

# ***In Search of Marginalized Women's Tragedy in Urbanization: A Brief Analysis of Supporting Role Narrative in Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing****

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**Abstract:** Post-millennium Beijing experienced rapid economic growth as a result of China's reform policies, fostering burgeoning urbanization and intensifying materialism and societal stratification. Witnessing this metropolitan backdrop, Chinese auteur Li Yu adopted a documentary style in her cinematic narrative in the feature film *Pingguo (Lost in Beijing, 2007)*, which premiered in the same year. Under the influence of Western feminist filmmakers, Li's notable call for social attention to marginalized female workers in the film demonstrated her distinctive ways of amplifying women's voices in Chinese cinema. Through an intertextual analysis of masseuse Xiao Mei, a "Northern Drifter" who tragically descends into a sexualized worker, this thesis would argue how by portraying the gradual psychic and physical alienation of Xiao Mei under the pressure of urbanization and economic competition, Li condenses the existential and spiritual dilemmas of contemporary underclass women into a supporting figure. While advocating for metropolises like Beijing to consider these "neglected majorities" in their development, this endeavor contributes to the study of productions from the late period of China's reform and opening up, as well as to the examination of contemporary Chinese feminist cinema.

**Keywords:** Urbanization, Alienation, Marginalized Women, Li Yu, Feminist Film.

## **1. Introduction**

Cinema, as an artistic medium infusing visual pleasure within cinematic narrative, has always possessed the nature and potential to reveal and break tradition. Along with its numerous revolutions, cinema shows changing performativity while constantly placing cultural representation in a broader and deeper social context.

Particularly, after the burgeoning of the second-wave feminism movement, cinema aims to advocate the vastly neglected female voice in redefining cinematic pleasure, reimagining story structures, and disrupting classical identification. When Feminist Film Theory developed in the 1970s and 1980s, theorists represented by American critic Molly Haskell combined sociological and empirical methods in attempts to analyze Hollywood's patriarchal manipulation of female images in the construction of a hidden hegemony of consciousness. It has not only triggered heated discussion but also revealed the contradictions and complexities of women in film, thus solidifying the practice of women's cinema in the later years. Meanwhile, feminist critics of cinema constituted the core

ideology of Western culture at that time largely. Coinciding with the Chinese economic reform in the early 1980s, Chinese cinema was vastly exerted and influenced by Western cinematic ideologies. The emergence of the "Sixth Generation filmmakers" in China was the one of most influential derivations during this period. Young auteurs including Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Li Yu, and others witnessed the volatile era in urban contexts and brought more individualistic and anti-romantic appeal to their film productions as a result [1].

Female director Li Yu, as the main focus of the paper, incorporates disorientation, rebellion, and dissatisfaction with China's contemporary development into her factual cinematic styles under a comprehensive cultural background [2]. Maintaining her value of "shameful of being false, reproducing social issues", what districts Li Yu from the rest of the generation is that she, besides inheriting the rebellious and bold presentation perspective Western feminist directors promote, also integrates her own life experience and perception into her works [3]. As she speaks for her production: "I don't make movies for achieving my own grandiose goals or lofty ideals, but to express them differently, to make more people think about the present with another way of speaking." [3] Despite claiming herself "not a feminist", Li Yu still finds her works rich in humanistic care and passion, both originating from and towards modern women [4].

Li Yu's works are triangulated and pluralized between urbanity and rurality. Her famous film trilogy *Jinnian Xiatian* (*Fish and Elephant*, 2001), *Hongyan* (*Dam Street*, 2005), and *Pingguo* (*Lost in Beijing*, 2007) examine China's metropolitan context from perspectives of female sexuality [5]. In her productions, influences of the Western feminist waves are subtly disclosed in blend with the portrayal of Chinese marginalized women who are central subjects in many of Li's socially engaging cinematic tropes. Primarily constructed from the female protagonist's perspectives, Li's productions embody "spectacles" of life while narrating stories from the vastly unseen group: Debuting lesbian relationships in Chinese feature films, *Jinnian Xiatian* concerns zoo keeper Qun's efforts to hide her lesbianism from her deeply conservative mother; After being expelled for abortion, young single mother Xiao Yun develops an ambiguous relationship with her kindred son in *Honyan*; In *Lost in Beijing*, impoverished couple Pingguo and An Kun eke out their existence working menial jobs while breaking in a child guardianship conflict induced by boss Lin Dong's rape of Pingguo.

