

7 *Longing for the Rain*

Journeys into the dislocated
female body of urban China

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There is a quiet revolution going on in director Yang Lina's 杨荔纳 Beijing: you can sense it lurking in the supermarkets, in the thick toxic air, in between the towering thighs of Big Pants China Central TV tower, driving down the Avenue of Eternal Peace and under the plastic Rainbow to Tiananmen square. It is unsettling the city right down to the last remaining traditional courtyard houses, where Fang Lei's 方蕾 mother-in-law is about to ascend to the realm of the spirits.

Caught in between the busyness of men, with too much time on their hands and money to spend, middle class housewives are doing it for themselves – quite literally. As the camera pans in on the protagonist, Fang Lei, masturbating on her sofa to a pornographic DVD, we simultaneously look out over the emptiness of Beijing. Fang Lei is 'longing for rain' – for the love, sex, and passion of the euphemistic Chinese title of the film *Chunmeng* 春梦 'lit. spring dream'. We soon discover her apparently amiable husband hiding under the sheets with his games console, too frenetically engaged with the digital world to notice his wife's growing alienation. The film subsequently charts the breakdown of the couple's relationship and the husband's abduction of their daughter as Fang Lei loses her way in a world where she cannot differentiate the phantasms of day and night.

In the cold, subdued light of her high-rise solitude Fang Lei's desire dissipates into the atmosphere, into everywhere. She inhabits the flipside of the phallic cityscape itself, playing the pervasive *yin* (the ever-present dark) to the hyperactive bright *yang* of life in the capital. Cold water, cognate with *yin*, is the element which flows through all of the scenes where Fang Lei experiences emotional intensity: rain, tears, showering, lakes, sea, and snow. But Fang Lei is also nowhere, aimlessly pushing a shopping trolley, lost in her own reflection behind the glass window of her high-rise apartment, following the sirens on the street, on a journey dislocated in time and space.

As Fang Lei's dislocation from her family and the world around results in both her behaviour and state of mind transgressing all boundaries of normalcy, *Longing for the Rain* invites us to enter into her spiritual crisis and follow her itineraries through the cityscape and her own inner landscape in search of what is, ultimately,

an uncertain healing process (Figure 7.1). In an interview I (Lo) conducted in 2016 Yang Lina confided,

I can only talk from my personal experiences and my observations. Friends around me, women of my age . . . everyone's situation is different, and everyone is in a different state. I don't think I can say anything on their behalf, *but one thing is certain, that is, the rhythm of life is so fast that we can't keep up. It is not so much sexual confusion as it is a spiritual confusion.* In the film, sex is just a vehicle. What I mainly want to express is our spiritual dilemma, our spiritual condition, and the spiritual conditions of these women.

(our emphasis. tr. Guo Liping)

There are many points of Medical Humanities interest in this film about the embodiment of spiritual confusion in contemporary China. Merleau-Ponty (1945, tr. Smith (1965): 112–70) described the body as a symbolic object, not something that ultimately belongs to us as we might assume, but as representative of our relationship to the totality of what surrounds us. Our bodies are not, however, just a corpus of symbols or a silent container inscribed with metaphors; they are constructed through ever-emerging processes where they lived and connected body itself participates actively in its own formation. Most obviously the film communicates these processes as it visualises a culturally specific illness narrative and a quest for healing. Illness narratives presented as ways of journeying towards health and well-being are nothing new, but Yang Lina's filmic tale acknowledges that people do not always get better. As Fang Lei's world falls apart and her grasp on reality gets ever more fragile, we also discover the spiritual geography of her sensual body as a reflection of the plural medical landscape of Beijing, and by



Figure 7.1 The emptiness of Fang Lei's mood merges with the cityscape

implication that of the psycho-spiritual condition of urban middle-class women themselves. As a narrative of, and in, the capital city of China, it is also a feminist critique of the state of things.

Through the insight of film theorist Zhang Yingjin we see in the film three phases of space-making: 'space as product; space as process; space as productive' (Zhang 2010: 1).

Through intersecting Fang Lei's fragmented body, her psychopathology, and her disturbing fantasies, with both the plural urban and religious landscapes of Beijing, Yang Lina animates a visual culture that is unique to China and China's medico-spiritual traditions. The productive space that Yang Lina creates between Fang Lei's body and the city of Beijing processes together historical and contemporary space: it borrows narrative journeys from tales of the supernatural that date to the Tang period, medieval religious pilgrimage, and geo-emotive body landscaping traditions from much before that and shows how they pervade the present. Fang Lei constantly shapes her own environment to these traditions, and journeys through them as a riposte to the dissatisfying urban domestic landscape that she finds herself in. In contrast to historic itineraries, however, the space that Yang Lina articulates is resolutely female, and therefore serves to comment on the disconnect between China's supersonic economic and political rise onto the global stage and those lost in the spiritual maze of its urban underbelly.

