Woman Demon Human: & A Soul Haunted By Painting A Critique of Gender, Culture and an Exploration of the Female Consciousness

Chapter 1: Introduction

Ren Gui Qing, or *Woman Demon Human* (1987), directed by Huang Shuqin, is the first "feminist film" in China and is also a broader part of Chinese "women's cinema" (Berry, 1989, 22). *Woman Demon Human* (1987) provides Shuqin with the opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles, demonstrate the malleable notions of gender identity, rather than assume it as biologically determined and stable (Cui, 2003) while exploring female subjectivity by telling the real-life story of a female opera performer, Pei Yanling.

Huang Shuqin's film never really puts history in the centre of the film, the Cultural Revolution is barely even addressed, but Women, Demon, Human does represent a critique of traditional ideologies of the male and female roles in society while demonstrating these ideologies have on the real lives of women. Considering the critical nature of the movie, it is somewhat surprising that the film has not received more significant attention by Western scholars, appearing only in the analysis of Wang's (2011) Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts and Cui's (2003) early work on Chinese women's cinema.

A Soul Haunted by Painting (1994), also directed by Huang Shuqin, is a film that can be classified as women's cinema, as it shares the true life story Pan Yuliang who was sold into prostitution as a young girl but ended up becoming a pioneering artist. In presenting Yuliang's story, Shuqi explores the complexity of a woman becoming, specifically in terms of how Yuliang went from being "a woman who is less than human", to being a "woman who is fully human", to being a "woman in full possession of her dignity'...who "establishes a self once and for all" (Li, 2011, 126). Thus, Huan Shuqin's concern with women and the attention Shuqin gives to their growth and, ultimately, liberation, is evident in this film just as much it is in her previous films.

A Soul Haunted by Painting (1994) has not received any critical attention, at least not within any writings or publications that can be found in the West, unlike Women, Demon, Humans (1987). *A Soul Haunted By Painting (*1994) is briefly mentioned in Zhou's (2013) study where she comments, very briefly and uncritically, that the movie is an exploration of the prostitute's fate in communist China. Elsewhere, the small amount of commentary there tends to focus on how the film directs attention to the "petty-minded intolerance of Nanjing intellectuals" (Kraus, 2004, 96), who would not and could not tolerate the content of Pan Yuliang's nude artwork. These statements, while not at all untrue, do not really get the point of Shuqin's message: the point is not just that the intellectuals and government was petty minded but more important was the way that this larger mindset influenced the ability of women to realise their

full personhoods and what kind of damage this had on their psychology, their lives, and the ways in which they worked to liberate themselves from it.

Perhaps one of the reasons why *A Soul Haunted By Painting* has not received this kind of critical analysis is because, according to a critic cited by Wang (2011, 129), the film is, "as a work of art [...] inferior to Woman, Demon, Human". Huan Shuqin admitted herself that when she was making the film, she was trying to achieve box office success and "did the best to make it commercial" (Li, 2011, 125) because she wanted more people to see the film. So that may justify the idea that it was not an 'artsy film.' Ultimately though, whether or not the film is inferior is a matter of interpretation is a subjective statement. What is not, quite arguably, is that taken as a whole, though, there is, in general, a lack of scholarly interest in Western literature about Chinese women's cinema. This is unfortunate as it leads to a significant knowledge gap about what female directors in other countries are producing and what their films have to say about society, its ideals and impact on the lives of people.

This work hopes to try and contribute, albeit in a small way, to the knowledge gap by first examining the way Woman, Demon, Human portrays the awakening of a women's consciousness. As one critic pointed out, Woman, Demon, Human "is a film about women made by a woman, and so the films women's consciousness and women's psychology is particularly deserving of our attention" (Li, 2012, 122). The work also aims to extract some of the major themes of the second film, A Soul Haunted by Painting (1994), directed by Huang Shuqin. The work also aims to explore how Shuqin's film challenges the gender conditions of the time in which the movie takes place and how gender identity is portrayed, which is anything but stable.

