teaches her students imperial history when she is shown watching a “palace intrigue” drama with her parents before arguing over an arranged date they have planned for her with a young police officer. On a structural level, the nesting of the television scene within her own family melodrama and immediately after her impassioned speech on freedom clearly establish an incongruous dynamic between Lotus’ high culture aspirations and her parents’ low culture expectations. Meanwhile, the reference to the Qing dynasty itself predicts an impending collapse of this space and Lotus’ place in it in a clear parallel to the global cosmopolitanism of early twentieth century China and the figure of the New Woman. Beholden to traditional rules as long as she lives in her parents’ home, Lotus concedes to their request but actively subverts the date with a young police officer by adopting rude mannerisms and an abrasive demeanor, drinking, smoking, and sullenly frowning to make herself as visually displeasing as possible. However, on a symbolic level, Lotus’ distaste for the television program is less about the value systems it depicts than the low culture materialism it promotes as a form of media. While “in the eighties…intellectuals rather than average citizens appeared to be the unequivocal spokespeople for the Chinese modern,” by the 1990s consumerism and popular culture dominated mainstream discourse and media including the melodrama dramatic palace dramas popular in the mid-2000s. Conceiving of herself as an intellectual, she treats the television program and by extension her own parents as beneath her. However, despite her disdain for the vulgarity of these
commercialized structures and imagery, the rest of her small-town life depicted in the film is characterized by similar melodramatic arcs.

While at times Lotus’ hometown life is marked as a space of comfort and peace by her restful moments in nature, by the end of the first act she is faced with the simultaneous collapse of both her public and private lives. After establishing Lotus’ character and her professional aspirations, she is shown in an illicit relationship with a married man who, in a complete reversal of Lotus’ masculine independence, is reluctant to leave his wife because he is financially dependent upon her. Lotus then loses her job after the man’s wife outs their relationship in front of all of Lotus’ coworkers and students. Moreover, her position had already been jeopardized by her refusal to teach to the syllabus, which was reported to the principal by the students assigned to spy on her in class. While Lotus has no close relationships to other women in the film, she is surrounded by this coercive network of women observing and reporting on her behavior in order to keep her transgressive behavior in check. Not only does this reflect real social phenomena in which “the devaluation of women is upheld by women,” but in this moment of public shame the film visualizes both the hardships of defying social norms as Lotus pushes her way out against the crowd of angry and bewildered bodies, as well as the use of economic deprivation as a punishment for social transgression. When Lotus is fired from teaching for her political and social views, she is actively denied economic stability and financial autonomy and is therefore made even more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Forced out of the public sphere by sexual shame, Lotus is thereby closed off from the public rural spaces in which she seeks freedom and left with a choice between the oppressive indoor space of her family home or leaving the rural altogether for a fresh start.
In an apt visual metaphor, this sequence of events is even preceded by a brief and almost surreal incident in which Lotus is flashed while biking. Just after being scolded by the school principal and prior to meeting with her married boyfriend, Lotus is shown happily bicycling down a sunny tree-lined dirt road before a man in a trench coat appears walking towards her. In a sudden moment of chaos, the man opens his coat to flash Lotus, and she crashes on the side of the road, her prior joy converted into an expression of fear and anger before the film cuts to her in town again being violently cut off by a car. This time Lotus’ fear turns to relief when the driver is revealed to be her boyfriend. However, these two juxtaposed moments of joy transformed into fear and then back again to joy illustrate the instability of Lotus’ rural life as well as the fragile boundary between the consensual and the violent. Ironically, it is the consensual relationship between Lotus and her boyfriend that is publicly condemned rather than this random act of violence that goes unmentioned for the rest of the film. This largely symbolic moment in which Lotus is assaulted in the space where she is most comfortable and free sets the tone for the rest of the film and marks even the quiet natural spaces of rural China as unsafe and unwelcoming to women.

After losing her job and her social status, Lotus leaves for Beijing and her rural iteration from the start of the film is contrasted with the two urban selves into which she is split by the city. The first of those two selves are a transitional Lotus adjusting to life in Beijing, gradually transformed from a confident and defiant remnant of socialist gender equality into a defeated and dehumanized husk of her former self. The start of this transition is marked by Lotus’ shift from masculine leisure clothes to feminine dresses and skirts, as well as from the open and undeveloped landscapes of her rural hometown into the crowded and over-developed concrete
sprawl of the city. Instead of living in the cramped apartment she shared with her parents, Lotus moves into an even smaller basement room in a rundown building. She forms a friendship with a young aspiring musician who lives across the hall and secures a job at a fashionable magazine. Yet, Lotus becomes even more isolated than before in this new urban environment. She cannot find a teaching job because she still won’t compromise her political beliefs, and eventually she loses her journalism job as well because she refuses to censor her writing or to prioritize celebrity gossip over political topics like the Cultural Revolution. Reduced from having reached a level of intellectual elitism to waitressing at a family restaurant, Lotus then ends up in a loveless relationship with a non-descript businessman. Her boyfriend is insignificant and undistinctive in appearance, but the one fact about him the audience learns is that he works in security—exactly what Lotus lacks as she faces economic precarity. This lack becomes even more apparent when she is targeted by a corrupt police officer and arrested for prostitution, culminating in a violent interrogation and the arrival of her father to return her to the oppressive safety of the family home.

