

# Visual Significations of Invisible Resistance: Mother–Daughter Subjectivities in Contemporary Chinese Women’s Cinema

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## Abstract

This study examines how contemporary Chinese women’s cinema after 2010 constructs female subjectivity and enacts resistance within the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou* (the integration of family and state). Combining narrative analysis with Peircean semiotics, the research focuses on two representative works, Yang Lina’s *Spring Tide* (2019) and Yang Mingming’s *Girls Always Happy* (2018), both of which confront intergenerational conflict, gender governance and the intimate negotiations of female agency. The findings reveal three intergenerational modes of female subjectivity articulated through narrative construction and semiotic expression: contradictory maternal subjectivity, critical subjectivity and negotiated subjectivity. By marginalising or erasing paternal figures, amplifying women’s voices and reconstructing kinship through sisterhood and intergenerational emotion, these films expose the internal tensions and negotiability of the patriarchal logic inherent in *jia-guo tonggou*. Integrating Foucault’s three modes of resistance, namely resistance within power, counter conduct and care of the self, with the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*, this study proposes a localised analytical framework to demonstrate how Chinese women’s cinema performs micro level practices of resistance while negotiating structural power. The research aims to expand both the textual and methodological understanding of Chinese women’s cinema while underscoring its aesthetic and political interventions within the context of post socialist gender governance.

**Keywords:** Mother and Daughter Narrative, Female Subjectivity, *Jia-Guo Tonggou*, Invisible Resistance, Chinese Women’s Cinema

## Introduction

Since the 2010s, independent women directors in China have emerged as a distinctive creative force, continuously challenging entrenched patriarchal narratives and reshaping female representation on screen through reflective and experimental visual languages. Beyond its aesthetic significance, this development also signals a broader transformation in how gender, power, and subjectivity are articulated within contemporary Chinese society. As debates on women's roles, family ethics, and national governance continue to intensify in post-socialist China, the study of women's cinema has become an important entry point for understanding how female experience is represented, negotiated, and contested in the public cultural sphere. This topic deserves closer scholarly attention not only because women's cinema has become increasingly visible in contemporary China, but also because it provides a particularly effective cultural site for examining how gender ideology is reproduced, challenged, and reworked through visual representation. Their works are deeply rooted in a long-standing socio-political structure known as *jia-guo tonggou*, a family–state integration logic grounded in Confucian ethics and institutionalised by the Chinese Communist Party within the modern state apparatus (Fei, 1992/1947; Jiang, 2012).

Within this cultural and political framework, women are positioned as moral subjects who maintain family order and legitimise the state, and their social value is defined primarily through ethical roles and emotional labour rather than through rights-based autonomy (Du, 2020). It is within this ideological configuration that contemporary female directors use cinematic practice to expose the tension between the state's gender order and women's everyday experiences, exploring how female subjectivity is produced and resisted at the intersections of family, institution and cultural power. Examining this topic therefore contributes not only to scholarship on Chinese women's cinema, but also to a deeper understanding of how visual culture engages with enduring forms of gender governance in contemporary society. In this sense, the study is important because it helps explain how cinema functions not merely as artistic expression, but as a socially meaningful medium through which gender norms, ethical expectations, and affective forms of discipline are made visible and contestable. In parallel, international scholarship on Chinese women's cinema has been shifting from a Western feminist discourse towards more localised analytical perspectives.

In global academic discourse, research on Chinese women's cinema has long been shaped by Western feminist frameworks, especially liberal feminist approaches centred on visibility and empowerment. More recent scholarship has begun to recognise the specificity of the Chinese socio-cultural context and to move towards more localised perspectives. Wang Lingzhen (2015, 2020) and Yang Fan (2022, 2023), for example, reconsider women's cinema through socialist feminist and post-socialist lenses, highlighting the historical formation and negotiated expression of female subjectivity under institutional constraints. While these approaches challenge the universalising assumptions of liberal feminism, they pay comparatively less attention to how patriarchal ideology continues to be reproduced through historically embedded ethical and institutional structures in contemporary China.

This study, while sharing Wang's and Yang's recognition that Chinese feminism and its cinematic articulations are deeply embedded in the nation's socio-political structure, departs from their emphasis on collective emancipation by addressing what their frameworks

overlook: the reproduction of patriarchal ideology under the contemporary logic of *jia-guo tonggou* and the ways in which women directors employ cinematic narrative and semiotic cinematic strategies to enact resistance from within power structures. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study develops a more context-sensitive analytical framework for examining how gendered power is both sustained and negotiated in contemporary Chinese screen culture.

At the same time, Chinese scholars have increasingly identified the mother–daughter relationship as a significant narrative structure in women’s cinema. Studies by Zhang Yinrong (2021), Jiang Wanqin (2021), and Wang Hetong (2021) show that maternal narratives have become an important site for examining intergenerational tension, affective conflict, and patriarchal power. However, most of these analyses remain primarily thematic and have yet to develop a systematic theoretical and methodological framework for explaining how mother–daughter relations function as sites where female subjectivity, ethical pressure, and embedded forms of resistance are negotiated. As a result, there remains a clear need for a more localised and operational framework that can explain not only what these films represent, but also why such representations matter for understanding gender governance and women’s agency in contemporary China.

