## FM4129 FILM MATERIALITY

## SUBVERTING ASIAN FEMININITY—CINEMA MATERIALS AND THE "MAOIST WOMAN" OF COLD WAR CHINA

Gender and Asian feminist film studies rarely diverge their focuses from semiotic on-screen representations. Rather than gender incorporated on screen, I aim to explore the sphere of Asiatic femininity embedded within the physicality of film and its exhibition. Utilizing Genevieve Yue's argument of celluloid's inherently gendered nature via the dismembered participation of Asiatic aesthetics within its manufacturing process, I attempt to suggest a different approach to Asian female identification within cinema materials.<sup>1</sup> Through presenting Maoist Chinese cinema as a case study, I propose a different sector of Asiatic femininity where it's definition, representation, and socio-political motive deconstructs the Western gender stereotypes of the yellow female body within the celluloid strips and its technologies.

In Genevieve Yue's *Girlhead: Feminism and Film Materiality*, she suggested the notion where film's physicality and exhibition is inherently gendered through its manufacturing process, including the hidden labour of women within the technology of film.<sup>2</sup> To understand Yue's argument, the definition of gender and its construct must be acknowledged. Teresa De Laurentis defined the theory of gender in film representation in her essay: *The Technology of Gender* as a "social technology", a construct that delineates femininity as both a difference "among men" and "within women." <sup>3</sup> The female gender therefore is not an existing property but a "set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations." <sup>4</sup> Subsequently, gender within film, thematically and physically is a construct that is fluid and malleable through socio-political implications and corporeal representations. Yue's notion aligned with De Laurentis's theory through her argument of "China girls" as the sine qua non in the gendering of celluloid materials. "China Girls" were apparatus that appears within the material construction of film as colour testing girls for the film laboratory.<sup>5</sup> Yue defines the materialisation of the female within the production process based on its differences among their "creators" such as technicians, mechanics and the unseen audience who were innately expected as male.<sup>6</sup> The testing girls were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Yue, Genevieve, 'China Girls in the Film Laboratory', *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York, NY, 2020; online edn, Fordham Scholarship Online, 20 May 2021) 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Yue, "China Girls in the Film Laboratory" 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> De Laurentis, Teresa . "The Technology of Gender." In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, 1–30. (Indiana University Press, 1987.) 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> De Laurentis, "The Technology of Gender" 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Yue, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

mimetic, attractive, "dolled up" in corresponding to their name "China girls" in a literal sense. Their ossified, sexualized bodies and voices, in contrast to the male technicians in laboratories establishes an idea of femininity within the materiality of film as ornate, silent and passive. As Yue has mentioned herself, with their images "baked into the film", the physicality of film is therefore embedded with an operative concept of gender.<sup>7</sup>

The case study of the "China girl" itself interestingly has heavy racial connotations alluding to not only a feminine, but also an "exotic" Asian identity within the materiality of film and cinema. In a colour testing calibre still from *Releasing Human Energies*, the China girl was dolled up in heavy makeup (Fig. 1). Her colourful Cheongsam (Chinese long dress) inspired clothing implicated a seductive racial ambiguity despite her Euro-centric features. In De Laurentis's argument she brought up the idea of femininity as also constructed under the differences among the female gender itself.<sup>8</sup> In this scenario, presenting a concept that film and cinema materials are both racialized and gendered—where according to Yue, the female flesh baked into the film is also an exoticized Chinese flesh.<sup>9</sup> However the enigma of Asiatic femininity ensues-the China girls "baked" into the celluloid surface were not truly East Asian, but rather Caucasian women adorned with Asiatic apparatus to exude racial ambiguity. Anne Alin Cheng coined the word "Ornamentalism" in her book of the same name, as to describe the appropriation and erasure of Asian female identity, and aesthetics within Western cultures since the invention of photography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Seeing the European view of Asian femininity as both ornamental and ornamented, it established the idea where the yellow female body is objectively decorative and blithely available to be ventriloquized. Hence the correlation of utilising Chinese aesthetics as a tool for the mimetic process within the material construction of film. Using De Laurentis's argument, I aim to explore and argue that the stereotype of race and gender within cinema materials exists as a spectrum among the differentiation between Western, and Eastern perspectives on Asiatic femininity, which were embedded and represented by the physicality and exhibition of film materials respectively. The dichotomy establishes the idea of a gap in the principle of Asiatic femininity—are they all seen and presented the same

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Yue, 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> De Laurentis, 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Yue, 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ornamentalism." St-Andrews.ac.uk. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021) 27.

within cinema materials? Or are the ideals of Asian femininity subverted in different scenarios away from the Western world?