Having reached her lowest moment wordlessly sobbing into a bowl of noodles in front of her father, the film abruptly splits Lotus’ character in two and cuts to an alternative, future iteration of herself who did adapt to the city. An almost unrecognizable version of Lotus with permed hair, full make-up, and designer clothes confidently steps out of what is revealed to be her own chain of luxury beauty salons before getting into a car and discussing a real estate deal over the phone in which she states she has married the business man she was dating. Like the successful cosmopolitan heroines of commercial Chinese romcoms effortlessly navigating between their luxurious consumptive careers and their search for a husband, this version of Lotus is also a
postsocialist cultural hybrid, but one that is starkly different than the Lotus at the start of the film.\textsuperscript{59} Whereas the rural Lotus at the start of the film represented a threatening conglomeration of Western political ideologies and antisocial behavior typified by \textit{wenqing}, the urban Lotus near the end represents the ideal combination of Western consumptive femininity and Confucian familial values that the Chinese state has actively promoted since 2007.\textsuperscript{60} As this Lotus drives through the city, the film even depicts her driving by Tiananmen square and the giant portrait of Mao Zedong surrounded by towering metal poles laden with surveillance cameras. This version of Lotus is too absorbed in her business and her personal interests to even glance at the scene beside her, carefully training her eyes ahead but still not seeing the ghost of her former self that then crosses in front of the car before the camera cuts away from future Lotus and back to her past self just arriving in her new apartment before the door closes behind her and shuts the audience out.

This doubling and breakage are at the crux of the film’s interpretation, layering Lotus’ gendered experience in the political and economic turmoil of postsocialism. As Chris Berry writes, the doubling is indicative of “a particular trope and response to a time of change where the rush forward is experienced as such a powerful force that there is no possibility of stopping to reflect, and any ‘blockage’ is simply crashed through,” as well as an analogy for the division between mainstream and independent filmmaking.\textsuperscript{61} In other words, this splitting of the protagonist is a result of the continuous and rapid economic and social changes that define Chinese post-socialism and render individuals incapable of doing anything but blindly pushing forward to secure a modicum of future stability. In this cyclical and widespread process young migrant women like Lotus are left to fend for themselves and form whatever communal
structures they can scrape together. This is how Lotus becomes friends with her neighbor, another young woman struggling to survive in the city. When this neighbor is beaten and robbed by her abusive boyfriend, Lotus comforts her and cradles her in bed. However, this moment is also a reminder of Lotus’ own precarity and the future she potentially faces if she lingers in this marginal space of forgotten youth. With the open-ended opportunity of the city comes uncertainty and the risk of failure, especially when women are systemically pushed out of the workforce for the benefit of men, and therefore this other woman offers solidarity but also represents a dark alternative to the comparatively comfortable confinement of marriage. The two Lotuses are the results of opposite and equally unappealing choices, one version electing for the safety and stagnation of social complacency and the other for the unstable and cyclical momentum of social rebellion.

While the film remains open-ended as to which Lotus has a preferable fate, the meta-commentary of this divide on the Chinese film industry also speaks to the relationship between media discourses on gender and their political and/or economic motivations. As a tool of mass ideology dissemination and of China’s global soft power efforts specifically, national slogans like the term “leftover women” and commercial Chinese films featuring women who easily and happily adapt to their post-socialist working conditions before leaving to get married help to promote a gendered social narrative that bolsters China’s biopolitical control. Concerned with a growing population of unmarried and unemployed men, the PRC uses these narratives to encourage women to exit the workforce and enter the domestic sphere, thereby clearing the way for men to achieve traditional social stability and as a result quell their political frustrations. That is to say, women are relegated to a subservient position in which the manipulation of their
lives and bodies are merely a means of indirectly controlling men and by extension preserving the political and economic hegemony of the CCP. Furthermore, independent filmmakers that operate outside this system are penalized economically as well because their work cannot be commercially marketed in China without being approved by government censors. The act of independent filmmaking, particularly on a subject that directly contradicts state-promoted narratives of gender and social harmony, is therefore a radical rejection of both globalized capitalism and the state. In this context, the ambivalence of the film’s ending is countered by its medium: the Lotus perpetually struggling at the margins with which the film ends is its answer to the false choice offered by postsocialist modernity. While her life may seem hopeless and empty, she places value in the maintenance of her identity and of her beliefs, and therefore as long as she continues to struggle there remains a possibility of escape and the opening of a new alternative.

Moreover, the role of state authority and violence in the perpetuation of this dichotomy is reinforced by the rupture of these two selves when the police raid Lotus’ apartment and arrest her for prostitution, forcing a label onto her in order to illegitimate her social existence and to legitimate their own corrupt behavior. Not long after she is hired as a journalist and starts working on her first article about a documentary filmmaker during the Cultural Revolution, Lotus encounters the Beijing police for the first time as she sits outside her apartment. While taking a smoke break to overcome writer’s block, a drunken man stumbles over to the grass nearby to urinate. After cutting to a more distant shot that frames Lotus in the mid-ground, clearly trying not to catch his gaze by staring at the pavement, the man slowly approaches and demands a cigarette. She obliges and tries to leave, but he pushes her down and begins to
interrogate her before identifying himself and demands to see her ID while refusing to show his own. The camera does not move for the entirety of the shot, passively standing by at a distance like a bystander unwilling to intervene, before following them as he tries to drag her away and later as she attempts to run. He forces his way into her apartment and attempts to rape her, but Lotus is able to trick him into leaving by appealing to his misogynistic preconceptions and saying she has an STI. Unexpectedly, this incident motivates Lotus to complete her article and later to stand her ground when the magazine editor tells her to focus on the filmmaker’s romantic life and to avoid anything political.

