

**Opinion Article***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Dr. Heike Frick*

Indie Chinese Cinema Week (ICCW), Berlin

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The first edition of the Indie Chinese Cinema Week (ICCW) started on Nov. 19th, 2022 with a roundtable discussion on the 'female gaze' and the 'subaltern', two central approaches of the productions shown at the Cinema Week. Further issues discussed were the question of feminism, its historical background and changing connotations as well as its relationship to the 'female gaze'. The 'female gaze' is a method focusing on women who are, due to social or cultural constraints, not able to speak up for themselves. Coined by Laura Mulvey in the 1970's, this theory allows the viewers to acquire deeper insights into the experiences and emotions of the female subjects and supports their agency.

The second major theme of the film festival dealt with the 'subaltern', a social theory that started in the 1930s with Antonio Gramsci and his observations on cultural, social and economic suppression. The subaltern encompasses marginalized social groups or individuals who are neglected in society and culture. In the Film Week the social theory of subaltern was represented in, for example, the documentary *Ant Dynamics* (2020), in which Chinese Telekom workers are defending their rights and are supported by an artist from their hometown by using performance art.

The feature film program consisted of seven titles, four feature films and three documentaries. All these films were from filmmakers who focus in their works on an independent and critical approach, reflecting on social, cultural and political issues in contemporary China. Several films were shown for the first time in Europe. The films included *Ants Dynamics*, directed by Xu Ruotao and Wang Chuyu (2020), *The Two Lives of Li Ermao*, directed by Jia Yuchuan 2019, which is a documentary about a transgender migrant worker, who is torn back and forth between his/her search for identity, *Tharlo* (2015) by the Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tsedon, who shows

the life of contemporary Tibetans from within local society and "A New Old Play", directed by Qiu Jiongjiang, 2021, a three-hour film embedded in the turbulent political history of 20th-century China, awarded by the Sundance Film Festival.

Among the titles using the 'female gaze' to focus on the female protagonist, motherhood as well as the relationship between mother and daughter and the internal conflict of women who are mothers and are searching for their own identity play a significant role. In sum there were three feature films and one short film dealing with this highly interesting topic: *Small Talk*, *Mama and Seven Days*, *The Taste of Rice Flowers* and the short film *Chinese Fusion*. Two titles, *Small Talk* and *Mama and Seven Days*, exemplify in particular the tendency to critically undermine the official discourse on motherhood in contemporary China. In the documentary *Small Talk*, a re-screening of the Berlinale Teddy Bear Best Documentary, the female director Hui-Chen Huang (Taiwan) conducts interviews with her own mother to initiate a way to make her speak. The motivation to this documentary stems from the fact that the relationship is reduced to the mere obligation of the mother to provide food and shelter to the daughter. From the perspective of the daughter, any emotional interaction and empathy is withheld by the mother. In the course of the interviews, which are used as a tool to break through the walls put up by the mother, it becomes clear that the mother had been sexually abused by her former husband. While she is not able to express feelings toward her daughter, she shows emotional warmth in her relations to female lovers. The role of motherhood is not the main core of her identity as a woman.

Mama and Seven Days, a family drama by Li Dongmei (2020), focusses on a pregnant mother who fulfills her obligations in a traditional rural society. The mother lives in a rural village under poor conditions with her parents and her three children, while the

father is absent because he works in the city. The family, consisting of almost only female members, eat regularly together outside of the house, barely speaking a word. The three daughters take care of each other. One of them, although in the age of a school-child, stays at home with the mother. In another scene the grandmother wears a huge basket of weed on her back, struggling to get up and to walk. No emotional outburst or facial expression from the grandmother are shown. The pregnant protagonist, due to her advanced pregnancy, is very immobile and seems to wait indifferently for the end of her pregnancy. The only contrast to her mundane and constant environment are the colorful postcards on her desk, possibly symbolizing a longing to another place. After finally giving birth to her fifth daughter, she dies at the age of 38. The lack of emotional expressions and the quietness of the film reflect almost philosophically the ability of endurance that these women from different generations cultivated in the course of their life. This film, produced by the eldest daughter of the mother, is a critical reflection on traditional values which emphasize patriarchy and the continuation of the family line by which women were expected to bear children until they have a son. It reflects also the silent acceptance of the values by women who are not willing or not able to overcome these cultural and socially constructed constraints.

While *Small Talk* is an example of a mother who does not want to or is emotionally not able to fulfill the narrative of the 'wise mother and good wife', the mother in *Mama* and *Seven Days* assumes both roles. The narrative of a 'wise mother and good wife',

can be tied back to East Asia around 1800. It became reframed in 2013 when Xi Jinping emphasized family values for the sake of the nation. It became a tool to ascribe women to traditional roles and social values. It emphasizes the role of women as caregivers with strong moral obligations to their children.

Both productions, the documentary from Taiwan as well as the drama from China, apply the method of the 'female gaze' to undermine the narrative of the officially propagated concept of the 'wise mother and good wife'. In the visual arts, the focus on the female gaze to liberate the female protagonist and her authentic self and subject form an opposite or at least alternative counter discourse in which women are not only defined primarily by their roles as mothers but should be able to choose their own identities in addition or without the prescribed role as a mother.

In sum, the female gaze theory offers the audience the possibility to gain insights into critical feminist issues in contemporary China as well as Taiwan as exemplified by the selection of films and documentaries with female protagonists shown during the Film Week in Berlin.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.