Neither author was born a Beijinger or identifies as wholly 'Han' Chinese, so we tested the film's success in representing the experiences and frustrations of those closer to the lives portrayed in the film. As in Chapter 10 (Vuillermin) we used students' subjective viewer-responses with the help of eight UCL postgraduate students, mostly women in their 20s, younger than the fictional protagonist, although brought up in similar urban contexts. Most were registered on the UCL postgraduate module Chinese Film and the Body in the Chinese Medical Humanities programme (2017–18). They were therefore well aware of the module's aims to 'to analyse representations of social and cultural issues related to health, medicine, and the body in twentieth and twenty-first century China'.

The student-centred teaching setting was my own home (Lo) and I prepared them a lavish Chinese meal to get them in the mood to share their responses to the film. *Longing for the Rain* has not been given the Dragon Seal of Film Bureau censorship approval, so it is not the kind of feature that they would be accustomed to seeing in mainland China. They were therefore curious about the experiment, agreeing about the plight of unhappy urban housewives, and engaging in heated discussion about honour in marriage and whether or not one can cheat with a spirit lover, and the merits and morality of having a lover at all as a woman.

The ghost lover

Ostensibly, all is well. Fang Lei is a loving mother and wife, makes excellent dumplings, and is primary carer for her charmingly demented mother-in-law. But when her computer game obsessed husband and beloved child have left for work and school, an eerie quiet comes over the apartment. Left to her own devices she

begins to observe herself as if in a dream. So, when a ghostly figure turns up in her dreams-cum-daydreams, first violently and then in a full-on seduction, we ask who is looking at whom? Who is the subject of the dream? Are we looking at her looking at twenty-first-century life in Beijing, or at the spectral life of her own body? Are these subjects and objects one and the same thing?

The sensuous touch of the stranger's body turns the dark nightmare of the initial intrusion into pleasure as the attacks become erotic rather than solely violent – awakening new passions within her body. As Fang Lei begins to give in to the seductions of the spectral lover, he emerges slowly in fragmented close up shots of his first violent and then seducing body. A montage of extreme close-ups of his nipples, long hair, and fleshy drooping bottom lip combine to create a shadowy, quasi feminine, figure who is at first clad all in black. As he slowly becomes the lover she cannot live without, he transforms into a romantic white-robed chevalier riding at the edge of the sea, suggestive of the lover's tryst of historical drama (Figure 7.2). In her darkening fantasies she begins to appear in a long black hooded cloak, as if swapping roles.

The image is, as George Yao, one of the students, points out

a completely opposed vision of her husband . . . her husband has short hair, this man has long hair; her husband always wears very casual outfits, this man wears the very fancy and historical outfit; her husband is kind of passive during the sex while this man was kind of dominating and very aggressive.

Yang Lina intends to draw on the hugely popular *liaozhai* 聊斋 or *zhiguai* 志怪 tradition. This is a genre that began in the Tang dynasty and grew out of the



Figure 7.2 Fang Lei, now robed in black, watches her spectral lover riding towards her like a romantic hero dressed in white

recording of ‘abnormal’ omens, often providing a supernatural commentary on political events, turning stories of the strange, ‘uncanny’ phenomena outside normal experience, into a literary form (Zeitlin 1993). These stories are inhabited by transmogrifying female fox spirits, snakes, dragons, and reptiles of all sorts that prey on upright scholarly men. But women on the edge are also prone to supernatural hauntings. Ming dynasty (1368–1644) medical histories have included a category that explains the propensity for sexual madness in women as ‘dreaming sex with demons’ (Chen 2003: 188–99). Although Yang Lina professes not to know of the medical tradition, she says:

this topic is not a strange topic in ancient Chinese society and classical literature. [but] what I intend to express is not related to the past or the ancient times. This film is about the anxiety of modern people. I intend to explore our current rhythm of life and people’s state of mind.