This brief triumph is brutally quashed when the officer returns to Lotus’ apartment a second time, but with the full authority of his position in the legal system. Just as Lotus reaches her emotional and economic breaking point, conceding to sex with her ‘boyfriend’ in exchange for money, the officer bursts into her apartment with an entire squad of men and drags Lotus naked from her bed before smacking her with the money. In a tragic reference to Lotus’ crushed aspirations and shattered innocence, as the officers burst into the room, they are framed against an iconic image of Audrey Hepburn pasted on the door. While Audrey was famed for her childlike naïveté and her numerous leading roles as a romantic Hollywood ingénue, her presence in this sad basement room as Lotus is verbally and physically assaulted is yet another reminder of how far her reality is from the carefree luxury promoted in commercial urban romcoms. The officer repeats his drunken unofficial interrogation of Lotus in a new, official capacity, attempting to force her to admit to being a prostitute so that he can retroactively justify the way he has treated her. Denied clothing and food or water, Lotus is depicted desperately but emptily insisting that she is in love with her boyfriend and that they are dating. In an attempt to save

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herself from this patriarchal violence, she is essentially coerced into marriage to prove that she exists within the socially acceptable boundaries of sexual and economic behavior as determined not just by society, but very directly imposed by the state.

While the first incident motivates Lotus to resist authority, the second concludes in a way that mirrors her workplace defeat and reinforces the idea that she is being forced to sacrifice her political interests for commercial trivialities and complacence. In a completion of this visual metaphor, Lotus is rescued from her encounter with government authority by the silent patriarchal disapproval of her own father. Having once told Lotus to be quiet when she expressed her distaste for the imperial television drama at the start of the film, Lotus’ father spends the next few scenes in absolute silence himself as he watches his daughter break down. He is clearly concerned for her well-being and to some degree this ‘rescue’ represents the lingering significance of the family as a social safety net particularly in the face of globalized capitalism and the economic precarity it spreads, but it also reveals the ways in which contemporary postsocialist political and economic systems work alongside traditional patriarchal culture to limit women’s choices and restrict their bodily autonomy. Her father may not be as bad as the police who have terrorized her and accused her of prostitution, but the life and the marriage he is pushing her towards might as well be prostitution in another form as far as Lotus is concerned. However, once the security of her home is disrupted by both the intrusion of public authority and the repeated violation of her personal boundaries, the safety of the predictable restrictions of marriage are an appealing alternative to the sporadic and brutal violence she faces as a single woman.
In a clear reflection of Liu Shu’s own struggles as a journalist and a filmmaker as evidenced by interviews she has given, Lotus encapsulates the perpetual struggles of middle-class youth trapped in an ideological and socioeconomic intermediary between China’s rural past and its urban future. As she stated in an interview, “I have lots of friends who used to be budding painters, poets, dancers, musicians: they left their hometowns to embrace the cultural aura and pursue their dreams in Beijing. However, to survive and thrive, little by little, they turn out to be totally different from what they wanted to be. They now own cars and apartments and feel good about themselves, but they have forgotten their ideals. As I see it, that is compromise.”

To both Liu Shu herself and the character of Lotus, the self-interested maintenance of own’s moral system is imperative above all else to negotiating the constant pressure to compromise in postsocialist China and to sacrifice artistic integrity for profit. Yet, there is a privilege in this perspective encapsulated in Lotus’ first emotional low point of the film: not the crushing violence of the sexual assault or the police interrogation, but the social humiliation of being seen by a former student at her waitressing job. Lotus’ intellectual and artistic elitism blind her to the classism of her shame and temper the aspirations of the film’s rebellious ending. The struggles and opportunities presented by Lotus are revealing of postsocialist conditions and gendered violence, but they are also limited in scope.

**Chapter 3: Angels Wear White and Human Financialization**

The final case study, Vivian Qu’s *Angels Wear White* (2016), differs from the other two by focusing on a younger generation of women born into the post-socialist conditions with which all
three films grapple. Unlike Kwok Yun and Lotus who confront a societal hypocrisy they have been raised alongside, the two young protagonists of Vivian Qu’s film Xiaomi and Xiaowen are the product of legal, cultural, and economic shifts of which they know only the repercussions. Most notably, they represent two different but equally bleak outcomes of the One Child Policy at the intersection of class and gender: while one is a legally documented but neglected only child, the other is an undocumented “黑孩子” or “black child” runaway, and both of them are financially unequipped to secure themselves a place in society.⁶⁹ Considering the fact from the 1950s on “Chinese women’s reproduction [has been] collectivized for the cause of socialist modernization,” these two young girls and the extreme violence they face as a combined result of their gender and their poverty is a glaring reminder of the widening gap between state-promoted narratives of gender and economic progress and the reality of contemporary post-socialist life in the PRC.⁷⁰ However, this system and its societal repercussions are covered up and sustained by commercial media and state-endorsed slogans that place the blame for these situations on women themselves and offer them compliance as a false solution.⁷¹ By focusing her film on these two children as the marginalized but defiant embodied intersection of national economic and cultural policy, Vivian Qu reveals the senseless violence of the dysfunctional mechanisms of a late stage postsocialist system that entraps women from an early age into an economic and reproductive cycle of national duty to perpetuate Chinese culture in which all of their self-worth is in sacrificing themselves for others.⁷² In its dark exploration of marketed purity, commodified sexuality, and a legal system run by money, Angels Wear White questions the point of a future in which young women re/produce for the sake of a nation that will not make space for them unless they silently conform—especially when they are already marginalized by poverty and the denial
of citizenship—and clearly establishes the contemporary postsocialist relationship between class and gender inequality in a way that the other two case studies do not.