Therefore, rather than adopting the liberal feminist focus on visibility and empowerment, this study recontextualises these concepts within the patriarchal structure of *jia-guo tonggou*, examining how the mother–daughter relationship in contemporary Chinese women’s cinema embodies structural transformation and modes of resistance that operate from within power structures. These transformations are situated in the interstices between family, institution, and affect, revealing how negotiation, care, and ethical agency emerge in spaces shaped by the continuity of patriarchal ideology. This study makes three main contributions. First, it offers a localised analytical framework that advances research in Chinese film and feminist media studies beyond universalised feminist paradigms. Second, it provides a historically grounded account of how patriarchal ideology is reproduced and negotiated in post-socialist China through cinematic form and narrative structure. Third, it highlights the relevance of women’s cinema for scholars and educators concerned with gender politics, visual culture, and contemporary Chinese society. More importantly, the study is beneficial to scholars of Chinese cinema, feminist media studies, and visual culture because it provides a workable framework for analysing how screen texts mediate gender ideology through family relations, affective conflict, and everyday resistance. It is also useful for educators and cultural researchers seeking to understand how contemporary films participate in shaping public perceptions of women, family ethics, and social order in China.

Building upon this theoretical stance, the study addresses three key questions: How do Chinese women’s films since 2010 rearticulate female subjectivity under the ideological framework of *jia-guo tonggou*? What narrative and semiotic strategies do these films employ to negotiate patriarchal constraints? And how do these practices articulate a mode of resistance that is embedded within, rather than external to, existing structures of power? By addressing these questions, the study not only deepens scholarly understanding of Chinese women’s cinema, but also demonstrates the broader analytical value of this field for examining gender governance, ethical subject formation, and the politics of representation in

contemporary China. The following sections, after reviewing the relevant literature, propose and implement a localised analytical framework to explore these questions.

### Literature Review

Scholars generally agree that the 1980s marked the foundational stage of Chinese women's cinema. Feminist film theory was introduced into China through translation and cross-cultural exchange (Hu, 1995), interacting dynamically with women directors' creative practices. Wu and Guan (2007) argue that the gender consciousness of female directors during this period underwent a transformation from implicit awareness to self-consciousness. Directors such as Dong Kena, Huang Shuqin, and Zhang Nuanxin placed women's experiences at the centre of cinematic narratives. The state also partially recognised this transformation: among the fifteen outstanding films of 1985, seven were directed by women (Berry, 1999). Based on this, Wang Lingzhen (2012) proposed a model of "subjectivisation and individualisation," suggesting that female characters during this period began to break free from "gender erasure" and express individual experiences on emotional and psychological levels. Berry (2016) further observed that these films portrayed everyday predicaments and emotional tensions from a female perspective, forming a stark contrast to the earlier collectivist narratives. However, liberal scholars such as Dai (1995, 2002) and Yang (1990) criticised that this emerging subjectivity remained circumscribed by the ideological framework of the state: women continued to be represented as political signifiers such as "mothers" or "heroines," making it difficult to achieve full subjectivity (Dai, 1995; Qin, 2006). Thus, women's cinema of the 1980s occupied a transitional state, oscillating between empowerment and discipline.

Entering the 1990s and 2000s, marketisation and globalisation brought new modes of gender representation. Yeh and Davis (2008) noted that the commercial transformation of the film industry enabled consumerism and feminism to enter China almost simultaneously, reshaping the cinematic portrayal of women. Wang and Barlow (2002) argued that women during this period gradually moved beyond previous gender-neutralised representations, demonstrating diverse forms of self-awareness and subjectivity. Yet male directors of the Fifth Generation often positioned women as allegories of the nation, a practice criticised as "collaborative orientalism" (Chow, 1995; Cui, 2012), which both resonated with Confucian patriarchy and catered to Western orientalist imagination. Some female directors, such as Li Shaohong and Hu Mei, were similarly constrained within this discursive framework. Nevertheless, directors such as Peng Xiaolian and Ning Ying sought to centre women's lived experiences, portraying their self-exploration within familial, professional, and emotional domains (Wei, 2021). Overall, women's cinema of the 1990s displayed stronger subject consciousness than that of the 1980s, yet its self-awakening largely remained on the level of personal experience rather than evolving into a systematic reflection on power structures.

This historical trajectory reveals that Chinese women's cinema has long oscillated between "subjectivity" and "reintegration," a tension not merely determined by industrial mechanisms but rooted in a deeper ethical-political structure that continually shapes women's social positioning. To uncover the origin of this structural recurrence, one must return to China's distinctive governance logic of *jia-guo tonggou*. As a cultural pattern deeply embedded in the Confucian political cosmology, *jia-guo tonggou* situates the individual, the family, and the state within a homological moral sequence of "self-cultivation, regulation of the family, governance of the state, and bringing peace to the world" (Legge, 1861). In this

ethical order, the family functions not only as the basic social unit but also as the moral prototype of state governance. The hierarchies, filial piety, and gender divisions within the family constitute the ethical foundation of state legitimacy.