(tr. Guo Liping)

The disturbing intrusion of the ghost-like figure into Fang Lei’s life disrupts what appears to be the perfectly modern nuclear family, challenging the sanctity of her home and her own willingness or ability to perform the normal social duties of wife and mother – in this way it mimics the conventional Chinese family drama where the family as a collectivity is in crisis centred around social duty (Berry 2008: 235). In Chinese terms of hierarchical but reciprocal responsibility, the husband is also not performing his duties and Hollywood films too put the blame on the weak or ailing patriarch figure. But in this case our heroine is not a misunderstood virtuous heroine – notwithstanding all the women in our student audience feel a deep sympathy for her – she is the destroyer of the Chinese family, rather than the victim. As Fang Lei becomes incapable of separating reality from dream, she loses her mind, as well as her body, and drives herself further and further away from her family, ultimately forfeiting both husband and child.

Yet, while profoundly disturbing for these reasons, the film is also strangely and instantly reassuring for its familiarity, for anyone who knows the atmosphere of twenty-first-century Beijing. While clearly a social and political critique it also speaks of the director’s love for the city and its women.

Yang Lina says:

For me, this woman expresses her physical condition and spiritual condition through dreams. It is a beautiful way of expression for me. Dreams can represent dissatisfaction with reality, longing for something which one doesn’t have in reality. Dreams can help us understand the conditions of this woman.

(tr. Guo Liping)

How does Yang Lina create this troubling, yet familiar reality?

I (Lo) first met Yang Lina at the end of a long motorbike ride chasing her and her teenage daughter around the riding schools of the north east suburbs of Beijing.

After a series of misunderstood WeChat directions, we ended up meeting at a bank in town. But since it was a warm Saturday afternoon in late summer, and those suburbs remained green and rural, it was very pleasant. And I share the daughter's love of horses, which was an immediate bond. Yang Lina knows this elite Beijing inside out and our students confirm her success in bringing this Beijing and its social dysfunction to the screen.

One of the students, Yang Yi, is a traditional medical practitioner from Beijing and roughly the same age as the fictional Fang Lei:

So, these characters and the screen scenes are, really, really like people's life in Beijing. The smog, and the building, the CCTV building. And all these Hutong (traditional alleyways), and the kind of taxi and buses, the traditional kind of squares. And also the Temple of Heaven park within it. It's like a trip back home. All those landscapes, those characters . . . the relationship between the couple are also familiar. They don't have really deep, intellectual, conversations. They don't really talk. They just live together, like . . .

George Yao adds: Roommates.

Yang Lina's personal relationship with the Beijing environment and social networks are evidenced in the use of non-professional actors for all but two of the parts in the feature film. She told me:

Except for the heroine and her husband, all other people in the film are non-professional actors and actresses. The supporting actress is played by one of my friends and this is her first foray into acting. In addition, *the Daoist priests are professional priests; monks in the temples, the fortune-teller, and all other actors are non-professional actors*. The temple in the film is the temple where I made my documentary in 2008. Not all Chinese temples are open for filming. I am on good terms with the masters and monks in the temple, so I could shoot this film there. China's censorship system has restrictions regarding temples, eroticism, and ghosts. *It does not matter if fox spirits are portrayed in the film, but ghosts are taboo*. This film has not passed censorship and has not been shown in China yet.

(our emphasis. tr. Guo Liping)

Yang Lina was originally a documentary film maker, now turned feature film maker. As a fictional account of the sexual audacity and awkwardness of the life of the nouveau riche *Longing for the Rain* is enriched by her own early autobiographical documentary style developed through *Old Men (Laotou 老头, 1999)*, about her elderly neighbours, and the ironically titled drama of her parents' divorce and its devastating effects on her little brother, *Home Video (Jiating luxi-angdai 家庭录像带, 2001)*. She is therefore very comfortable with the transitions between attempting to record reality, and the fantasies of narrative:

Because I started by shooting documentaries, therefore there are many elements of documentaries in my films. I've always been committed to

aesthetically or methodologically making my films fusions of documentaries and feature films. . . . So my documentaries are much like feature films, and feature films like documentaries.

(tr. Guo Liping)

This technique is clear from the outset when the shots of Fang Lei in the supermarket are interlaced with her interviews of housekeepers and carers from among the middle-aged female migrant workers in Beijing, highlighting the dissonance between the urban and rural female experience in the capital. In these shots there is a clear sense that the protagonist herself is the documentary filmmaker, interviewing her subjects in a self-reflexive manner. This has the effect of multiplying the spectator's points of view, and foreshadows that as the narrative unfolds, Fang Lei, like the migrant workers who talk of leaving their children at home in the countryside, will lose her child.