Set in an off-season ocean resort town, the plot of the film centers on the rape of 12-year-old Xiaowen and her best friend by the local police commissioner Liu, as witnessed and recorded through security footage by Xiaomi, an undocumented girl working at the hotel where the assault takes place. Split between the two girls as they confront the violence of this incident as victim and witness, the film juxtaposes their lives as documented and undocumented children struggling with a legal system that is not just indifferent but that actively seeks to invalidate and censure their experiences. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that although Xiaowen is a documented only child, neither of her divorced parents is interested in raising her until her father finally takes responsibility for what has happened and his role in it. As part of this process of redemption, he and Xiaowen turn down both bribes to pay for an expensive private school and threats to kick them out of the water park in which they live all whilst a female lawyer fights to find proof of the assault and secure some kind of justice. At the same time, Xiaomi struggles with the moral dilemma of her undocumented status and the precarious position it places her in both legally and economically while agonizing over whether or not to cooperate as a witness and turn over proof of the assault. Moreover, as pointed out by another character in the film, Xiaomi struggles to empathize with the two other girls because they appear to be wealthy if they can afford to stay in a hotel room that costs more per night than her monthly salary. The two girls are even shown having a fun time playing in wigs and ordering beer before the assault occurs, making them less sympathetic as imperfect victims unworthy of Xiaomi’s efforts.
In an attempt to secure fake documents and by extension her job, Xiaomi blackmauls Liu only to be beaten nearly to death after a tracker is placed in the money that she gives him, and her plans to buy identification fall through. Lying in a hospital bed, Xiaomi finally turns over the video she has of Liu entering Xiaowen’s hotel room to the lawyer, who pays her bills in gratitude. Unfortunately, even video evidence is not enough when Xiaowen and her friend are called in for a surprise second medical evaluation and a series of doctors declare that no assault occurred in a press conference already set up at the same hospital. The film cuts from Xiaowen’s restrained father screaming for justice to Xiaowen as she cries silently in her hospital gown and then to a construction crew dismantling an enormous statue of Marilyn Monroe also featured throughout the film. Finally, the story jumps to a near future in which Xiaomi is working as a prostitute. Listening to a radio broadcast pronouncing the arrest of several corrupt doctors and police officials including Liu followed by a story on a national women’s conference to promote children’s well-being, Xiaomi closes the film by stealing a moped and escaping from the town, riding off on the highway to somewhere new as Marilyn’s body passes by on a flatbed truck.73

This Marilyn statue dismantled at the end of the film is a sort of third protagonist and narrative arc that indirectly unites the two girls together. Introduced in the opening shot of the film as Xiaomi approaches her enormous, newly installed feet, the statue is shown primarily from the waist down throughout the film and is immediately identifiable not by Marilyn’s blonde hair or red lipstick, but by the uplifted white skirt, visible underwear, and white-strapped heels from her iconic role in Billy Wilder’s 1955 film The Seven Year Itch.74 Stroking the statue’s feet before being shoved out of the way by two tourists with a selfie stick, Xiaomi appears awe-struck by the statue as the camera films through her phone taking a photo up Marilyn’s skirt.
Unlike the other tourists who want their photo taken with the statue, Xiaomi is interested in the statue itself as a point of curiosity. Meanwhile, the next time the statue appears is midway through the film when Xiaowen approaches its feet in the middle of the night and curls up between them to sleep. The fact that she runs away to such a pinnacle of femininity is made more significant by a chaotic scene prior in which Xiaowen’s mother destroys the girl’s clothes and cuts her hair to make her more childlike, screaming that these things aren’t meant for her in a misplaced attempt to comprehend the way in which her daughter was attacked. Xiaowen runs away from this misdirected anger and abuse to her father’s home only to find the gate locked and his phone unresponsive, leaving her stranded on the streets between the comforts of childhood and the cruelty of adulthood. In this instance, the statue becomes a place of uneasy refuge that returns on screen in a photograph the lawyer shows to Xiaomi. The lawyer shows Xiaomi the photograph of Xiaowen sleeping under the statue as an accompaniment to an impassioned speech about how she may not think Xiaowen is worth helping because she was staying in a hotel room that night worth than a month of Xiaomi’s wages, but in reality Xiaomi is just as impoverished and vulnerable. They are both drawn to the luxurious prosperity of the Western femininity Marilyn represents as opposed to the poverty of their own experiences of gender and class. The statue’s legs appear briefly in the background throughout the rest of the film as they become increasingly dirtied by graffiti and garbage, but Marilyn is only featured again as she is being taken apart. Surrounded by men and construction equipment in the middle of the night, the statue is unceremoniously hacked at until it is pulled down and lifted away, only to be seen again as it travels to an unknown destination on the highway in front of Xiaomi.
Within the representational layers of the film, this strange tourist attraction and Hollywood sex icon in the background simultaneously reveals the filmmaker’s clear appreciation of Marilyn in a historical and cultural context as opposed to the limited and childish perspective of the protagonists as Vivian Qu depicts them. In her pure white dress and perfect ideal of commercial Western beauty standards, the statue of Marilyn represents the dream of luxurious femininity to which the two girls aspire as they enter adulthood. However, no matter how hard they try, that idealized femininity only exists in their imagination. Even if it were real it would always be racially and economically unattainable for them anyways. On a structural level, however, the statue functions differently for the two girls and their distinct stages in the process of puberty. For Xiaomi, the statue mirrors her relationship with her older sister-like coworker, Lili, to whom she looks up to before gradually realizing the abusive nature of Lili’s relationships with men and with work. In an early scene in which Xiaomi praises Lili’s new earrings and how nice her boyfriend Jian must be to have bought them, Lili informs her that he would never spend money on her and proceeds to inform Xiaomi that he inquired about her virginity and how much she would sell it for. Later on, when Xiaomi goes with Lili to the beachside bar where Jian works, she watches as Lili is cast aside and forced to spend the night with Jian’s boss who leaves her bruised and beaten the next day at work. As this abusive reality emerges, the statue’s legs become increasingly coated in trash despite Xiaomi’s half-hearted attempts to clean them, and eventually the statue fades from her interest as Lili leaves altogether. In the final moments of the film when she is forced to work for Jian as a prostitute, Xiaomi dresses up in a white dress and shoes like Marilyn’s, puts on red lipstick, and dons the green earrings Lili left behind for her. Having worn the same ragged clothes throughout the film and repeatedly denied her potential to
be feminine like Lili or Monroe, she ends the film clad in the symbolic uniform of that femininity and yet does so as she finally escapes the epitome of re/productive enslavement that is involuntary prostitution. Alternatively, for Xiaowen the Monroe statue is more of a motherly figure and a representation of the femininity she is both repelled by and from in the public destruction of virginity and the private collapse of her relationship with her actual mother. Unlike Xiaowen who voluntarily puts on a white dress as she reclaims her own sense of self-worth, Xiaomi is clad in a Marilyn-esque white dress as she is examined for the second time, the camera motionlessly watching as doctor after doctor fills the space between her stirrup-suspended legs and gazes back at the viewer. Her virginity and by extension her societal worth are artificially reinstated by the state to cover up corruption, and she is plastered back into an official narrative from which she very nearly escaped. When the Marilyn statue is dismantled at the end of the film, it is simultaneously a liberation and loss: no longer is this towering pinnacle of commercial global femininity and violent female death casting its shadow over their lives, but the dream it represented to mask the harsh reality of disposable womanhood is torn apart as well.