Since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, Chairman Mao Tse-tung already sought to establish ultimate socialism through mass mobilisation and permanent revolution. Throughout the party's establishment until the late 1960s, the notion of gender has been radicalized into an ideal of equivalency in terms of their social roles as productive units for the communist economy. <sup>11</sup> Mao's ideals greatly transformed the Asian female identity not only within societal culture, but also broadened the spectrum of Asiatic femininity within the materiality of film production, technology and exhibition. In this section, through the case study of Maoist rural China under the backdrop of the Cold War, I aim to explore and suggest how female Asian identity was subverted in contrast with its depictions in the West. For instance, how the roles of female film projectionists and celebrated correlation between the yellow female body and technology, constructs a separate definition of gendered cinema materiality in contrast to their Western counterparts.

In 1942, Mao delivered two speeches at the forums on Literature and Arts in Yan 'an (延安) emphasising the vitality of the arts including the film industry.<sup>12</sup> Hence slowly recognising film technology as a progressive element in modernism beneficial to the newly founded communist China.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, he started propagating the equality between men and women to garner the ideal of equal strength to efficiently build a technologically progressive nation.<sup>14</sup> The symbolism between the female body and technology in turn paralleled the phenomena in the West. However, the two stakeholder's approaches were different ideologically. In Yue's essay, she argued the role of the China girl in European cinema is fragmented, her designated technical function is "the tone of her flesh" that is "integral to the final image" that will be screened to an audience.<sup>15</sup> Her anonymity and dismemberment solidifies her existence as solely a part of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Zhou, Chenshu. "*Cinema off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China.*" *St-Andrews.ac.uk.* Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Zhang Litao. "*Zhongguo Dian Ying Shi Gai Lun.*" *St-Andrews.ac.uk*. (Hong Kong: Tomokazu Production House 1990.) 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Zhou, "Cinema off Screen" 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Yue, 52.

material construction of the film, invisible to the screen. Therefore to make film, women's bodies were used—not mentioned, not seen, not included in its making process with their existence no more than emulsions on film strips. The deconstruction of Asiatic femininity and its integration into film technological process, abiding by Yue's argument, becomes an oppressive erasure of representation, identity and individuality. Their intentional orientalist allure contributing to the subconscious perception of Asian female bodies as decorative arts.<sup>16</sup>

However, the Asiatic female-technology relationship in Maoist China became an elevation of gender equality and progressiveness. The Maoist women were not dismembered, but fleshed out and integrated within the production and exhibition of film. In Tina Mai Chen's essay The Human-Machine Continuum: The Intersection of Soviet Socialist Realism, Japanese Theoretical Physics and Chinese Revolutionary Theory, she asserted the importance of machinery and community within Maoism which established a "reconceptualization of boundaries between humans and machines." <sup>17</sup> She highlighted the usage of "cellular terminology" throughout Mao's talks and ideologies in the 1950s and 60s that foregrounded a "human-machine continuum."<sup>18</sup> The continuum was the result of Mao's acknowledgement of mechanization throughout sectors of productions, including the film manufacturing industry as facets of modernization. He referred to both men and women of China as "cells of the same body" (同胞) that is Maoist China—a gender neutral term that exempts gender differences.<sup>19</sup> Hence both men and women—especially women who were prohibited to work in technological, and machinery industries pre-revolution were given the same opportunity as men. Consequently, the blurring of boundaries between human organs and tools were seen as a celebratory milestone within Maoist revolution. Therefore, Mao's ideology established a subversive version of Asian femininity—a masculine, capable and active embodiment of technology. Within the scope of cinema materiality, Mao's Asiatic feminine incarnation could be discovered notably through the formation of all female rural film projectionists and female lab technicians in celluloid factories.

<sup>18</sup> Chen, "The Human—Machine continuum" 156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Cheng, "Ornamentalism", 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Tina Mai Chen. "The human—machine continuum in Maoism: The intersection of Socialist Realism, Japanese Theoretical Physics, and Chinese Revolutionary Theory." *Cultural Critique 80* (2012): 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