In the cityscape scenes, we see a docu-cinematic style of cinematography: the camera follows the fluid movement of our protagonist just as it captures the vibrant energy of Beijing, its every cell in constant motion. The three entities, city, protagonist, camera, move in parallel but they also deliberately fail to negotiate with one another. All the elements of the city and its population move with intent towards pre-destined ends; yet, in fact, we cannot tell why everything is constantly in transit or where we are supposed to be going. The most real sense of the city is therefore underexposed. The city seems hardly bothered by the existence of the camera and does not seem to cooperate. The space, the people, and the camera's eye all have an independent fluidity that fosters a sense of mutual irrelevance. The disinterested reality that Yang Lina skilfully frames through this failed negotiation between dramatic tensions reflects two distinct tendencies in her work. First, her own inclination is to use interview and person-to-person intimate narrative. Second, these scenes invoke the observational documentary style that Chinese independent film makers have a long history of preferring, and which has exerted a deep influence on her work.

As the frenetic *yang* energy of the outward facing city surrounds Fang Lei's growing trauma and disorientation, inside the house the lively haunting *yin* force – for ghosts like women and water are also of *yin* – begins to dominate the landscape of the film (Allan 1997: 35–54). The fragmentation of his body is therefore also a fragmentation of hers, both seen in interactive close ups during their sexual encounters. The *yin* nature of the female body is most powerfully presented through multiple scenes involving water: the sexual 'rain' of the euphemistic title, turns into flood water as Fang Lei submerges herself fully clothed to cool her ardour. An excess of *yin*, so lusciously and lasciviously portrayed in the film, has always mounted both political and sexual challenges to male power in Chinese literature. Depraved and dangerous beauties, from Dan Ji 妲己, wife of the last king of Shang 商纣王, to Bao Si 褒姒, consort of King You of Zhou 周幽王, to Lü Zhi 吕雉, wife of the founder of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang 刘邦, to the self-styled female 'Emperor' Wu Zetian 武则天 and her grandson's unforgettable concubine, Yang Guifei 杨贵妃, were blamed in the standard histories for endangering or bringing down their respective dynasties; and their corruption of

political power was naturalised through a cosmic transgression framed in terms of yin-*yang* imbalance (Raphals 1998: 61–86; Liu 2014).

Itineraries through a plural medical landscape

As Fang Lei embarks on a journey to heal herself of her soulless life and gothic fantasies, she takes us through the maze that is the dysfunctional emotional and medico-spiritual architecture of Beijing and its environs, to glitzy clubs full of gigolos, solemn Tibetan-Buddhist temples where her aunt from out-of-town agonises over salvation; to Daoist priests down hidden alleyways whose talismans will protect her from the evil spirits – evil spirits that are residing in her torso – to suburban fortune tellers with whom she prays and whose spiritual empathy brings her to tears. Their sexual and spiritual quests for healing illustrate a very female ‘relation between the spatial structures and their inhabitants’ and the ways in which space and architecture identify the human body (Boumeester 2011: 247; Landy 2010: 121).

Poignantly, despite a swift descent into what would certainly be labelled an emergency in psychiatric terms, an inability to distinguish dream from reality, Fang Lei never consults a psychiatrist. The male students in our audience were outnumbered 2:1 by the women, but they had strong opinions about the solutions to Fang Lei’s problem. Liu Hanwen stated, ‘she should have some communication with her husband or seek some psychological help’. Another, a professional male psychiatrist, Zhou Dangwei, was the only person in the audience to proffer a psychiatric interpretation of Fang Lei’s condition:

I believe that, from a psychological standard the woman in that movie became more and more psychotic. Because before she was a bit neurotic but not so . . . bad. But after a lot of wrong treatments she became more and more psychotic. Because, she treated the [ghost] figure as real, equal to the fantasy figure in her dream. This is very dangerous, for her real life. I think she will become schizophrenic. She will become more and more paranoid.

(tr. Guo Liping)

Despite her girlfriend’s advice, however, Fang Lei never visits a psychiatrist or therapist. The director says:

Around me, in Beijing, as far as I know, there are many professional women, artists, and intellectuals who will choose to consult Buddhists, Rinpoche and other religious masters to solve their own psychological problems. The reason for this is first that psychiatry in China is not very developed. Secondly, talking with Daoist or Buddhist masters can give these people psychological comfort.

(tr. Guo Liping)

The field of Health Humanities has long embraced study of all the broader ways in which healthcare involves those other than professional medical communities.

It has, however, been commonplace to believe that religious healing and traditional medicine survive only in remote and impoverished places where modern medicine cannot reach. But *Longing for the Rain* represents a plurality of medical care that is fashionable in elite and privileged urban circles.