The surreal tourist attraction of Marilyn as an escapist dream space is emblematic of a larger dynamic the film creates through the unique space of the resort town, an iteration of the small town encountered in Lotus. While *UFO in Her Eyes* depicts the transformation of the rural into the urban and *Lotus* depicts the journey from small towns to urban centers, the seaside resort town of *Angels Wear White* is the only setting in the film and it is a different type of space that is particularly indicative of contemporary postsocialism. Unlike a regular town that functions primarily as a residential community or a city to which people migrate for work, a resort town is
a place built entirely around a luxurious escape from work for the wealthy, who are served by the intentionally concealed and unceasing labor of the impoverished people who live there. This artificial commercial space that intentionally replicates the structural economic inequalities of Chinese society at large in order to sustain a highly profitable industry of luxury consumption. Undocumented laborers like Xiaomi clean up after the elite guests whose own documents they are expected to vet, an irony pointed out by her own corrupt boss. Documented but uneducated laborers like Xiaowen’s parents wear themselves down to entertain clients and guard their private property while sacrificing their own well-being so that they can secure an unguaranteed better future for their own children. Although seaside resorts are most often coded in commercial films as spaces of romance and fantasy in which young women find love and excitement—a trend alluded to by the steadily growing influx of happy beachgoers and waterside wedding photoshoots in the film—in this narrative it is a place of violent dehumanization and suffering. The hotel in which Xiaomi works epitomizes this structural imbalance, while the rape that occurs within it—something her boss brazenly dismisses as a normal event—reinforces the film’s point that this entire town was built to serve its transitory guests at the expense of its disposable residents in a condensed version of urban life.

Furthermore, within this unique postsocialist space is the even more specific environment of the waterpark in which Xiaowen and Mengtao live and the relationship it highlights between children and gendered economic violence. Although it will not be open until Children’s Day, an ironic fact iterated to the police officers as they take Xiaowen and Mengtao to the medical examination, the waterpark is a place that provides artificial entertainment for children at a price. After the tragic adult encounter Xiaowen has at the hotel, this child-centric space is even more
significant as a refuge of tenuous innocence and safety. In the waterpark Xiaowen is surrounded by the markers of commercialized childhood and its sinister implications, but she is living out a more sincere childish fantasy of having these spaces to herself and for free. An example is when she is on the phone with her friend, quietly sharing the distant sounds of the ocean in the dark. In one particularly poignant scene in which Mengtao discusses the offer to pay for Xiaowen’s education in exchange for dropping the rape charges, Xiaowen is shown playing with her friend in the surreal, brightly painted tunnels of the defunct waterslides. As they temporarily forget the burden of their situation and simply play as children, their parents are coldly discussing the financial calculation of the trade-off between their children’s’ economic future and their emotional and physical well-being. For Mengtao no amount of money is worth the invalidation of his daughter’s truth, but for the other parents the financial gain is an attractive alternative to the cynical reality that the damage has already been done and recuperating their economic loss is better than nothing. However, their decision is no less compassionate or difficult than Mengtao’s, they are simply more equipped to adapt to and accept the state’s narrative in exchange for an illusion of normalcy and safety. The waterpark represents the tenuous boundary between fantasy and horror through which children pass on their way to adulthood, while providing a complicated space in which the film explores how early and how insidiously postsocialist attributions of value shape human existence.

The youth of the protagonists is significant not just in the historical period of which they are indicative, but of the representative significance of children themselves politically and economically. As Lee Edelman writes of children and their symbolic weight, “the image of the Child…serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will count as political
discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address.”

Children are emblematic of a collective, national future discursively through the historical relationships between children and re/productive propaganda as well as through the emotional stickiness of children as something pure and fragile requiring protection.