Fei Xiaotong's *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* further elucidates the sociological mechanism of this structure. He identified the "differential mode of association" as the organising principle of Chinese society, in which social relations radiate outward from kinship, forming a moral concentric circle that extends from the *jia* (family) to the *guo* (nation) (Fei, 1992/1947). This ethical logic of *jia-guo tonggou* sustains political authority through affective bonds, making familism an essential cultural resource for state governance. Fei's later theory of the "pluralistic unity pattern" also demonstrates how successive regimes consolidated regional and ethnic integration through familial and patriarchal institutions, thereby fixing the linkage between "family" and "nation" as the core axis of political stability (Fei, 1999).

Within this cultural framework, women are symbolically positioned as moral subjects who maintain domestic order and legitimise state authority. Their social value is primarily expressed through role ethics and affective labour rather than through rights or autonomy (Du, 2020). In other words, the family operates not merely as a site of social reproduction but as a moral microcosm of power relations (Yan, 2003, 2020). The boundaries between family and state are compressed on the ethical level, with women bearing the affective labour that sustains the linkage between the two. This structure embeds patriarchy not only within domestic relations but also within the state's governing rationality in the form of cultural ethics.

In modern China, the state did not completely abandon this Confucian template but selectively appropriated and rearticulated it, forming what this study refers to as a "familial-national patriarchal ideology." During the Maoist era, slogans such as "men and women are the same" mobilised women into public labour but failed to relieve them of domestic and reproductive responsibilities, resulting instead in a "gender erasure" that normalised the male citizen as the standard (Liu, 2017). Rural women's labour experiences likewise reveal that equality in production did not disrupt the patriarchal division of labour within the household (Hershatter, 2002). After the Reform and Opening-up, the retrenchment of welfare provisions and the advance of marketisation relocated care responsibilities back to the home, while population policies such as the one-child policy further incorporated women's bodies into the rationality of state governance (Cook & Dong, 2011; He & Wu, 2017).

Meanwhile, cultural and policy discourses reactivated Confucian gender ethics, re-emphasising women's central role in maintaining familial morality and social harmony (Wang, 2014; Wu & Dong, 2019). Since 2010, the state, through the All-China Women's Federation and mainstream media, has reinforced this ideological orientation, re-binding the image of the "ideal woman" to familial duty and national virtue (Li & Wang, 2017; Nowak, 2020; Zhou, 2019). This logic, which instrumentalises "motherhood" and "filial piety" as resources of affective governance, constitutes a mode of cultural regulation grounded in gender ethics.

Compared with the postfeminist governmentality described by Fraser (2013) and McRobbie (2008), in which governance operates "through gender," the Chinese context

demonstrates a distinct model of gender governance. While Western postfeminist systems take individual autonomy and subjectivity as their premise, absorbing feminist discourse through market and consumer logic, the Chinese model pivots on internalised familial ethics and emotional obligation. Through the structure of “motherhood–filial piety,” it interlocks familial hierarchy with state authority, forming an ethical, relational, and affectively managed mode of governance. This mechanism sustains institutional functioning through affective labour and reproduces patriarchal order at the cultural level.

Throughout this historical continuum, *jia-guo tonggou* has functioned as an adaptive cultural mechanism that continually couples familial ethics with state governance to preserve gender hierarchy and political stability (Fan, 2012; Jiang, 2012). Compared with the instrumental rationality exposed by critiques of state feminism (Molyneux, 1986), the Chinese case reveals a governance model deeply rooted in cultural ethics. The unreflective adoption of gender as a universal analytic category risks obscuring the genealogical depth of China’s familist moral order (Li, 2016; Spakowski, 2011). In practice, socialist discourses of liberation have often been translated into the reproduction of *jia-guo* ethics (He & Wu, 2017; Wu, 2014, 2022), positioning women’s subjectivity within the dual mechanisms of political empowerment and cultural discipline.

Within this governance context, women’s cinematic resistance and negotiation since the 2010s have unfolded along two parallel trajectories. On the one hand, commercialised “women’s films” associate notions of “growth” and “independence” with professional success and consumer choice, thereby producing easily disseminated narratives of individual empowerment (L. Wang, 2021). Bao (2019) accordingly critiques this phenomenon as “consumerist feminism,” arguing that market logic often substitutes for critique of structural inequality. Yang (2023) further labels it “pseudo-feminism,” pointing out that in a depoliticised environment, representations of independence and empowerment are re-encoded as consumable emotions and lifestyles. On the other hand, independent women directors, situated in the interstices between state and market, shift the locus of resistance from industrial negotiation to cinematic language itself, using documentary, essayistic, and low-budget fiction forms. Berry (2007), through the concept of “co-independence,” reveals the collaborative logic underlying Chinese independent cinema’s negotiation with institutional boundaries, emphasising its structural dependency and symbiotic survival. Yet this macro-level analysis remains insufficient in terms of gender. While Berry illuminates the structural interaction between independent cinema and the system, he overlooks how women directors, at the micro level of creative practice, enact resistance and self-expression through filmic language. Within this collaborative structure, women directors reconstruct domestic space and re-encode affective soundscapes, articulating a strategy of “resistance within power.” At the same time, low-budget digital production and platform distribution have created fertile cultural conditions for these practices, reorganising the circulation and audience structures of their works and activating affective resonance within a feminist public sphere (Mendes et al., 2018; Wang & Driscoll, 2019).