Li Yu's films never conform to monotony. Compared to directors whose hyperspecific portrayals of protagonists often result in a lackluster supporting narration, Li Yu always strives to add more complicated strands depicting characters in diversity. However, her excessive focus on reflecting reality through intricate plotlines often risks censorship for hitting reality taboos and red herrings set by related authorities. Take *Lost in Beijing* (2007) for instance, Li wanted to magnify the helplessness, struggle, and eventual tragedy of the entire underclass in bustling Beijing by creating characters in the film as epitomes of collective groups rather than the existence of oneself. The film underwent six rounds of review with approximately 17 minutes censored before finally being showcased in theatres. Despite the obstacles, Li Yu still voiced her attitude: "Despite all the difficulties in the process, I'm relieved to be able to meet the audience in the end...but I won't give up on sticking to myself, I've just learned to express myself differently [3]."

The deletion or prohibition of the film's screening proves *Lost in Beijing*'s engagement with contemporary issues and poignant humanistic concerns. Represented by narration like *Lost in Beijing*, Li Yu's works are rich in symbolic reflection upon reality, and pioneering voices challenging the state's rhetoric of building a harmonious society by revealing the darker side of the corresponding community in specific eras. Discovering Li Yu's cinematic endeavors poured into the making of *Lost in Beijing*, particularly those centered around underclass figures, contributes to the fields regarding contemporary Chinese cinema academia previously overlooked, and those tightly related to the sociocultural context up to the present. Taking on the example of *Lost in Beijing*, this paper undertakes the investigation of Li Yu's female-centric narrative further with an emphasis on the urban marginal

population. By converging discussions on *Lost in Beijing* for its complicated yet representative characterization, the essay aims to analyze supporting roles within a correlative socio-economical context.

Opening with a comprehensive introduction to the film's correlative socio-cultural context, the thesis converges discussions on *Lost in Beijing* for its complicated yet representative characterization. Then, in order to shed light on marginalized women's tragedy in Beijing's urbanization, this paper will use the key supporting role, masseuses girl Xiao Mei's narrative as a cinematic scheme to explore the concerns projected by Li Yu onto the impoverished lower class.

## **2. Socio-economical Background Introduction of the Film**

The film is set in Beijing in 2007, at the convergence of the post-millennium and pre-Olympic Eras, during which Beijing raced high on its booming urban development, greatly benefiting from ongoing reforming enactments. Crompton suggests, "The growth of industrialism was accompanied by an emphasis on the rationality of the modern social order"[6]. Amidst socialist open-market transformation driven by the massive and urgent need for employment, Beijing's societal order is significantly characterized by the inequality of social labor division, particularly in terms of class stratification.

## **3. Characterization within the Social Setting**

Affluents, represented by Lin Dong, the wealthy owner of the Golden Basin Massage Parlor, capitalize on the economic development bandwagon. Subsequently, their constant desire for extravagance swells under material prosperity, with Lin inflicting his possession and libidos via the raping of his female subordinate. Simultaneously, the vastly neglected underclass faces concurrent threats to their physical and mental health. Migrant couple Liu Pingguo and An Kun scrimp in dilapidated tenements while earning life via low-paid menial jobs like foot masseuses and window washers. As financial disparities became the most determining factor for individuals' social position increasingly, Beijing unwittingly imposed a money-oriented valuing system on society. Witnessing the callousness of the rich who wield power through money, the underclass admires money for its perceived efficacy in gaining and retaining social power. This foreshadows and rationalizes An Kun and Pingguo's decision to negotiate child ownership as a means to extort money from Lin. By crafting characters in stark social contrast, Li Yu purposefully infuses socio-economical concern into the story by using money as a potent motif binding the story together.