In a specifically Chinese context that traces back to Lu Xun and stories like *A Madman’s Diary*, children are doubly significant as both fundamental components of the Confucian family and as the source of future economic and cultural production. There are also a number of Chinese films, especially from the 1980s and 90s, that use children’s perspectives to approach politically sensitive topics, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (1993) which discusses the Cultural Revolution, and Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984) which explores the suffering of a young child bride against the backdrop of a burgeoning communist revolution.

*Angels Wear White* explicitly critiques this dichotomy and the inseparability of gender and politics it creates that marks the act of reproduction as something highly public. By focusing on children and the irony of preaching the importance of their care and education in the face of the brutal assault they endure, the film draws attention to a long-standing “mutual adjustment between production and reproduction…achieved through state planning” that raises children as a means to an economic ends.

While children are still globally considered the private economic guarantee of an individual family’s security, in the postsocialist PRC they are also the guarantee of a national economic growth predicated upon their disposability. Furthermore, in depicting the moment at which these children are awakened to and enfolded within an ideological cosmology of sociality, politics, and capitalism, Vivian Qu reminds the audience that gender and adulthood are learned
patterns of behavior to which we are conditioned rather than natural or predestined outcomes. In its dark vision of a violent postsocialist coming-of-age, the surreal experience of watching children brutalized by the adults who are supposed to protect them be normalized as an everyday occurrence forces the audience to question the normalized violence of their own lives.

In relation to the significance of children, one of the subtler ways in which the film subverts gender norms is through Xiaowen’s parents, who invert societal gender expectations of child-rearing while also embodying the opposite of the privilege of Lotus’ united family in the prior case study. As part of the growing national pressure to produce “quality” children over quantity, in the 1990s the PRC began widely promoting the concept of “‘the good mother’…who would sacrifice her own interests for her youngster and follow the prescriptions of the latest science in conceiving, giving birth to, and rearing a high-quality child.” This ideal mother figure was educated, nationalistic, and devoted to raising children of similar qualities at the expense of her career and independence. Xiaowen’s mother, however, is the exact opposite: she is a working class, divorced woman who prioritizes her job and her social life over Xiaowen, but who still feels compelled to maintain her public image through Xiaowen’s behavior. When Xiaowen is assaulted and loses her virginity, something confirmed in a scene immediately after Xiaomi is told she would be offered a lot of money for her own, she is immediately devalued as a woman as is her mother, by extension, in a case so public that it is known by the entire town. In an attempt to reassert control after a senseless act of violence that affects them both, Xiaowen’s mother destroys her clothes and cuts her hair to make her look more childlike and thereby mask the perceived entrance to adulthood and its violence that she has endured prior to puberty. Before running away, Xiaowen destroys her mother’s make-up in a symbolic act of revenge, as if to
reject the commodified hyper-femininity it represents altogether and to punish her mother by denying it to her as well. Her mother is obsessed with appearances and what people think her, constantly berating Xiaowen for causing her shame, and thus this small act of destruction indicates Xiaowen’s longing for something more genuine. Ironically, however, she ends up taking shelter that night between the feet of Marilyn Monroe, a symbol of the sexualized femininity she has just simultaneously rejected and been rejected by. Having left the woman who failed to live up to national standards of motherhood, she instead finds herself huddled underneath the cold calcified husk of expendable womanhood itself without being fully conscious of the irony in her circumstances.

However, where Xiaowen’s mother symbolically fails, her father Mengtao steps up to fulfill a caretaker role to which he seems naturally predisposed but culturally conditioned to reject. Although their divorce is never explained, it gradually becomes apparent that while Xiaowen’s mother is obsessed with social judgement and appearances, her father has settled for mere survival after failing to live up to postsocialist masculine standards of economic success. Despite this perceived societal failure—or perhaps because of it—he is far more compassionate and empathetic towards his daughter. For example, the first morning Xiaowen spends with Mengtao he is depicted as a typical single father who owns only one bowl which he gives to Xiaowen before eating straight from the pot himself. Like the figure of “the good mother” who sacrifices for her child, Mengtao makes sacrifices for his daughter when he realizes how much she needs him. Nonetheless, he still attempts to return her to her mother until he realizes how much Xiaowen does not want to go back. Although fathers are typically neglected in state-promoted narratives of child-rearing apart from their role as a worker who contributes monetarily.
to the family, yet Mengtao provides the nurturing and patient care Xiaowen requires to recover from her trauma while actively defending her story and refusing to prioritize his job over justice when he is threatened by his boss and the police with legal action and eviction. At the same time, he is far more naïve than Xiaowen’s mother about society and how women are treated within it. Where Xiaowen’s mother argues with the police and questions the way they are harassing and questioning her daughter, Mengtao hesitantly complies with the police until he realizes the police are not driving Xiaowen and him to the station to authenticate the video proof, but rather to a second medical examination staged to pretend the crime never occurred at all. Ultimately, Mengtao is no more able to protect Xiaowen than is her mother. Despite this shortcoming, Mengtao conveys an example of fatherhood that counters a societal narrative that places all the pressure of child-rearing on women while denying men the opportunity to participate successfully. He is not a typical patriarchal savior because he ultimately fails to help Xiaowen where the law eventually succeeds, but the type of fatherhood he demonstrates is still caring and protective even if it is not the solution to the protagonists’ problems.