Within the scholarly genealogy, Wang Lingzhen (2015) conceptualises “multi-dimensional subjectivity” to explain the representation of women’s subjecthood in Chinese cinema. Her research focuses primarily on the socialist cultural context of the 1980s, emphasising the progressive and historically continuous character of socialist feminism since

the Maoist period. This provides a macro framework for understanding how female subjects have been produced and negotiated within the intersecting structures of state policy, class positioning, and collectivist discourse (Wang, 2020). Building upon this, Yang Fan, adopting a post-socialist feminist perspective, diagnoses contemporary commercial women's films as manifestations of "pseudo-feminism," demonstrating how consumerism and market rationality reshape representations of "independence" and "empowerment" within a depoliticised context (Yang, 2023). The two approaches are progressive in both temporal and theoretical terms: Wang provides a multidimensional framework for understanding the historical production and negotiation of women's subjectivity, whereas Yang directs critique toward the representations of women under the marketised and platformed conditions of the post-2010s. This study aligns with both scholars in its focus on gendered practice within China's sociopolitical structure, yet diverges theoretically. While Wang and Yang highlight the progressive legacy of socialist feminism in the discourse of collective liberation, this research aims to expose the mechanisms of patriarchal reproduction embedded within that very framework. It examines how women directors, situated within the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*, articulate "resistance within power" through narrative construction and semiotic practice.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have increasingly approached the mother-daughter narrative as a key entry point for exploring female subjectivity. Zhang Yinrong (2021) interprets *Spring Tide* and *Girls Always Happy* as cinematic deconstructions of the "myth of motherhood," exposing the affective violence and power dynamics internal to maternal roles. Jiang Wanqin (2021), from the perspective of Chinese he (harmony) culture, examines inter-generational trauma among women through the lens of family ethics and filial piety. Wang Hetong (2021), combining psychoanalysis and feminist theory, analyses the "symbiosis-separation" pattern in mother-daughter relations. Although these studies demonstrate that certain women directors have already manifested a critical awareness of patriarchy within maternal narratives, most remain at a thematic level and lack systematic theoretical frameworks or methodological elaboration. This suggests that situating the mother-daughter narrative within the gendered governance structure of *jia-guo tonggou* not only reveals the political origins of women's cinematic resistance but also deepens its affective and subjective expressions on an aesthetic level.

In summary, existing scholarship either focuses on the progressive narrative of socialist feminism or remains confined to thematic analyses of motherhood and female experience. What has yet to be illuminated is how the mother-daughter narrative, in the post-socialist context, becomes a key arena for the renewal of female subjectivity and structural resistance. Building upon this gap, the present study proposes a localised analytical framework grounded in the patriarchal structure of *jia-guo tonggou* and employing a dual methodological axis of narrative and semiotics. It aims to investigate how contemporary Chinese women directors reconstruct female subjectivity through maternal narratives and generate cinematic expressions of negotiation and resistance within intertwined family-nation structures.

### **Methods and Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts critical textual analysis as its primary method and integrates Michel Foucault's threefold model of resistance (resistance within power, counter conduct, and care of the self) to examine the narrative and semiotic dimensions of mother-daughter relations

in *Spring Tide* (Yang Lina, 2019) and *Girls Always Happy* (Yang Mingming, 2018). Both films centre the domestic sphere as the core narrative site, revealing how maternal discipline, intergenerational conflict, and female awakening intertwine to expose women's negotiation of power and affective struggle within the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*.

At the theoretical level, this research combines Foucault's conception of power and resistance with China's distinctive patriarchal structure of *jia-guo tonggou*, conceptualising resistance as a micro-level practice inherent within the power system rather than as external opposition. As Foucault (1978) argues in his analysis of power mechanisms, power is not merely repressive but diffused throughout everyday relationships, always accompanied by the possibility of resistance. This understanding provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting women's agency within the ethical continuum of family and nation, where they are simultaneously embedded in networks of discipline and capable of generating counter practices through affective, bodily, and linguistic gestures. Furthermore, Foucault's discussion of governmentality and counter conduct (Foucault, 2007) elucidates how individuals strategically deviate from normative orders, offering an analytical dimension for understanding women's ethical resistance within familial structures. His later writings on care of the self further highlight how subjects can achieve ethical transformation through self-reflection and practice (Foucault, 2001; Foucault & Rabinow, 1997).

Building upon these theoretical trajectories, this study proposes a dual axis analytical framework of narrative and semiotics, examining how women directors construct embodied resistance and expressions of subjectivity within the power structure through two interrelated dimensions, narrative structure and cinematic signification.