## **4. Supporting Role Narration: Xiao Mei**

### **4.1. Xiao Mei's Underclass Predicament: Identity, Economic Capabilities, and Alienation**

In addition, the film also portrays supporting roles to exemplify the harsh realities faced by the underclass. One such character Xiao Mei, whose name refers to "the chick" in English, deliberately sunk into anonymity for her negligible social status. Formerly a masseuse at the Golden Basin Foot Parlor, she endured eroticized work until fired for resisting sexual harassment. She then worked as a KTV bar hostess and ultimately a prostitute and was killed by one of her customers there [7]. Her story poignantly touched on underclass women's economic and psychic quandaries, highlighting the group's lack of discourse and tragic consequences in societal development. As her name suggests, the notion that every underclass woman could potentially be "Xiao Mei" exacerbates her representativeness to contemporaries.

Marx defines the consequences of class stratification as "social alienation", which refers to an individual's feeling of disconnection from an affiliated entity both objectively and psychologically [8]. The film expresses Xiao Mei's tragic social alienation mainly by juxtaposing her embodiment in confronting a social competition prioritizing economic power. In a provocative scene, Liu Pingguo refutes Xiao Mei's dream of buying an apartment in her hometown by telling her "Stop daydreaming" and insists that if she doesn't take on more clients daily, the fantasy will never come to life.

Amid a social trend centering on the burgeoning real estate industry, owning a house is often seen as proof of economic capability. However, before daring to envision owning their private property, the underclass must financially scrimp hardships and sacrifice abundant time and effort. Particularly under a male-dominated monopoly, female workers find it hard to grasp basic physiological needs unless engage in sexually objectified work, which would provide them with the highest turnover at the lowest possible cost. Like Xiao Mei and Pingguo, by working as masseuses who subordinate their male patrons situated in upper echelons, they gain profit directly from submission to masculine power. In Xiao Mei's case, to pursue her distant dream, she becomes more reliant on selling her out for more until eventually realizes that achieving it means sacrificing her individuality to the extent of being treated like commodities to be exploited and consumed by their male patrons in work. This sequence serves as the exposition of not only Xiao Mei's alienated tragedy but also epitomized grievance experienced rifely by the entire female underclass.

Xiao Mei's dream mirrors the collective aspiration of Chinese "Northern drifters", migrants who uproot from their hometowns to seek livelihoods in Beijing [7]. Upon entering the metropolis, the following struggles and difficulties they previously overlooked would ultimately deplete their passion. Though Lin Dong made a fortune by owning his own Parlor, his identity as a Guangdong province migrant hindered him from gaining significant commercial authority, relegating him to a marginal merchant. Moreover, Xiao Mei, as a single underclass woman with limited power and social discourse, would inevitably face more setbacks compared to men North Drifters who had access to more job opportunities. The increasingly harsh economic and survival conditions in Beijing have further intensified the challenges faced by those North Drifters, squeezing them out of the competitive urban environment.