In 1950 the Central Film Bureau organized a three-month program in Nanjing that trained over 1800 projectionists around the nation that concentrated their roles in the countryside.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the 50s to the 60s, projection teams that screens 35mm and 16mm films increased to 11,151 groups while rural audiences skyrocketed to 537 million by 1960.<sup>21</sup> Among the teams, the Bureau ensured each province of the nation had at least one all-female projection team especially in rural areas.<sup>22</sup> These women with their strength, fitness and youth emphasized over their attractiveness served as evidence for Chinese socialist progressivism in terms of both industrial and social modernization. Yanping Guo's research essay Female Projectionists on the Move: Exhibiting Socialist Gender Equality in Rural China (1949-66) investigates the gender discourse of female projectionists in rural China and the influence they had in gender equality and social progression.<sup>23</sup> He especially highlighted the notion where "technology is not gender neutral", it is the surrounding social interactions and handling that articulates new expressions of gender the gender expressions of Asian women.<sup>24</sup> In Socialist China female projection teams, unlike the invisibility of Hollywood China girls were at the forefront of film screening in rural provinces. As inadequate infrastructures in rural provinces made outdoor projections the only viable way for mass audience screenings, the projectionist who were usually hidden away in the back in most Western theatres, were present to be seen among audiences.<sup>25</sup> These female projectionists served as the "linkage between technology and the female body", where the physical film-the film strip and projector will not operate without the role of the projectionists (Fig.2).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, despite the similar cyborg relationship between their bodies and the physical film apparatus, the Chinese female projectionists' flesh, identity and femininity were ever so present—in contrast to the China girl's hieroglyphic bodies and invisible imprint of film materials. These Chinese women became the symbols of a revolutionary technology that services the communist party with newfound modernism. As Guo quoted in his essay: "turning film viewing into a highly performative, live and interactive event supplemented by the medium of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Zhang, "Zhongguo Dian Ying Shi Gai Lun." 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Zhang, 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Ibid. 46

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Guo, Yanping. "Female Projectionists on the Move: Exhibiting Socialist Gender Equality in Rural China (1949–1966)." *Gender & History*, (Wiley Online Library, August 31, 2022) https//doi.org/10.111/1468-0424.12641
 <sup>24</sup> Guo, "Female Projectionists on the Move"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Guo,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the human body," the freedom of translating and explaining scenes shown in screenings by female projectionists symbolized a varied form of embedded gender. <sup>27</sup> As an embodiment of Asiatic femininity that is not invisible, ventriloquized, appropriated and ornated, a version where their identities could be fleshed out and acknowledged when viewed. Moreover, the demanding task of carrying heavy equipment from centralized Bureaus to rural provinces—a patriotic act celebrated by the Communist Party, not only drove rural acknowledgement of the physical and technological value of film; it also associated the value of modernism with the importance of China's new Maoist woman. Consequently, further representing a new version of Asiatic femininity "baked" into film strips and its apparatus. <sup>28</sup>

The identity of film can be separated into two dimensions: the semiotic image on the emulsion, and the physicality of the celluloid strip. Henceforth exposing spaces of gender theoretical analyses within its manufacturing process. Yue sees the oriental femininity within the celluloid as "hidden" from industrial and institutional process yet still are no less gendered. <sup>29</sup> The gender and power differentiation between the processing laboratory, and sartorial strips of muted female images produce the construct of Asiatic femininity in Hollywood and Europe. In an industry where women were more acceptable to be "viewed" and "consumed" like virtual candy, film processing laboratories were divided into strict binary roles where women rarely came in contact to processing films.<sup>30</sup> The argument of invisible social forces that "shape supposedly neutral or objective technical processes" could be astutely examined through Cheng's theory of "edible pets" within the Western gaze of yellow femininity.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, inspecting how this frame of Asian femininity was subverted in Maoist China via their industrial and laboratory process. According to Cheng, her theory of "edible pets" originates from the idea of orientalist commodification: China is seen as mysterious, excessive and most importantly feminine.<sup>32</sup> Supported by Kyla Wazana Tompkins's Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century, she implied the "digestion" as a site of "anxiety" through its "management through the ingestion,

<sup>31</sup> Cheng, 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Guo, Yanping. "The Cinema of Make-Believe: Rural Viewers'. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Zhang, 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Yue, 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Yue, 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Cheng, 109.

both literal and metaphoric of racialized minorities" such as Asian women.<sup>33</sup> The supposedly excessiveness and fragility draws in the literal digestion of Asiatic femininity within the film corpus through the "consumption" of yellow bodies. Subsequently becoming the ghost of a yellow woman inside the white bodies of China girls, ingested by the male gazes within laboratories. The process of film strip development and colour testing are both metaphorical and literal representations of commodification and consumption of the Asian female identity.