The narrative analysis is grounded in Freytag's five-part dramatic structure (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) and identifies three levels of analysis within each phase. First, the spatial dimension distinguishes between domestic interiors (living room, bedroom, dining table), liminal zones (customs checkpoints, streets), and institutional spaces (police station, hospital, school), analysing women's power positions and affective movements across these settings. Second, interpersonal dynamics among women are classified by narrative and emotional function into four categories: ethical mediators, trauma bearers, active resisters, and strategic negotiators. Third, narrative turning points focus on the moments of delay, collapse, or stillness in the climax and resolution, identifying the films' internal disruptions of patriarchal narrative logic.

The semiotic analysis draws on Charles S. Peirce's triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant to trace multimodal systems of signification within the films. Cinematic elements such as camera movement, framing, colour, lighting, bodily performance, language, and sound are treated as *signs* that point to underlying *objects* such as patriarchal authority, maternal discipline, and affective attachment, and generate *interpretants* in the form of emotional responses such as shame, anger, empathy, or estrangement in the viewer. Through this process, the films' visual and sonic languages materialise power relations sensorially, transforming resistance into an experiential cinematic event.

Following the principle of intratextual evidence and cross textual verification, this study employs an intersecting analysis across the narrative and semiotic axes to reveal how the

mother–daughter relationship functions as a site where power and emotion are intricately intertwined. It further demonstrates how women directors, through micro level cinematic practices, translate Foucault’s triadic resistance model into embodied and affective visual languages within the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*. This methodological approach not only elucidates the mechanisms through which female subjectivity is generated on screen but also provides an operational theoretical model for understanding the agency and resistance of contemporary Chinese women’s cinema under institutional constraints. This methodological orientation also resonates with the visual semiotic approach proposed by Fang and Mansor (2024), both emphasising how narrative and symbolic dimensions of film reveal the interaction between cultural meaning and power relations.

### Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study through a comparative analysis of *Spring Tide* (Yang Lina, 2019) and *Girls Always Happy* (Yang Mingming, 2018). Building on Freytag’s five-part narrative model and Peirce’s triadic framework of signification, the discussion examines how mother–daughter relationships evolve across narrative stages to articulate resistance, negotiation, and ethical awakening within the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*.

Table 1 outlines the comparative narrative trajectories of the four central female characters, mapping their emotional, ethical, and relational transformations from subjection to agency. This comparative framework serves as the analytical foundation for the ensuing discussion, which interprets how each narrative phase visualises distinct forms of female subjectivity, ranging from contradictory maternal discipline to counter-conduct and everyday strategies of self-care.

Table 1

*Comparative narrative trajectories of Spring Tide and Girls Always Happy*

Narrative stage	<i>Spring Tide</i> – Mother Ji Minglan	<i>Spring Tide</i> – Daughter Guo Jianbo	<i>Girls Always Happy</i> – Mother of Xiaowu	<i>Girls Always Happy</i> – Xiaowu
Exposition	Leads the family choir at home and mobilises patriotic songs, establishing moral authority	Slaps the harasser at the police station, interrupts the family choir rehearsal	Criticises Xiaowu’s writing as unprofitable, pressuring her toward marriage	Responds coldly at the dining table, reconciles with boyfriend for “security”
Rising Action	Intensifies humiliation and surveillance of Jianbo	Engages in a secret relationship, dreams of her mother being dragged away	Mocks daughter’s posture, emotionally invades her creative space	Argues with mother and leaves home, rejects boyfriend’s proposal
Climax	Confesses marital trauma during failed intimacy with a blind date, forces another matchmaking	Publicly resists arranged dates, confronts mother directly	Quarrel escalates into emotional coercion (“I do not want to live anymore”)	Shouts at mother (“My illness is not caused by men but by you”), exchanges encouragement with a female friend

Falling Action	Reveals truth about granddaughter's father, faints after fierce quarrel	Monologue in hospital: "Home is not a battlefield."	Collapses after discovering romantic betrayal	Temporarily reconciles with mother, rides freely through the alley
Resolution	Exits in a coma, choir recalls patriotic order	Intimate reunion and kiss with lover, practices self-care	Coexists with daughter in the alley, ambiguous reconciliation implied in bus scene	Quarrels continue but coexistence persists, offscreen narration affirms open subjectivity

### *Contradictory Maternal Subjectivity: Victims and Perpetrators within Patriarchal Structures*

The maternal figures in *Spring Tide* and *Girls Always Happy* collectively construct a form of contradictory maternal subjectivity. They are both victims of the Mao era's policy of "gender erasure" and patriarchal marriage systems, and enforcers who replicate power and discipline within the domestic sphere.

The Maoist slogan "men and women are the same" has long been regarded as a symbol of revolutionary equality. Yet, as Liu (2017) and Du (2016) point out, such degendered equality functioned as a mechanism of gender erasure. Women were mobilised as integral parts of the state's productive machinery, while their gendered experiences and personal desires were systematically effaced. Li (2016) further notes that the state institutionalised motherhood through labour laws and welfare policies, transforming women into political bodies responsible for both production and reproduction. Fei Xiaotong's notion of the ethical configuration of "family and state" was formalised during this period (Fei, 1992/1947). Mothers were not only the maintainers of domestic order but also the moral extensions of the nation (Jiang, 2012). Motherhood thus became the conduit through which state power entered the family, exercising discipline and control under the guise of care.