Fang Lei first turns for help to her outrageously lascivious and well-heeled girlfriend, whose name always remains a mystery, and with whom she first tries shopping therapy. On one trip her friend suggests that her fantasies are simply sexual frustration and gives her sex toys and advises taking a young lover. China reputedly manufactures 95% of the world's sex toys and women are a large part of that customer base (ShamelessCh 2019). Medicalised sex play on offer from female assistants dressed in clinical coats has been a feature of China's high street *chengren shangdian* 成人商店 (adult shops) for a decade or more. The naked body started appearing again in the 1980s in magazines with titles like *Jiankang zhi you* 健康之友 (Our Health) and *Jiating Yisheng* 家庭医生 (The Family Doctor), always under the guise of offering medical advice. Often on show were genitalia with hideous cankers and so on. No doubt all of this is part of the long history leading to this fetish figuring so strongly in Chinese sex shop trade.

The students were divided along gender lines as to whether Fang Lei was a good mother or had destroyed her credibility by cheating with her spirit lover. They were particularly animated by the sex boys and toys for women in urban commercial districts, although there was some confusion about what exactly was for sale: sex or just alcohol and companionship, and its legality.

YANG XINGYUE: Men have multiple lovers and mistresses and you can see there is lots of prostitution in China. But it's not public knowledge that women can also say to each other 'why couldn't you get a lover like everyone else'. What's your impression? Are women are just covering the fact that they are having just as free relationships as men in China?

GE YUNJIAO: I'm not sure what's going on in Beijing, but in Shanghai there are more and more male prostitution clubs, the *niulang dian* 牛郎店. And these men are earning lots of money, even more than the superstars. It's got great career potential for men. I think these things must also happen in Beijing although I haven't lived there. . . . There are even some women prostitution clubs for lesbians in Shanghai, and in Hangzhou. I have talked with my friends who live in Hangzhou. I don't think this is an underground phenomenon, it is increasingly blatant, and accepted.

They do not offer sex, they offer company, and they sell food and wine, well it's just like someone to talk to you.

GEORGE YAO: In some places they are having sexual intercourse and that's illegal; in others they are just masturbating, and that's legal.

GE YUNJIAO: You can just regard these men as waiters, who talk to you more.

YANG XINGYUE: Just like the princesses in the KTV, right?

GE YUNJIAO: Yes, and that doesn't break the law . . . at first the sex tools were only sold to the men, but now they are even more sex tools for the women.

As Fang Lei's older girlfriend laments the inconstancy of men, the drunken scenes in the toy boy clubs increase the sense of isolation for both women. Despite the touching trust that is evident between the women, Fang Lei is not happy there and so together they embark on a deeper quest through the astonishing twenty- and twenty-first-century religious revival in China with the friend initially playing tour guide (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 201–392; Johnson 2017).

Their stroll together to visit the Daoist priest is no more comfortable than the foray into the night clubs. The camera follows the women down a traditional Ming-dynasty walled lane such as one finds within the Forbidden City to a rather ordinary living room. The very real priest, clad in full ritual robes, first takes her pulse, and then identifies the ghost as mid-30s, five foot seven, and living within Fang Lei's chest area. Intoning a scripture, he calls on the Daoist guardian spirits, waves a ritual sword and beats her gently with a Daoist whisk (Strichmann 2002). Next, he produces his calligraphy brush like a magic weapon and scribes a protective talisman in Daoist magic design which she must fold in three and carry in her pocket. Her ghost is an evil spirit out to harm her.

Exorcism of ghosts and evil spirits has been a core part of the Daoist repertoire for nearly two thousand years. Powerful Daoist communities, such as the *Tian-shi dao* 天师道 (Celestial Masters), emerged during the political fragmentation of the end of the Han dynasty (second century CE) with distinctive scriptures, institutions, and hierarchies, as well as complex pantheons of deities. They practised communal confession, forms of meditation, moral self-cultivation, followed dietary and medicinal regimens to prolong their lives, and visualised *qi* with specialised breathing techniques. Their ritual masters uttered incantations and gave doses of water infused with the ashes of talismanic writing; they performed sacrifices and exorcised ghosts and demons that took up residence within the body (Kaltenmark 1979: 41–4). Some of the millenarian Daoist cults even believed that through these techniques they would become the immortal chosen people who would survive a coming apocalypse. Living Daoist traditions testify that all of these practices have survived into the twenty-first century, in some form or other, despite 70 years of Communist campaigns against 'superstition'. Daoist priests and shamans still follow shamanic rituals that conflate travelling out-of-body through the universe with itineraries through the pathways of the inner body. The iconography and topographies of the Daoist body therefore overlap in their detail with physiological maps: the acupuncture points sparkle with names of rivers, stars, and constellations, with temples and gates to heaven and alchemical furnaces (Fava 2018: 51–73).