In meeting the overall aim and objectives, this work will rely primarily on what is known as 'textual analysis' to examine how Shuqin used 'film language,' as evident in the use of close-ups and 'mis-en-scene' to drive home the criticisms she was making about traditional cultural ideology. Overall, it is hoped that through an analysis which relies on textual analysis, the implications of one of the first 'Chinese women's cinema' (that is, *Woman Demon Human* (1987)), may be brought to the fore, while also exploring the themes in *A Soul Haunted by Painting* (1994).

The second chapter will examine women's cinema in China to present a socio-historical and theoretical context. What the second chapter shows is that women's cinema, especially those produced after the fall of the 'gang of four,' represents a notable shift because prior to this time the film industry was dominated by the state, with film serving as a primary vehicle for propaganda rather than for critical engagement and reflection. However, historically, women's film was used as a means in which to offer critical reflection and engagement, a trend which certainly continued with the release of Shuqin's films. The third chapter will

present an analysis of *Woman, Demon Human*, while the fourth chapter will present the analysis of A Soul Haunted by Painting. The conclusion will close with a summary of the significant findings.

Chapter 2: Socio-Historical and Theoretical Context

This chapter aims to present the socio-historical context of Chinese women's cinema. Chinese women's cinema is defined by Zhang (2011, 318) as "Chinese language films that are directed and occasionally written by Chinese women in greater China" (Zhang, 2011, p. 318). These films mostly target female audience and focus on women's issues, but not all scholars limit the definition to the topics they focus on; for instance, Berry (1988b: 9) defines Chinese women's cinema as "all films made by women, not just those made by women espousing certain principles." However, female scholars like Cui (2003) point out that women's cinema essentially "indicates a female consciousness that desires to read and represent women" (xviii). However, for many decades, scholars ignored female directors and writers, exploring instead of Hollywood films and those produced and consumed by Western agencies. This chapter, while again examining the social and historical context of Chinese women's cinema, will also, and more briefly, examine the methodology employed to analyse Huang Shuqin's films. The textual analysis approach is chosen, explored and justified.

2.1 Socio-Historical Context

Chinese women originally began participating in filmmaking in the 1920s in Shanghai. Shanghai, China is where the theatre was initially born in the nation, the first being opened by a Spanish showman, Antonio Ramos, in 1908 (Cui, 2003). Most early films were dominated by American and European production. Domestic production arouses to the response of such distribution as well as a means in which to meet local needs.

Zhang (2011) claims Xie Caizhen was the first woman director in Chinese history while Pu Shunqing was the first Chinese woman screenwriter (Zhang, 2011). These women began participating in the film industry when it functioned as a profit-driven organisation to provide entertainment for urban audiences (Cui, 2003) and relied on a diverse range of resources to support their efforts. For instance, Sungqing collaborated with her director husband, Hou Yao, to generate screenplays into films, while other female filmmakers such as Yang Naimei relied on generals in North China to support the films financially.

The films the first generation of women directors produced dealt with topics that were directly related to issues affecting women in particular. Cupid's Puppets (1925), written by Pu Shunqing, for instance, can be read appropriately as a cultural critique of traditional practices, particularly, arranged marriages, as it advocates a different theme, freedom and choice in both love and marriage, and thereby seems to call for a break of traditional practices that limit women's place in society to whom she (is able) to marry. Not all screenwriters, however, directly critique societal practices. Yang Naimei, who wrote the screenplay, *A Wondrous Woman* (1928) dealt with a sexually unconventional woman (Zhang, 1999).

Nevertheless, the topics of these films thus broke a short tradition of the past, where early Chinese films (those produced outside of women's cinema) were, for the most part, couched within the "melodramatic tradition" (Cui, 2003: 24). According to Cui (2003, 24), the melodramatic tradition "seeks to engage the emotions of the audience and provide thrills," and in Chinese film tradition, family melodramas was a common theme. The reason is that the family, as opposed to other entities like the state, was the most important social unit in traditional Chinese society. Thus, "the family becomes a stage for external and domestic crises" (Cui, 2003: 24) and melodrama offers a means in which to represent reality to the audience. Some of the films that represented the melodramatic tradition include The Spring River Flows East (1947) which portrays and explores morals like the virtuous wife/unfaithful husband and good/bad woman (Cui, 2003).