The figures of Ji Minglan and Xiaowu's mother emerge as contradictory subjects shaped by this historical legacy. On the narrative level, their behaviours exemplify the logic of "replicating oppression under oppression." Ji Minglan channels the resentment born of marital betrayal and emotional repression into the humiliation and manipulation of her daughter, while Xiaowu's mother maintains domestic order through emotional coercion and bodily intrusion. These actions are not symptoms of personal pathology but continuations of the patriarchal consciousness embedded in the *jia-guo tonggou* framework of affective and ethical relations.

On the semiotic level, both films translate the disciplinary power of motherhood into perceptible experience through spatial and sonic design. In *Spring Tide*, the domestic space is filled with the choral sound of "My Motherland." The *signs* include Ji Minglan's central posture, her red shawl, and the medium shot framing of collective singing. The *object* points to the fusion of maternal authority and national discourse, where the home is reconstructed as an extension of political ritual. The *interpretant* is the "reproduction of mother–nation," in which Ji Minglan transmits state discipline in the name of maternal love, embodying the dual condition of submission and control that defines contradictory maternal subjectivity (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Ji Minglan Organises the Choir

In the dialogue scene with her blind date, the low saturation lighting, enclosed space, and visual contrast of the red shawl function as primary *signs*. The *object* signifies women's confinement within patriarchal marriage, while the *interpretant* is "confessional resistance." Through recounting her trauma, she expresses a semi awakened subjectivity yet remains entrapped within disciplinary structures, producing a tension between remorse and control (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ji Minglan accused the Deceased Husband as a Bastard

In *Girls Always Happy*, the mother's ambiguous posture and the use of soft-focus cinematography during her phone conversation with her lover also generate multiple layers of signification. The soft lighting, close-up framing, and shy smile constitute the *signs*. The *object* refers to the woman's emotional dependence and unequal position within intimate relations. The *interpretant* is "self-deceptive resistance," suggesting that she attempts to escape loneliness through romantic attachment yet re-enters the same cycle of dependency (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Xiaowu's Mother Calling Her Lover

In the breakdown scene following the separation, low saturation tones and static framing form a new set of *signs*. The *object* indicates the loss of voice and emotional imbalance of women within the patriarchal order. The *interpretant* is that tears symbolise the collapse of the maternal order, exposing women's fragility within the repetitive cycle of discipline and self-deception (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Xiaowu's Mother Being Broken Up With

From Foucault's perspective, this maternal formation embodies a mode of "resistance within power." The mother sustains her survival by reproducing disciplinary mechanisms, and her acts of "care" themselves become the medium through which power operates. Within oppression, she continues the circulation of power, yet through this very continuation she re-encodes the patriarchal logic, transforming state political discipline into the ethical and affective order of the family. Motherhood thus functions as an interface where power and resistance are interwoven. At this interface, the overlap of emotion, discipline, and care reveals both the reproduction and the re-semantisation of patriarchal consciousness. This re-encoding of patriarchy not only exposes women's passive agency within institutional structures but also renders the "contradictory maternal subjectivity" an important historical metaphor for understanding women's conditions in socialist and post-socialist contexts.

*Critical Subjectivity: Guo Jianbo's Counter Conduct and Ethical Awakening*

Building upon this contradictory maternal formation, *Spring Tide* further presents Guo Jianbo as a figure of ethical awakening. After the Reform and Opening-up, de-institutionalisation and welfare retrenchment subjected women to double oppression between labour and family (Ji et al., 2017). In periods of economic downturn, the state once again encouraged women to return home to ease employment pressure (Wu, 2014). Women have repeatedly been mobilised as flexible labour and emotional resources (Wallis, 2017), becoming “deployable subjects” under the dual structures of state and market. Within this institutional cycle, Guo Jianbo’s resistance is not merely an act of personal defiance but an ethical response. She refuses to be reabsorbed into the affective logic of the “family–nation” narrative.

On the narrative level, Jianbo’s actions constitute a typical practice of counter conduct. Rather than opposing the system through violence, she resists by redefining the direction of her conduct. At the police station, she slaps the harasser, using bodily action to expose institutional indifference. At the arranged dating event, she rejects the bureaucratic marriage jointly planned by her mother and her superior. In the hospital, she calmly declares, “Home is not a battlefield,” reconfiguring the ethical space of the family through speech. Through acts of refusing marriage, confronting authority, and withdrawing into silence, she extracts the female subject from within patriarchal ethics, forming a detached and self-aware counter-disciplinary posture.

At the semiotic level, the film transforms resistance into a tangible visual event through camera perspective and bodily performance. In the police station sequence (see Figure 5), the *signs* include Jianbo’s sudden slapping motion, the trembling of the handheld camera, and the high-pitched background noise. The *object* refers to institutional apathy and the constrained position of the female body within structural violence. The *interpretant* is “the body as politics.” Through her gesture, she breaks silence, turning the female body into a visible medium that exposes power imbalance, and resistance becomes embodied in the very moment of action.