This visualisation of spiritual itineraries is first evidenced in the *Shanhai jing* 山海经 (Classic of Mountains and Seas; latest date first century BCE), a compilation that has been described as 'a manual on prodigies, a geographical gazetteer or explanatory notes on illustrations or maps' (Sterckx 2018: 39). Therein we find what Dorefeeva-Lichtmann speculates are 'mapless maps', itineraries at the origins of geomancy that navigate the mountain locations of divine powers and guardian spirits, and thereafter ground a tradition of spirit quests or out-of-body journeys of shamans (Dorefeeva-Lichtmann 2007: 53–62). Over the succeeding

two millennia this tradition of spirit quests, pilgrimages, out-of-body and inner body, produced multiple imaginaries in both Daoist and Buddhist contexts. Manuscript images of Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602–664) pilgrimage to India to collect the Buddhist scriptures survive from medieval Dunhuang. His journey (together with the main protagonist, his companion and protector, the Monkey King Sun Wukong 孙悟空) was later immortalised in Wu Cheng'en's Ming novel *Xiyou ji*, 西游记 (Journey to the West, c. mid-sixteenth century), stories from which survive in practically every visual media from poster and advertisement to cartoon and film. *Journey to the West* embodies enduring and creative tensions in China's religious landscape: the state, Daoist, Buddhist, and more local practices for religious adepts. But the journeys recounted in the film are uniquely female itineraries which, perversely, have no happy or transcendental ending. Yang Lina charts a series of troubled displacements through the plural medico-religious landscape of urban Beijing that match the similarly troubled filmic landscapes of Fang Lei's inner body, her anguish and the fluidity of her passions, taking her on a pilgrimage into the suburbs, first to a fortune teller and then to a Buddhist monastery in the mountains.

The way to the female fortune teller tracks the two friends as they leave behind the glitzy urban nightclub, and its false promise of escape from Fang Lei's nightmare, to a less familiar, bleak rural reality. The trembling hand-held camera accompanies their car to the run-down village where the fortune teller lives. With the camera positioned in the back seat we follow the travellers in rear view so that the viewer is 'an observer ideally mobile in space and time' (Pudovkin 1949: 71; Branigan and Buckland 2014: 328) and then strolling behind them through deserted roadways full of building rubble (Figure 7.3). The contrast between the dull hues of the fortune teller's shabby village and the high saturated interior jars.



Figure 7.3 Driving with Fang Lei and her friend to the fortune teller

This time the glitz is that of the makeshift temple and religious paraphernalia of the fortune teller's crowded shrine. The welcoming spirit medium and the virtuoso mix of Buddhism and Daoism enchants Fang Lei. It is strange yet appealing to her. As the spirit medium channels the ghost's voice and reveals him as her husband in a former life who will save her and her family, Fang Lei finally breaks down in tears of relief.

In the next out-of-town journey Fang Lei's daughter goes missing from the car while she herself is somnambulant, running between the trees with her ghost lover. Waking from a scene of wild sex in the car she runs frantically around in the same deadly woods looking for the little girl. We are led through her terror to an unknown lake. As she throws herself into the chilly waters, clutching her daughter's inflatable toy, we experience that terror as both that of the distraught parent, and also the guilt of ambivalent mothering – an ambivalence almost unthinkable in Chinese culture. This monologue of maternal desperation is sandwiched between the scenes of the two men in her life, juxtaposing passionate sexual intimacy and passionless marriage. Between the two men she has not only lost her child, but she is also being punished by the weight of Chinese culture, for her own selfish desire and sensory indulgence. The child, in fact, does not die, but ends up in A & E, where the husband finally loses all patience with his wife's 'infidelity' rejecting totally her mad confession and pleadings for forgiveness. He whispers that she is nothing but a 'dirty whore' and that is the last we see of him or the child.

Desperate with grief and left on her own, Fang Lei scours the city looking for her child, wherein we meet Yang Lina herself playing director of the Women's Federation. But it is the Buddhist aunt, with whom Fang Lei has a natural affinity, who initiates the final journey which takes them out of town to a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. By this time, she is no longer curious or hopeful. Her pale emotionless expression parallels the empty snowscape. In a high-angle shot that gradually tracks backwards, we see the coach moving further and further into the distance, almost vanishing, engulfing Fang Lei's loneliness. At this point the majestic red pillars of the temple sparkle in the distance, a momentary respite from the film's monotonous palette. The all-female passengers get off the coach, silently forming two lines to approach the temple, seemingly muted by its gravity and the spectre of communal female suffering.