The culture critique and the break from the melodramatic tradition figured more greatly, however, in the films produced in the 1930s where many films directly dealt with women's liberation. This concern was ushered in by the May Fourth cultural movement of the 1930s. This left-wing movement, also known as a "bourgeois cultural revolution" (Taiyuan, 2011, 211) or a time of 'enlightenment', was sparked by an abhorrence of feudalism and strong resistance to imperialism (after years of humiliating military victories and unfair treaties imposed by the West) (Cui, 2003). Those belonging to the movement, mostly intellectuals and Chinese students, celebrated personal emancipation and promoted anti-feudal anti-Confucian thought. What they wanted was the promotion of democracy and other values representing social progress, establishing a proper "foundation for modern Chinese culture" (Changli, 2010: 20). The movement was primarily responsible for, offering an alternative, anti-imperialist nationalism and promoting the representation of people of different classes and gender in film.

A Woman Of Today (1933) for instance shows a woman transforming itself from being confined to "socially awakened and self-consciousness" (Zhang, 2011, 320). This 'awakening' taking place in the film was brought about by public discourse, mostly about gender equality, equal rights and women's liberation (Changli, 2010) and manifested into 'new woman' concept taking hold in China. The 'new woman' concept, which held women were to be "educated, politically active, and working toward women's suffrage and freedom" (Pan, 2011, 266), was represented on screen, as can be seen in Sun Yu's Wild Rose (1932), LIeelt Toys (1933) or The Highway (1934), films led by female protagonists, all of whom are independent, feminine, representing moral values and patriotism and resist traditional discourse.

Other films focused on the suffering of women and showed how they were victimized continuously to expose the "darkness of Chinese society" (Pan, 2011, p. 276) as a means to launch social criticism and provide evidence of social injustice as a means to incite revolution. From that perspective, Cui (2003: 13)

argues that the call for women's emancipation was motivated out of a desire for "social revolution and national salvation" rather than as a result of a direct concern for equality or having been motivated from a true feminist movement. Thus, rather than a form of entertainment, as it might have been in the 1920s, film production emerged as a "socio-national practice" (Cui, 2003: xiv)

During communist control, the party was involved in what Cui (2003) calls a "the project of nation-building" (Cui, 2003: xii) and for decades (1949-1979) China remained isolated from the world, "trapped inside the collective enterprise" (Cui, 2003 xii). In this world, females and female sexuality were cited as being replaced with "genderless and sexless symbol" signifying "sociopolitical collectivity" (Cui, 2003: xiii). As a result, films were no longer being used as a means in which to try and incite revolution. Instead, they were used as a means in which to promote national stability and uphold the party's power. It is why during this time that Wang (2011) argued that female directors were forced to subject themselves' into socialist ideology and discourse so that there was no real autonomy provided to the directors for personal expression. Indeed, Female directors at the time were very few, but the films they directed portrayed communist/socialist themes. Some examples include the films by female director Wang Ping, The Story of Liubao Village (1957). Locust Tree Village and Sentinels under the Neon Lights (1964) (which depicts a class struggle and the villagers winning against corrupt bourgeoisie. influences) (Xuelin, 2007) demonstrate these themes. In fact, Xuelin (2007) argues that the films produced in the 'seventeen years' that is, from 1949-1966 (1966 is the year when the Cultural Revolution took hold of the country), an important theme was to show how the workers and farmers, i.e., the proletariat, remained in their ways in the face of the temptations from the attractions of the city or the bourgeoisie.

Some directors tried to free themselves from the constraints imposed by the socialist government by entering into Hong Kong and Taiwan, where, after the civil war was over and the communist party founded, they might have been allotted more freedom given the unique film traditions and directions these regions moved into (as a result of different government systems, Hong Kong at the time was ruled by Britain, while Taiwan was under the rule of its nationalist party). For instance, Wang (2011) documents how a once-popular actress, Chen Jianjian and Ren Yizhi, moved to Hong Kong after 1949 and worked to produce films, while another female director, Ch'en Wen-win, was the first female Taiwan female director who mostly produced film about underprivileged women and the troubles they endured in their relationships with the family.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1972), severely disrupted film production overall and there is no evidence that Chinese women's cinema was produced at this time. The Cultural Revolution refers to various policies that were, at least outwardly, mean to bring rapid progress, eliminate social inequalities