Figure 5. Guo Jianbo Slapping the Molester

In the hospital monologue scene (see Figure 6), the *signs* consist of cold lighting, static composition, and the reflection of red light from outside the window. The *object* refers to the ethical and emotional trauma embedded within familial relations under power structures.

The *interpretant* is “rational and self-aware counter conduct.” Jianbo’s calm declaration that “Home is not a battlefield” represents a rejection of patriarchal narrative through linguistic and emotional detachment. This moment signifies a turning point in subjectivity, shifting from external confrontation to an inward practice of self-care.



Figure 6. Guo Jianbo’s Monologue “Home Is Not a Battlefield”

Therefore, Jianbo’s form of “critical subjectivity” embodies both an ethical breakthrough of counter conduct and a process through which resistance is rendered experiential and sensorial through cinematic signification. By rejecting the myth of the heroic maternal figure and embracing a composed rationality, she enacts a “subjectivity of refusal” that transforms detachment into ethical awakening. This marks a transition from the inherited contradictions of motherhood to an individualised moral consciousness, bridging structural resistance and personal transformation.

#### *Negotiated Subjectivity: Xiaowu’s Low-Intensity Resistance and Everyday Strategies*

Extending from this counter conduct, *Girls Always Happy* reconfigures resistance through the quotidian and affective strategies of a younger generation. Unlike the “contradictory maternal subjectivity” of the older generation and Guo Jianbo’s “critical subjectivity,” Xiaowu in *Girls Always Happy* embodies a form of negotiated subjectivity. Her resistance does not take the form of direct confrontation but is sustained through low-intensity and continuous everyday strategies that preserve selfhood within the interstices of patriarchal ethics and market culture.

Since the 1990s, China’s reform process has entered a phase of accelerated marketisation and urbanisation. In contrast to the Maoist era’s “degendering” and the early reform period’s “instrumental equality,” the concept of “gender” gradually entered public policy and social discourse after the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women (Li & Wang, 2017). A relatively liberal cultural atmosphere emerged, and consumerism together with mass media began to shape the image of the “independent woman.” However, such independence was soon reabsorbed into the logic of the market (Ong & Zhang, 2008). Women were encouraged to become “independent and beautiful” consumers, yet they continued to bear familial and emotional responsibilities (He & Wu, 2017; Sun & Chen, 2015). The space of

negotiation was therefore opened yet remained confined within the tension between patriarchal governance and market rationality.

On the narrative level, Xiaowu's resistance manifests through the strategic use of emotion and the body. She declares that she will not marry before the age of twenty-nine, using time itself as a buffer against marital pressure. In the bedsheet-tugging scene with her boyfriend, her bodily gestures perform a non-verbal rejection of the patriarchal script of intimacy. In her private conversations with a female friend, she builds an emotional alliance and a sanctuary of female solidarity. Writing and cycling become her quiet practices of self-repair and self-definition.

At the semiotic level, *Girls Always Happy* presents negotiation as a dynamic process of emotion and power through bodily performance and spatial arrangement. In the quarrel scene with her mother (see Figure 7), the *signs* consist of close-up framing, low lighting, and Xiaowu's direct gaze at the camera. The *object* refers to emotional oppression and generational power imbalance within the family. The *interpretant* is "resistance through articulation." Xiaowu breaks silence through speech and gaze, transforming familial conflict into an opportunity for self-definition, allowing resistance to take the form of emotional eruption and enter the realm of embodied experience.



Figure 7. Xiaowu Arguing with Her Mother

In the cycling scene (see Figure 8), the *signs* consist of the long take, natural lighting, and the deep spatial perspective of the hutong. The *object* refers to the fluidity and openness of urban space, which stands in contrast to the confinement of the home. The *interpretant* is "negotiated freedom." Through bodily movement, Xiaowu achieves emotional release and self-care, and the act of cycling becomes a visual metaphor for the female subject's breathing and expansion within the fissures of the patriarchal structure.



Figure 8. Xiaowu Riding a Scooter through the Beijing Alleyways

Xiaowu's resistance therefore reveals an aesthetic of delay. She does not overturn the structure but creates fissures within it. Her negotiation is not an act of evasion but a lucid form of survival wisdom, extending the breathing space of female subjectivity through low-intensity and fragmented actions. From Foucault's perspective, this practice intertwines "resistance within power" with "care of the self." While acknowledging the constraints of reality, Xiaowu transforms negotiation into an embodied form of agency through emotional distance and self-practice. Through Xiaowu's everyday negotiation, resistance thus transforms from an ethical stance into an aesthetic and affective practice of living, marking a transition from ethical awakening to an embodied "care of the self," and completing the continuum of female subjectivity across generations.