The theory of literal and metaphorical ingestion of Asiatic aesthetics encapsulates the Western concept and representation of the yellow female body within film physicality. However, under the circumstances within Socialist Maoist China, the notion of appropriative digestion of Asian female identities are challenged through factory structures and social status differences between the binary genders. In 1958, Baoding Celluloid Factory (保定電影膠片廠), the first celluloid manufacturing company in China was established (Fig. 3).<sup>34</sup> To employ Mao's ideology of gender equality as a component to technological progressivism, Baoding factory hired both men and women workers in the celluloid manufacturing company.<sup>35</sup> These women partaking a much larger percentage within the workforce in comparison to the West (Fig.4) drew gaps in the characteristics, and representations of Asiatic femininity within film materials between the two continents. In contrast to the literal engulfment and erasure of yellow bodies through the incorporation of China girls and the male gaze during the industrial process, the Euro-centric orientalist notion was greatly reduced in Maoist China.<sup>36</sup> Mostly developing black and white celluloid films until 1960, most raw materials or undeveloped celluloids were imported from the Soviet Union where colour testing involving any models were unnecessary. <sup>37</sup> Therefore, the visual embedment of dismembered female bodies was not involved in the manufacturing process of Chinese celluloid factories. Coupled with more female workers at the status of physically handling and processing these imported and "borrowed" technologies, the Asian female body were no longer echoes among the digested fleshes of orientalist white women and a patriarchal production system. Asian femininity was in turn embedded within the materiality of film through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Tompkins Kyla Wazana. Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century. (NYU Press, 2012.) 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Zhang, 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Zhang, 60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Yue, 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Lantern.mediahist.org. "The Cine Technician (1953 - 1956) - Lantern," 1953.

her active involvement in their technological development processes instead of fragmented resonances of ventriloquistic bodies.

Despite Mao's ideologies of gender equality reforms, the difference in representation and definition of Asiatic femininity within film materiality and its technology were not an intended outcome. In this final section, I aim to suggest the differentiation among Maoist China's gendered film materials were influenced by a political relationship with Europe and the Soviet Union. In Alice Lovejoy's essay Celluloid geopolitics: film stock and the war economy 1939-47, she argued that politics are carried not only on a semiotic image level, but also within its vertical production.<sup>38</sup> Using Lovejoy's statement, I attempt to suggest the androgynous, progressive nature of Asiatic femininity within cinema materials of Maoist China were influenced by Cold war politics. In the early 1920s before the end of the Chinese Civil war, the Chinese Communist Party viewed cinema as the root of capitalism and western ideologies.<sup>39</sup> It was until the debut of Lenin's quote "Film is the most important of all arts" that the CCP began to draw focus on the propagandic potential of celluloid and cinema production.<sup>40</sup> Eager to position themselves as a 'technological equal' of the Soviet Union, their only political ally during the Cold War, the CCP implemented several socio-economic reforms that uplifted the modernization of mechanical industries, including vertical film productions. To significantly transform and integrate into socio-political modernization, the CCP thoroughly implemented a propaganda culture that associated women's bodies with labour skills and new technology. <sup>41</sup> Based on their belief that the "most oppressed group" would be the "most radical actor in the communist revolutionary", the CCP revolutionized the identity of Asian femininity through the positive association of their bodies within the film production, exhibition and circulation sector. <sup>42</sup> Hence the conjoined yellow female bodies within film physicality and machinery became the forefront of CCP symbolism of modernity and alliance with the Soviet Union. However, since the Sino-soviet split in 1960, the Soviet Union withdrew every film laboratory technician and celluloid raw material

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Lovejoy, Alice. "Celluloid Geopolitics: Film Stock and the War Economy, 1939–47( EBSCOhost.University of Glasgow, 2019) 224.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Zhou, 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Chen, "The Human—Machine continuum", 158.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Chen, Tina Mai. "Propagating the Propaganda Film: The Meaning of Film in Chinese Communist Party Writings, 1949-1965." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003) 160.

exports, compelling China to localize their productions while the Chinese female body still stands at the forefront of cinema material production, circulation and exhibition.<sup>43</sup>

Although cinema materials from its celluloid strip to its exhibition are inherently gendered through a feminist theoretical lens, its discipline left sections of non-Eurocentric conditions undiscovered. Through studying the case of yellow bodies within film and its technology under Maoist China, the congenitally oppressive nature of Asiatic femininity within Western narratives were deconstructed. In turn, the varied and contradictive ways of Asiatic female definition within non Euro-centric cinema materials begs the question—it is time to smash the white feminist China doll within film materiality discussions?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Zhou, 32.

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(Fig. 1) Film still from Releasing Human Energies (Mark Toscano, 2012) Excerpt from Genevieve Yue's *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*.



(Fig. 2) The projectionist of the village Poster, Xi Liliang (忻禮良), Wu Qingxun (吳慶勳), June 1966, China Film Archive



chineseposters.net

(Fig. 3) Baoding Newspaper on the opening of first celluloid chemical factory in China, 1958, China Film Archive.





(Fig, 4) A female worker in Baoding Factory, Photography, 1958-1966, University of Kentucky.

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