and bureaucratic privileges, to a nation that recently emerged from feudalism, two civil wars (1929-1941) and a century-long history of foreign domination (1800s-1910s) (Clark, 2008) by eliminating the ' 'four olds' (old thought, old culture, old customs, and old habits) and speeding up progress. However, what it ended up producing was "barbarism, violence, and human suffering" (Wu, 2014: 4) on a level that many have compared to the Nazi Holocaust. The so-called 'gang of four,' referring to Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Wongwen, all members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and all cited as holding a strong grip over the nation's media, controlled entirely what was and what was not produced. At the time, those producing cultural products, like artists and writers such as Pan Tianshou and Lao She, were brought to death by suicide and torture. It was a dark time that continues to be an area of problematic research even despite the interest of the subject in academia. As far as this writer can tell, women's cinema does not appear to have been produced; women appeared in some films, as an example, Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (1970), but when they did appear they were genderless and sexless:

"As women, they had ceased to listen to the claims of their individual bodies and were devoting themselves instead to the grandiose project of socialism. They were simply reduced to anonymous and faceless members of a large collective group identity—   sisters of the proletarian class" (Xuelin, 2001: 7-8).

With the need to engage in 'open up and reform' brought about by the havoc and devastation of the Cultural Revolution, a project which entailed importing advanced science and technology, and with it, for better or worse, Western concepts, ideas and conduct (Xuelin, 2001), cinema was once again reopened in Chinese society, and women were at the forefront. In fact, as Berry (1988a) argues, women's cinema was not a term used before 1986, but it was at that time in which the editors of Contemporary Cinema organised a discussion on 'women's cinema' at the China Film Art Research Center in Beijing, participants of whom included female directors as well as various film scholars and critics. They remarked in wonder how, since the fall of the 'gang of four,' the number of women directors making feature films had increased notably, with more than 30 such female directors, many of whom were receiving prizes for their films (Berry, 1988b).

Some notable women directors at the time included Zhang Nuanxin's Sacrificed Youth (1985), Hu Mei's Army Nurse (1986) and The Seasons for Live (1986). While the films deal with different characters and struggles, the commonality they share is, as Berry (1988b: 14) remarks, "a high level of female subjectivity." Female subjectivity is particularly evident in the way the directors purposefully chose to incorporate cinematic language devices (for instance, the voice-over narration used in all three films) to allow for a introspective voice. It was a notable departure from film techniques used in the past which did

not allow a third person perspective. Indeed, historically, Chinese films were primarily meant to position viewers so that they understand, see and agree with what is acceptable with the political environment of the time. However, during the 1980s, the films made by these female directors were divulging, and deeply, into female consciousness.

Berry (1988b) speculates as to what accounts for the change, suggesting that this went alongside Chinese government efforts to dismantle core elements of socialism like the 'big pot' and allow for more individual autonomy, and hence this may be why the individual female subject and the difficulties she experienced began to become more embraced, and so widely, on the screen. The way that gender and sexuality were denied during the Cultural Revolution may also play a role here too.

Whatever the reason though, it is arguable that as Johnston (1979) proposed, women's cinema could be appropriately read as counter cinema in that the female directors at the time were presenting an alternative to conventional film techniques, styles and themes by rejecting common approaches and being open to different forms of production. Cui (2003: 185) would counter this perspective though, saying that Chinese women's cinema is not necessarily 'counter' or feminist cinema but that it instead deals with "psychological dilemma where personal desires conflict with dominant ideologies" or, put differently, " the exploration of a self-split between submission to sociopolitical ideology and allegiance to personal desire" (Cui, 2003: 2000).

Unfortunately, as Wang (2011) remarks, the number of English language studies focusing on Chinese women filmmakers and their films is sparse. Wang's (2011) and Cui's (2003) study are some of the few that can be located on the subject, especially concerning women's films produced after the 1980s. Li (2011: 113) has however considered Huan Shuqin, the director of focus for this study, to be one of the first female directors self-aware of women's consciousness and, as Li (2011) argues, Shuqin's films "can unequivocally be called 'women's film." Hence, attention will be centered on analysing what her films represent and mean, in general, to meet the aim and objectives presented in the introduction. Before doing that, though, the next section will provide an overview of the theoretical context of the methodology of the study.