### Conclusion

This study adopts critical textual analysis as its core method, employing a dual-axis approach that integrates narrative structure and semiotic analysis to examine the mother–daughter relationships in two films directed by women, *Spring Tide* (Yang Lina, 2019) and *Girls Always Happy* (Yang Mingming, 2018). Methodologically, the research combines Freytag's five-part narrative model with Peirce's triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant, in order to reveal how these films represent the formation and negotiation of female subjectivity through narrative and visual structures. Theoretically, it takes Foucault's threefold framework of resistance (resistance within power, counter conduct, and care of the self) as its analytical foundation and extends it within the localised patriarchal ideology of *jia guo tonggou*. Through this framework, the study analyses how female subjects are produced, fragmented, and reconstructed within the intersecting power structures of the state, the family, and the market. By transforming emotion, the body, and space into readable visual signs, the study exposes the forms of women's resistance and their intergenerational genealogies within the patriarchal configuration of *jia guo tonggou*, revealing the complex negotiations of power and emotional ethics between mothers and daughters.

The study finds that the maternal generation embodies a form of contradictory maternal subjectivity. Both Ji Minglan in *Spring Tide* and Xiaowu's mother in *Girls Always Happy* are products of the Maoist-era politics of gender erasure and collective motherhood, while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal discipline within the domestic sphere. Visual motifs such as the red shawl, enclosed composition, and dissonant soundscapes make this

contradiction perceptible. The coexistence of maternal affection and disciplinary control renders motherhood an extension of state ideology. This internalised practice of power exemplifies Foucault's notion of "resistance within power," as women sustain their survival through discipline while simultaneously reproducing the logic of domination.

In contrast, Guo Jianbo represents a form of critical subjectivity. Through counter-disciplinary acts and embodied resistance, she challenges the ethical confines of the family–nation structure. Key narrative moments, including the slap, the refusal of marriage, and the hospital monologue, mark her process of ethical awakening. The use of cold lighting, static framing, and bodily distance symbolises her rational rejection and moral awareness, allowing both counter conduct and care of the self to find affective expression in cinematic form. Her awakening signifies the transformation of the female subject from one who is disciplined to one who acts, illustrating how contemporary women reconstruct selfhood within institutional fissures.

By contrast, Xiaowu in *Girls Always Happy* embodies a negotiated subjectivity. Her resistance is not direct confrontation but a form of low-intensity, continuous survival strategy enacted within the interstices of patriarchal ethics and market culture. The film's long takes of cycling and the spatial imagery of the hutong construct a visual grammar of negotiation and care, symbolising the creation of breathing space for the female subject at a micro level. Through silence, delay, and bodily gesture, Xiaowu performs a non-verbal refusal, revealing a lucid mode of negotiation and self-repair within the post-socialist context.

Overall, these three forms of subjectivity, namely contradictory maternal subjectivity, critical subjectivity and negotiated subjectivity, do not exist as isolated categories but constitute an evolving genealogy shaped by the patriarchal ideology of *jia-guo tonggou*. Together, they delineate a continuous trajectory of female subjectivity from discipline to rupture and negotiation. Their differences reflect the historical positions of women within distinct gendered social structures and demonstrate how female subjectivity emerges through cycles of formation, fragmentation, and renewal.

On the cinematic level, women directors reconstruct the patriarchal logic of vision through the reorganisation of perspective, bodily movement, and the politics of sound. From the use of subjective camera and muted soundscapes to spatial dislocation and bodily gaze, the films construct an ethics of anti-gaze, allowing female experience to be perceived and rearticulated. Through these micro-level narrative and semiotic strategies, *Spring Tide* and *Girls Always Happy* collectively deconstruct the patriarchal order of the family and the authority of male-centred narratives.

Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating Foucault's threefold model of resistance with the patriarchal ideology of *jia guo tonggou*, proposing a locally grounded and operational analytical framework for film studies. This framework enables the tracing of female characters' behavioural paths across narrative spaces such as the home, workplace, and hospital (including actions such as silence, negotiation, speech, departure, and repair). It also provides a semiotic grid to decode five visual dimensions, namely point of view, spatial displacement, bodily movement, soundscape and symbolic object (for example, the red shawl, bedsheet, wall and cycling path), which together articulate the grammar of resistance.

Through this framework, “resistance within power” becomes textually identifiable, comparable, and verifiable, allowing the analysis of contemporary Chinese women’s cinema to move beyond abstract theory toward a systematic and embodied interpretation of cinematic language. The localised framework also resonates with the non-Western narrative theoretical orientation proposed by Arifin (2025), demonstrating a theoretical self-awareness rooted in indigenous intellectual traditions within contemporary Asian film studies.

Practically, this research reveals how contemporary women directors reconstruct female experience through low-budget, individualised, and ethically reflective cinematic practices. It provides a new perspective for understanding the ethical and aesthetic transformation of Chinese women’s cinema in the post-socialist context. These films do not merely express resistance or compliance but continuously rewrite the political and aesthetic dimensions of female representation through negotiation and repair within the very structures that constrain them. These intertwined practices of discipline, counter conduct, and negotiation ultimately map a dynamic continuum of resistance, through which Chinese women’s cinema articulates a distinctive ethics of selfhood within the patriarchal and post-socialist order.

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