#### **4.2. Under Materialism: Marginalized Xiao Mei's Psychal Alienation**

Conflict erupts when "one of the Parlor's best guests" sexually harasses Xiao Mei by touching her breast. Xiao Mei stubbornly retaliates by slicing his toenail, asserting "he deserved it", which is later reprimanded by Lin Dong for he believes that such overreacted aggression would put him at risk of losing the customer and jeopardize customer relations. Therefore, he threatens to fire her. Pingguo intervenes on Xiao Mei's behalf, arguing that "she is too young". Both pleas are firmly silenced by the boss, who maintains his esteem and power of speech not only for his position but his gender condescension as well. This reflects how, under a representational economy in which mandated positions are revered, female masseuses, together with all attend body-trading works who favor less importance than male patrons on behalf of wealth and social discourse, are either invisible or objects rather than subjects of the gaze and judgment. Moreover, Pingguo well-intentionally appeals to Xiao Mei to actively avoid being touched on her breast by giving the customer her hand, which inadvertently throws Xiao Mei into the awkwardness of being commodified and diminishes her agency and subjectivity. After being fired, drunken Xiao Mei puzzles over prosperous Beijing's inhospitality: "Beijing is this big...How could there be no space for a little me [7]?" After losing her source of income, Xiao Mei is passively viewed as someone who is "unable to earn money and has no social value". She has fought her way up from her native soil but now lives without a roof over her head. Xiao Mei's perplexed mindset further isolates her from her former work community and society as a whole. By contrasting Xiao Mei's insignificance to Beijing as a unity that imposes

unfairness on her, the scene highlights her feeling of detachment inextricably ingrained in Beijing's materialistic value system that prioritizes economic hierarchy as a measure of one's worth.

As Xiao Mei struggles to speak out, she nuancely undergoes self-compromise, transitioning her subjectivity from the edged massaging industry to the illegal prostitution industry. This depraved move also leads numerous marginalized women who unwittingly find themselves cocooned into commodities. Xiao Mei's reappearance in subcultural style features eye-catching decorations and outrageous dresses presenting a contrasting image from her former self. When questioned about how she obtained newfound possessions phone and French perfume- Xiao Mei, now finding her in the exchange between herself and her fellow "guests" as a KTV hostess, proudly displays them to Pingguo, attributing them to gifts from guests. She complains about the "guest's" silly behavior with disdain, but profits from him by allowing him to make up via gifts in "just a touch." Subtly selling her dignity in exchange for materialistic gain, Xiao Mei, who no longer envisions a local apartment, forges her commodified value in dealing with the frequent but realistic trading with her body. Situating in Beijing, Xiao Mei's attempt goes astray as she falsely takes using self to trade for merchandise as a turnover of owning one's subjectivity, but neglects the self-respect she once had that has been gradually eroded.

#### 4.3. Uprooted Drifters: Marginalized Xiao Mei's Physical Alienation

Xiao Mei's narration remains suspended long till the film processes near its end. Heavy make-up Xiao encounters An Kun, Pingguo's husband, in the car with his lover Wang Mei, the wife of the massage parlor owner Lin Dong. She halts the vehicle in the surprise of meeting her old friend and expresses her envy of the luxury car. Though not revealed verbally, her despondent state is indicated by her addiction to cigarettes and alcohol in later scenes, suggesting that Xiao Mei has now completely succumbed to alienation without a clear prospect of her future. Though not physically degraded, Beijing, as the society she lives in, has socially declared her as such. In a following conversation with An, Xiao Mei laments that she "misses her mother", longing for the maternal care she used to receive. Situated in Beijing's distorted fantasy of patriarchal success and fame, Xiao Mei still clings to her initial naivety and stubbornness. Despite vaguely resistant to "going back to her hometown" for stability, in Beijing, she indulges in it while living in the margins, feeling inescapable. Facing a society where rigid social standard applies, Xiao Mei, like many marginalized women, yearns for the simplicity of a "hometown" without the pressures of survival, but still holds hopes for an urban fantasy where one doesn't have to wander and can always count on oneself.

The tragic ending of Xiao Mei, who is robbed and killed by a john while engaged in prostitution, is implicitly conveyed to the audience via a call received by Pingguo from the police. She is directed to the morgue, where Xiao Mei's body is displayed for her to identify. Under pale light, Xiao Mei's lifeless body is half-revealed, prompting Pingguo to suffer from a nervous inner breakdown. The friendship between Xiao Mei and Pingguo serves as a poignant anchor and clue throughout the story. Xiao Mei's character is initially introduced in the *mise-en-scène* where she and Liu Pingguo, with fellow masseuses, freshening up in the steamy women's shower room, a cramped and warm space tying the two within an intra-class barrier [9]. Both women, migrants working in the eroticized industry as migrants, share common hardships as each other's best and only friends in the metropolitan. Upon knowing Xiao Mei's death dies, Pingguo is profoundly affected while getting lost in the meaning of her own existence in Beijing. Xiao Mei's death prompts Pingguo to leave the cannibalistic city and head for the fresh unknown. The ending, though, is left open-ended, inviting diversified interpretation to the audience; implies Pingguo, as a woman at the bottom of the social hierarchy, whose fate would inevitably intertwine with Xiao Mei's similarly.