Furthermore, the parents’ divorced status, combined with the film’s portrayal of a cynical industry built around virginity and marriage, forms an even more complete picture of the failures of Chinese societal structures at the cross section of gender and class, as well as a refusal of those structures that is envisioned through the various women of the film and the life stages they represent. At one end of this spectrum are the two twelve-year-olds and the violent rupture of childhood and adulthood they experience through the non-consensual and pre-pubescent loss of their virginity. In the hotel room prior to the attack, the two girls are joyfully playing at their idea of adulthood by drinking beer and wearing wigs in a place outside of their financial and age

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demographic norms, only to be attacked and then further demeaned by the parade of authority figures calling them liars and blaming them for leaving the safe bounds of childhood rather than the adult man who dragged them there. The cultural and commercial value of the purity they have lost is then reinforced in the experiences of 16-year-old Xiaomi as her own virginity is marked by Jian’s interest in selling it, as well as by the not-much-older Lili when she transitions out of the same stage of life and into the next. While Xiaomi is still confused and physically developing, Lili has already adapted to the demands of the world around her and is often shown either maintaining her physical appearance or using it to assert a modicum of control over the violent men around her. However, the instability of this lifestyle becomes clear when Lili brings Xiaomi with her to a hymen reconstruction surgery, presumably so that she can get married without revealing her sexual past. The procedure leaves Lili in agony as she wishes never to be born a woman again, and the horrifying scene teaches Xiaomi that her role models and the attractive femininity they perpetuate simply conceal the dehumanizing reality of what Chinese women are worth to society. Meanwhile, the two mothers depicted in the film are no better off than their younger counterparts, unable to save their children from the same gendered reality to which they are beholden. The only stable and morally uncompromised adult woman in the film is Xiaowen’s lawyer, who has dedicated her life to seeking justice for victims of sexual assault. She is the only woman in the film who is not defined negatively by her gender or her reproductive status, and yet even she is beholden to the systematic dehumanization of women by globalized postsocialism to which she has dedicated her professional life.

Ultimately, *Angels Wear White* portrays a postsocialist China that has systemically failed the most marginalized segments of the population, and in particular impoverished and/or
undocumented women. As Hardt and Negri argue, “money institutionalizes a social relation—or, rather, a set of relations of social production and reproduction,” and the set of social relations it has institutionalized in the contemporary PRC have escalated to a virtually complete financialization and commodification of humanity. In this social system of constant exchange and cold economic calculation depicted by the film, the communal bonds of women and other marginalized groups are strained by an elusive competition for resources and temporary stability that prevent collaboration. Vivian Qu also depicts an insistence on maintaining those critical bonds through the gradual and fragile connections built between Xiaowen, Xiaomi, and other women around them. However, the tidy resolution of the radio broadcast at the end of the film when the government saves the day somewhat undercuts the film’s message despite its tongue-in-cheek reminder of the gap between the government’s publicly promoted slogans about women and children and the reality of their mistreatment. As an artistic sacrifice that probably enabled the film to be shown in China at all and therefore to reach its intended audience, this strange conclusion closes the narrative on an ambivalent and hollow note while the final shots of the film depict a small triumph in an ongoing process as Xiaomi chases after Marilyn on a stolen moped far too slow for the highway. Symbolically unpressed by the honking cars speeding past her, Xiaomi’s escape embodies the gradual and repetitive but still worth-while crawl towards social equality.

Conclusion:

When analyzed together, these three contemporary independent films by Chinese women offer a varied and nuanced depiction of postsocialist gender inequality as it intersects with
China’s economic and political conflicts that would be unencompassable by a single text. Building off the lived experiences of the directors themselves, each film looks at different stages and aspects of contemporary postsocialist life that can be compared and contrasted to reveal a larger narrative of growing inequality in the PRC. Although Lotus fails to address class as adequately as the other two films, all three illustrate the intersectional effects of China’s state neoliberal policies and the ways in which women often bear the brunt of political and economic upheaval as the symbolic carriers of national pride. Moreover, all three films push the boundaries of this oppressive reality by blending elements of surrealism and absurdism into the everyday lives of typical Chinese women—rather than simply accept these gendered conditions they each envision an escape or transcendence above the ideological mess of human meaning and discourse: Kwok Yun seeks out a non-human, alien life; Lotus fades into the realm of ghosts as she cycles back through her life again; and Xiaowen rides off into the sunset, following the dismantled Marilyn statue into a future the viewer can only see in the determination on Xiaowen’s face as the camera turns back. Although none of these endings could be described as fully resolved, they are part of a legacy of revolutionary but open-ended Chinese films that challenge the status quo by raising questions rather than providing answers. As postsocialist Chinese women’s films continue to push the margins of society into the spotlight, they gradually pressure the party-state to change by transforming the ways in which audiences—and citizens—view women and their gender-specific struggles.

However, as independent films they also paradoxically speak to a Chinese audience to which they usually do not receive access. As Paul Pickowicz writes of underground filmmaking in China, “the domestic impact is limited to videotape and especially VCD and DVD
sales…[but] determined people in China can acquire these films almost as easily as foreign institutions." In other words, only people who already have an interest in these films typically seek them out and therefore the films’ impacts are often limited to highly-educated groups that are already aware of gender-based violence. Even worse, these films are often unavailable due to a simple lack of financial interest: they are prevented from receiving government subsidies because of their content, and they are otherwise limited in distribution because they have very little capitalist value when perceived as niche stories only of interest to the marginalized groups on which they focus. On one level this refusal of financial valuation is in ideological keeping with the messages of the films themselves, and on another it is ironically indicative of the worthlessness of moral integrity and of non-productive womanhood in a postsocialist socioeconomic system. *Angels Wear White* indicates a burgeoning transformation of these circumstances in the domestic screenings it was able to secure, but this change was predicated upon a larger global and domestic pressure from the #MeToo movement. By comprising its ending, Vivian Qu allowed the film to be partially coopted into the PRC’s soft power efforts in exchange for reaching the domestic audience it needed to affect change.89