There we find a community of semi-deranged women consulting Buddhist monks, and participating in ecstatic group sessions. The participants are again not actors, so the scenes of the faithful and their consultations use semi-documentary footage of the use of Buddhist healing for real distress. How representative is it of actual medical and patient practice and how are the plural practices articulated and intersecting in the film? Yang Yi, the TCM practitioner, is astonished by the religious appropriation of her skills:

The Daoist priest, and also the Buddhist priest, they both take pulses. Sometimes they give some prescriptions. That's quite surprising.

Buddhists have, in fact, always provided many forms of healing in the temples (Salguero 2014; Wang Jinyu 2018). We see an enigmatic abbot in the distance, a lone figure in the snow, seemingly, a celibate authority who offers salvation. The stages of Buddhist healing typically describe a narrative journey which includes curing illness, sharing those benefits with others, purifying the body and speech to prepare for death, achieving rebirth in the presence of the Buddha and finally enlightenment (Teiser 2019). At night amid women chanting *oh mane padme hu 'm* (ཨ་མ་ཏེ་བདེ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ [唵嘛呢叭咪吽]), an address to the bodhisattva of the same name, Manipadma 'Jewel Lotus' (aka the bodhisattva Avilokitesvara; Lopez 1988: 131), Fang Lei gives birth to a baby dressed in red. Has her ghost been exorcised, re-born as the abbot tells her? Or is the child a reincarnation of her own self? In Pure Land Chinese Buddhism (*Jingtu zong* 净土宗), the healing narrative ultimately ends in a pure birth, quite unlike blood-tainted human reproduction, a birth symbolised by a baby emerging wrapped in a Lotus flower (Yulin Cave 25 Pure Land mural).

Yet, at least in the view of one of our student respondents, the enigmatic Buddhist monk 'really has all the physical features, of the man in her dream' (George Yao). Whatever the director's intention, the final scenes of the film, as Fang Lei's lingering gaze rests on the abbot in the snow and she gently strokes her underbelly, are charged with the same quality of unfulfilled sexual desire that the film begins with. They undermine any audience desire to see our anti-heroine find an easy peace. Or in the words of the director:

As far as I'm concerned, I think neither psychiatrists nor religions can solve people's psychological problems, because I think in the contemporary society, nobody can be another person's redemption. Therefore, I offer no concrete answer to end the film. This is my observation of reality.

(tr. Guo Liping)

For this audience member, however, Yang Lina does provide another kind of homecoming.

Female intimacy: to the heart of Beijing

If there is a final journey for Fang Lei it is not taken in one chronological sequence but emerges throughout the film linking all the moments of pleasure when women delight in each other's company and escape pre-destined female roles. Whether bathing and feeding children, playing with sex toys or sucking lollipops, in shopping malls, in prayer or ecstatic dancing, the care-connection between the women in the film, friends, mothers and children, and the older women in the family, is expressed through physical objects and practices – the source of the most joyful and intimate scenes in the film. The 'curious and telling correlation between the mobility and visual and aural sensations' brings an intimacy to the film that

transcends the temporal, and even death, and takes us to the heart of Beijing, creating female inter-generational spaces between the city's old and new architectures (Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001: 1). Li Weijia says:

I feel it, the female in this film. The main character, she is kind of, like, isolated . . . it seems she only has one friend, and her only relative in this film is her auntie. Her parents do not appear in this film.. the husband does not pay attention to his own mother. And it is the wife, the mother, who really cares for the conditions of the grandma. Like she helps her to take the shower.

When Fang Lei gets called away from the Yonghegong 雍和宫 temple, she has to beg leave of her auntie from out of town who is praying for salvation from some emotional distress that we never get to know about. Granny has had a fall. In the homely, human comfort of the compound, far away from the madding streets of Beijing, they share a shower because Granny smells bad. Despite the fact that Granny doesn't even recognise her daughter-in-law, the soft intimacy that is created as Fang Lei gets naked to encourage her to wash, and playfully tweaks Granny's nipples, turns tragic mental decline into gentle humour.