Xiao Mei's physical death overtly expresses her condition of getting cruelly oppressed. From minor injustices including robbery, employment dismissal, and gender discrimination to macroscopic



oppression inherent in Beijing's society, Xiao Mei's death is perplexing and cannot be attributed to one factor. Li Yu depicts Xiao Mei as not only an innocent victim who is repeatedly rebuffed by and ultimately martyred by the unpredictable counters in life, but also a resilient woman who defiantly drives her life to the abyss of helplessness. Her narration is a dramatized version of many underclass women workers, who may not all meet the tragic fate of Xiao Mei but suffer equally from Beijing's overwhelming harsh survival condition that squeezes out the migrant drifters.

#### 4.4. Challenges in Presenting Supporting Role Narratives

Objectively, Xiao Mei occupies a minimal space with 9 minutes out of the 130 minutes of the film's entire narration [7]. This design deliberately enables the main plot line to take precedence while alluding to the weak voice of such characters in social discourse. What's more, in order to obtain permission for the film to be released, significant portions of Xiao Mei's footage were drastically cut, with her lines questioning Beijing's indifference also being blurred. This censorship undoubtedly underscores the widespread attention of Li Yu's fictional and documentary narratives have gained and imposes suppression and indifference to the underclass reflected in Xiao Mei's story.

In a way, this approach also deepens the movie's reflection of reality. Though Xiao Mei is not characterized as a central role, each of her showcases is carefully crafted with straightforward cinematography and impressive lines that coalesce to represent and typify her figure in epitome. Among Li Yu's adept portrayal of female characters at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, Xiao Mei remains valued by offering a poignant representation of the challenges faced by marginalized women in contemporary urban settings [10]. To this day, the tragedy of Xiao Mei's narrative remains a warning to booming urbanization, reminding cities to take into account the development of marginalized female migrants who are struggling to survive both economically and psychically in the urban environment. Her story offers both a fabled reading of China's modernization process and a literal reading of women's predicaments in a hectic time of economic growth.

#### 5. Conclusion

Late 2000s Beijing's ever-changing development gave rise to a materialistic, class-stratified society that constantly pressures marginalized women to sell flesh for survival, leading them towards self-commodification and objectification. In the film *Lost in Beijing*, the dramatized and symbolic storyline primarily follows how the protagonists bearing significant social class gaps, including pregnant worker Liu Pingguo, undergo body-oriented trading. Beyond these, director Li Yu crafts masseuses Xiao Mei's subplot with poignantly delineated dialogues and cinematography. By portraying Xiao Mei as a victim grappling with both psychological and physical alienation while enduring the cruelty of societal progress, Li allows the audience to sense society's cannibalistic influence on her and the entire marginalized female workforce. Furthermore, Li Yu exposes the real and brutal fact of intertwined desire and morality fighting under the pressure of urbanization, which is often obscured or poorly received in a conservative discourse. This exploration contributes to the archive of contemporary Chinese cinema, realistically diving deep into the struggles of marginalized narration, exposing moral and legitimate risks. However, the insufficient character examples somewhat limit the representativeness of the analysis. The lack of firsthand documentation regarding the filmmaker's intention in creating Xiao Mei also undermines the credibility of assumptions made in the analysis. Thus, to better elucidate the connection between indie film production and the influence the social-economical environment casts on it, further study is warranted into the image of contemporary Chinese women expressed in film within a broader coverage. Additionally, studies featuring more firsthand accounts are necessary to complement the current research gaps.

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