Yet, while the domestic screening of *Angels Wear White* and its moderate ending can be interpreted as a political concession, in a more positive light it actually indicates a shift in the Chinese party-state’s attitude towards gendered violence. In the 2000s, the government and law enforcement did little to address domestic violence, workplace discrimination, or sexual assault, choosing instead to censor victims and to arrest women’s’ rights protestors like the Feminist Five.90 However, as the #MeToo movements spreads globally, the PRC has been increasingly pressured to address gender inequality and gender-based violence.91 While other women’s films
like Li Yu’s 苹果 or Lost in Beijing (2006) have been censored and/or outright banned for focusing on rape and class difference, the largely uncensored domestic screening of a film like Angels Wear White is an admission of the PRC’s shifting interests as they attempt to maintain their global soft power image. Much like the radio broadcast at the end in which the government pays lip service to children’s well-being while concealing the suffering of real children, the mere screening of this film is a sign of how women’s issues in the PRC have become too severe to ignore. As the One-Child Policy is gradually phased out along with the harshest of China’s reproductive slogans—such as “宁愿多座坟头，绝不多个人头” or “sooner add one more tomb than add one more head”—in exchange for more moderate ones like “关爱女孩就是关爱国家的未来” or “caring for girls is caring for the future of the country,” it is apparent that the Chinese party-state is currently making a greater effort to appeal to women as they attempt to increase the national birth rate. While the changing of slogans and the allowance of critical media are small steps towards change, they open the way for much more radical change in the future as Chinese women are increasingly empowered with the space to publicly share their grievances and to coalesce around their common interests.

On one hand, women’s independent films challenge the party-state and draw international attention to Chinese women’s issues, but on the other hand they also benefit the PRC by proving the lenience of allowing them to be made or distributed without legal or financial retribution. Independent Chinese filmmakers are forced to balance their social and financial survival with creative and ideological freedom, and Chinese women filmmakers must further negotiate the various forms of economic, governmental, and social censorship that stem from their gender and render women-centric narratives more difficult to tell. Moreover, as China moves further into its
postsocialist experiment it is the capitalist suppression of women from the public that dominates the filmmakers’ concerns, and which can be read in the progression of class issues and awareness from the first case study to the last. As Xiaolu Guo succinctly summarizes her intermediary experience of writing about femininity and Chineseness domestically and abroad, “[capitalism] is the most horrible monster which affects the way you think, the way you write and the creative.” More than anything else, it is the gradual dehumanization of financialized human relationships and value against which these films push back. They are important not just because of the messages they attempt to impart, but because of the records they keep of gendered inequality as it has been transformed under postsocialism and the way in which they humanize and personalize those records through the embodied experiences of typified Chinese women.
Notes:

2. So, *Class and Class Conflict in Post-Socialist China*.
10. Ibid.
12. See chapter twelve of Paul Pickowicz’ book *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* for an explanation of the difference between the terms “independent” and “underground” in Chinese filmmaking.
18. The original title of Xiaolu Guo’s film is in English; the original Chinese title of Vivian Qu’s film translates to “carnival.”
26. I use the term “corporate postsocialism” as a stage of postsocialist development distinct from an earlier period of small entrepreneur-based postsocialism as exhibited by, for example, the small booth run by Kwok Yun’s grandfather in the town market.

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30 Kate Millett, Sexual Politics, (Columbia University Press, 2016.)
34 Barlow, The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism.
37 Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity
47 Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity, 161-162.
49 Beatriz Carrillo García, Small Town China: Rural Labour and Social Inclusion, (Routledge, 2015), 146.
51 Last Train Home, (Zeitgeist Films, 2009).
54 Zhang, An Amorous History of the Silver Screen Shanghai Cinema.
55 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

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58 Butler, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.
60 Fincher, Leftover Women: the Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China.
62 Fincher, Leftover Women: the Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China.
63 Foucault, The History of Sexuality.
64 Fincher, Leftover Women: the Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China.
65 Su, China’s Encounter with Global Hollywood.
66 Butler, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.
68 Film Doo, “Liu Shu Talks Lotus.”
69 Enacted in 1979 and phased into a two-child policy from 2014 to 2016, this policy limited the majority of Chinese families to having only one child without paying an exorbitant fee; “Heihaizi” or “black child” is a term for an undocumented additional child who has no access to education, healthcare, etc.
70 Wong, “Dispersing The ‘Public’ And The ‘Private.’”
73 For viewers who do not speak Mandarin Chinese or who were not paying careful attention to the ending, the radio broadcast is easily missed and is actually left untranslated in the officially rentable English version of the film. In illegal translations of the film online, the subtitles transcribe the broadcast in full.
74 The Seven Year Itch. 20th Century Fox, 1955.
75 This statement is not a condemnation of sex work, but of coercive sex work.
76 Marilyn Monroe is perhaps just as famous for her suspicious and political death as she is for her iconically sexualized life.
77 Lee Edelman’s work is often considered controversial as a result of what some scholars call its “anti-social thesis” in which homosexuality is cast as “deeply antithetical to normative sociality (Ruti 2008).” However, even if it is not useful in its entirety, there is theoretical value in this type of anti-social theory and the ways in which it examines the abnormality attributed to homosexuality in political discourse; Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
80 The Blue Kite, (Kino International, 1993); Yellow Earth, (Guangxi Studios, 1984).
82 Foucault, The History of Sexuality.
83 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, (Taylor and Francis, 2006).
85 Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity.
86 “Fathers, because they were not the primary biological reproducers, were treated as irrelevant;” Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity.
88 Pickowicz, China on Film: a Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy.
93 Guo, “Interviews.”
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