The claustrophobic privacy of Granny's indoor life is cluttered with caresses, the joy of sweets, and the extra-sensory communication that the women share. The architecture of Granny's compound humanises the visual and sensory quality already identified for Fang Lei's sexuality, countering the emptiness of her illicit desire with tenderness. The brightness of the sun-filled courtyard illuminates just the two of them and creates a mutuality that others cannot access. Granny's growing dementia parallels Fang Lei's growing madness, and together they transcend social convention through a kind of mad-to-mad communing. Relief comes, in this way, through 'expansion from direct concentration on the character to his [her] immediate world' (Kolker 1983: 7). Like the Buddhist monks and nuns who do not really require faith or complete belief and understanding, these irrational moments are a source of spiritual sustenance.

Fang Lei is prescient of the exact moment that Granny dies and intuits the location of the shoes that Granny wants to wear at her funeral. It alarms her husband. But the film is unquestioning of the power of supernatural communication between women, and the comfort that it can bring. Our students related similar stories of family members, including men, who knew instinctively of the death of their loved ones before they were told (Zhou Dangwei). Non-verbal or written communications also extends to connections maintained over distance with children. Yang Qihua, our only undergraduate respondent, was wearing a Buddhist charm around his wrist. The youngest male participant in the experiment, he had been away from home for a long time and felt a bond of attachment through the religious paraphernalia sent to him by his mother:

My mom strongly believes in it [religion]. Actually, throughout my life, my life choices are guided by this spiritual stuff. . . . Whenever there is trouble or a problem with my life, my mom will ask Daoist priests, or like monks from

the temple for help first. So, like, she puts their advice as a top priority. I feel more connection with my family. I've been abroad for so many years. I still keep the Buddhist scripts my mom sent to me recently. I don't like, believe in it completely.

Yang Qihua's mother is not the only Buddhist presence in the room. Yang Yi, our Beijing student, is also a Buddhist. For her, Buddhism is a 'way of explaining the world, the universe convinces me and brings me peace'. As Fang Lei drifts through various locations of Beijing, the city is presented as native space, as well as a site of multiple, polylocalised identities: both homeland and homelessness. She does not find peace. But it is in the intimacy with which women and their locations are consistently portrayed that we feel the greatest sense of homecoming. And this quality fills what otherwise would be a totally depressing film with a tangible sense of optimism, whether or not that was intended by the director.

Conclusion

Revisionist histories will tell us that there have been many routes to power for women in China with wealth and connections. Yet China's economic miracle means that the numbers of women with education, time on their hands and spending power has grown exponentially (Chen 2018). Apart from being there and experiencing the new forms of social dislocation that these new freedoms bring *en masse*, it is hard to appreciate the problem without Yang Lina's direction.

One of the difficulties, including the last scene in the temple, seems to be the way out. But there is actually no way out. I am very pessimistic. I do not think this present era has any positive effect on me.

(tr. Guo Liping)

Yang Lina's docu-drama intends to portray the experience of a national spiritual crisis through the lens of China's urban middle-class women. There is no doubt that the women students in our class recognised the director's vision as a reflection of their own experience of urban housewives in China, and the essential emptiness of Fang Lei's condition. The film constantly measures these empty spaces – not only collapsing the inhuman urban architecture into the emptiness of her soul but emphasising the lonely distance between each scene and the beholder (Bordwell 2013: 6).

As the filmic journey unravels a process that is both psychologically dysfunctional and destructive, as much as it provides a release from Fang Lei's boredom and frustration, it may be, as Yang Lina herself suggests, that there is no way out. Yet running through this spiritual chaos is a series of endearing moments of peace, hope, and humour, unfettered by patriarchal social or religious hierarchies. They serve to connect all the tender moments of maternal, sisterly, and womanly care, from the middle-aged girls playing with dildos to visions of Granny beyond the grave shining above Fang Lei's dreams like a demented bodhisattva.

Filmography

Filmography for Yang Lina

- Home Video (Jiating luxiangdai 家庭录像带)*, dir. Yang Lina, 2001.
Let's Dance Together (Yiqi tiaowu 一起跳舞), dir. Yang Lina, 2007.
Longing for the Rain (Chunmeng 春梦), dir. Yang Lina, 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOhh_sS7ZPU, accessed 07 April 2019.
My Neighbors and Their Japanese Ghosts (Wode linju shuo guizi 我的邻居说鬼子), dir. Yang Lina, 2008.
Old Men (Laotou 老头), dir. Yang Lina, 1999.
The Love of Mr. An (Lao An 老安), dir. Yang Lina, 2008.
Wild Grass (Yecao 野草), dir. Yang Lina, 2009.

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