2.2 Theoretical Context

To appropriately analyse the films, *Woman Demon Human* (1987) and *A Soul Haunted By Painting* (1994), the work will rely on a textual analysis. Textual analysis is a method that has been chosen by an array of film scholars, especially those writing and analysing Chinese film (Cui, 2003) because it provides a means in which to treat, analyze and evaluate films as a unit of discourse. As a unit of discourse, the analysis can give attention to various symbols and signs that appear in a film, such as images, sounds and,

as Derrida reminds, the scholar can 'unpack' texts to reveal that which may be "unspoken." The history of textual analysis may be traced to theorists such as Roland Barthes who believed that cultural products were possible to 'decode' if signs in the text were analyzed, a belief that was widely held by other structuralists such as Jacques Lacan and Michael Foucault+. Textual analysis also involves making of close observation of the way that the director decided to choose and present the elements that create meaning within the film, such as the acting, lighting, cinematography, mise end scene, and the author/scholar is free to question and interrogate the use of these tactics to unearth possible meaning. At the same time, the textual analysis also enables a researcher to understand how decisions the director made this to be social, historical and political context so that the scholar can elicit a thorough understanding of the film.

Some of the early textual analyses of film can be found in the analysis of Western films, such as Bellour's analysis of Gigi (Bellour, 2000) or his analysis of many Hitchcock films, or Heath's analysis of a Touch of Evil. Many of the early works relying on textual analysis applied, as Friedman (2010) argues, "the insights of psychoanalysis to the study of ideology" (p. 1). For instance, the textual analysis developed by French film scholars such as Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni revealed how classical Hollywood films reproduced the ideology of industrial capitalism as a social order that is "inevitable and unchangeable" (p. 2). However, textual analysis has only recently been playing a more significant role in the analysis of Chinese film in particular, possibly as a result of its strength in extracting the underlying ideological, psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations of film to expose "subtextual and even its unconscious meanings" (Kuhn & Westwell, 2009, p. 13).

Several Chinese authors have relied on textual analysis to unearth meaning. For instance, in Cui's (2003) analysis of six Chinese films, she pays close attention to narration, that is, not just what is being told but rather "the telling" (xxiv) itself and gives special attention to the visual language system (that is, the cinematography, editing, sound, colour) in the films in terms of how they may work to create the "meaning of nation and gender" (xxii). In an earlier work, Cui (1997) also relied on textual analysis to extract meanings from the film, Ju Dou, by interrogating the cinematic language used in the film (namely, off-screen sounds effects) as well as focusing on the representation of women (by relying on the insights of the theoretical work on the male gaze and feminist film criticism). The body of work cited here is not extensive, but this should not be particularly surprising, especially since film studies and scholars in the PRC are cited (Zhang, 2011: 247) as being more concerned with new genres, structural reforms and technological change rather than being "invested in ideological critique based on textual analysis". Thus, given its employment in the analysis of film in both the Western and Eastern context, it seems appropriate to apply.

There are notable caveats in choosing this theoretical framework. One major one is that while there are studies which employ textual analysis, as clearly cited above, attempting to locate a consensus on the way in which to launch the analysis itself (that is, methodologically speaking) is difficult it appears to be non-existent. Many studies (for example, Zhen, 2002) say they use textual analysis without detailing how the method was employed. So the current author can only rely on some of the techniques used by authors like Cui (2003) as a starting point, taking into consideration such things as lighting sounds and cinematophric language, while following the methodological insights of Bainbridge (2003). This vague way of launching the analysis is quite in contrast to quantitative film analysis which might have more standardised ways of analysing film and film-related issues, such as a quantitative context analysis. However, the current author is of the belief that since the two films in question deal with fundamentally subjective issues and concerns, such as a woman's conscious, it seems necessary to employ an interpretative, qualitative technique like textual analysis to truly appreciate the underlying and even possibly hidden meanings in the movie.

2.3 Literature Review Summary

Overall, this chapter has provided the historical and social context to give the reader a thorough understanding of Chinese women's cinema, regarding what it means and how it evolved throughout various historical periods of Chinese society. As well, the second part provided an assessment of the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the two films. The following chapters will provide the analysis, starting with *Woman, Demon Human* first.