

# The Female Body and the Body Politic in Sex Scenes of Lou Ye's Film: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *Summer Palace*

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the body politic of Yu Hong in the postsocialist Chinese film—*Summer Palace* (2006). Director Lou Ye places Yu Hong's body in the sex scenes that metaphorically expresses a traumatic and sensitive political event, the "June Fourth Incident." The portrayal of sexual intercourse, nudity, and this historical event is the unspeakable "secret" in mainland Chinese media. Therefore, the authors raise the question that, when sexual intercourse and the female body enter political discourse, how do we deal with the complex and dynamic power structures behind bodily attributes and the "anachronistic" historical objects that do not fit into the mainstream narrative and epistemological spaces? Drawing on body politic theory, feminist film theory, and a semiotic framework, we adopt multimodal critical discourse analysis to assess power relations and ideologies behind Yu's body attributes in the sex scenes. The findings indicate that Lou constructs a complex communication system, using her body as a carrier of communication to express self-consciousness, constructing female subjectivity through the writing of feminine discourse, with the political purpose of seeking the freedom of the written word. Sexual liberation is sought by establishing a transgressive body that is not accepted by the mainstream and opposes the inherent power of government. Yu's bodily pleasure is set up as an expression of narcissistic individualism through love, producing a vision of political ecstasy. Her melancholy body metaphor for the discomfort and confusion that preceded the student movement and the post-traumatic ambivalence. Using the female body as a site of political discourse and sexual liberation offers a new reading strategy for analysing the representation of the female body in film and other forms of media. In making the argument, the study contributes valuable scholarship to the film studies focused on sexual, gender, and political marginalised discourse.*

**Keywords:** *female body, body politic, sex scenes, Lou Ye, feminist film theory*

## INTRODUCTION

This article takes Yu Hong's body in the sex scenes of Lou Ye's film – *Summer Palace* (2006) as its point of departure and considers the system of power operating that epidermal her body. As "a postsocialist Chinese film, *Summer Palace* waited 17 years to deliver its filmic dehiscence" (Zuo 2019), an aesthetic unsuturing of a female body, self-identity, and sexual liberation. Sexuality is an essential topic in media studies; the sexual discourse is a part of human life and history (McNair 2002). The body in sexuality is adapted and organised as a tool for presenting gender politics, through which people adapt, perform and negotiate social norms (Scott 1986). Before 1985, Chinese people discussed love without any sex element; later, although some Chinese directors began to focus on women, the exclusion of the female body from sex scenes, confusing the subjective consciousness of women, and depictions still have a solid subjective bias or patriarchal judgement (Zheng

2005; David 2021). At the same time, there are scarce studies and films about the body in sex scenes due to China's particular cultural context and film censorship policy. However, women's sexuality has been repressed for a long time, so it has become more intense (Zheng 2005). Sixth-generation director Lou Ye attempts to achieve a "revolution" with the female body in sex scenes—the female protagonist Yu Hong's erotic pleasure in the act of self-reflective writing and in repeated, compulsive sexual intercourse, her body politicised in the given diegetic context.

The following analysis of a Chinese film, *Summer Palace*, "masterfully converges sexual awakening and romantic confusion with political radicalisation and frustrated aspirations" (Shen 2021), in which sexual intercourse, body, and political events as "sensitive elements" challenged Chinese cinema. Director Lou uses Yu's body in the sex scenes to trace the lineage of traumatic political events from before the Tiananmen Square protests to after the failed movement. The film spans almost 20 years and relentlessly pursues aimless young bodies as they dance, fall in love and have sex in chaotic spaces inside and outside China. Yu Hong and Zhou Wei, two Beijing University students, fall in love while the dramatic political conflict—"June Fourth Incident" (hereafter 6/4), plays out in the background. The duo encounters each other and engages in an intense romantic relationship until 4 June 1989. On that night, both individuals partake in the protests, and Yu becomes cognizant of Zhou's sexual encounter with her closest friend. After these incidents, the lovers part ways, but their hearts and minds are still devoted to one another. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) deemed the film and its director, Lou, as purveyors of moral degradation, banned the film indefinitely and barred Lou from filmmaking for five years. Although the official reason for the ban from the SARFT was "Lou's lack of an international exhibition permit when the film premiered at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival" (Zuo 2019), there was more to it than that—the film would not have passed the censorship requirements due to presentation of the sensitive 6/4 and the 13 sex scenes and full-frontal nudity.

The film is one of only three Chinese narrative films explicitly depicting the 6/4 (Zuo 2019), the traumatic refraction of the political event in love, sex, and body; like sex, this political event is an unspeakable secret in the media. The student-led demonstrations during the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, referred to as "6/4" (Lim 2014). Against the context of rapid economic development and social change in post-Mao China, the reforms of the 1980s resulted in a new market economy that benefited some people but severely harmed others. Inflation, corruption, inadequate preparation of graduates for the new economy, and restrictions on political participation were the main complaints at the time (Brook 1998). The movement began on 15 April, "the students called for greater accountability, constitutional due process, democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech" (Lim 2014; Nathan 2001); they called it the "democracy movement." The government proclaimed martial law on 4 June and ordered the People's Liberation Army to armed fire on demonstrators (Brook 1998). Following the Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government has reasserted its authority over the press, publishing, and mass media. The discussions regarding the protests remain prohibited, and the government has implemented measures to prevent disseminating information related to the incident (Saiget 2009), thereby suppressing the public's memory of 6/4 (Su 2021). Therefore, *Summer Palace* uses sex and the body as a metaphor for the unspeakably traumatic political event—it brings together multiple sensitive elements.

Lou explained, "the story is based on sex; sex is completely unnecessary to avoid, and should not be avoided" (Liu 2011) because the sexual revolution of university students was parallel and consistent with the political revolution of Chinese society in 1989 (Shen 2021). During the student revolt, "the need for sexual release increased proportion to leisure, boredom, and chaos"; they viewed the sexual activities on and off-campus as the "first sexual liberation movement in New China" (Shen 2021). The film explores and implies the connection between the student movement at Tiananmen Square and their sexual lives—sex and body are metaphors for political events. In contrast to the objectification of the female body, repetitive sexual intercourse is shown as "a clumsy athletic exercise, a messy enervation of tumbling bodies" (Zuo 2019). The gratuitous nature of *Summer Palace*'s eroticism extends to its taboo depiction of sex and its impermissible portrayal of the 6/4. Both sex and politics in the film are intimate observations of the spectacle of the body, exposing too much "skin" (Zuo 2019).

The body and sex scenes are integral to expressing the strong sense of pioneering and female aspirations—the female protagonist, Yu's body, is a seminal symbol of women's liberation in Chinese cinema, and the body metaphors express political structural contradictions (Kim 2013). According to Butler (1990), the formation of politics "that represents women as the subject of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics. The feminist subject is thus constituted by the political system through which emancipation is sought." Lou aims to be straightforward and naturalistic in light and camera movement—sex scenes lack artistic skill as if they are daily scenes that occur naturally and are recorded

(Han 2013). Rather than consuming the female body, these cinematic techniques reject the power relations implied by the male gaze, represent female desire, and construct new gender and political power structures by emphasising bodily interactions in sex scenes (Han 2013).

This article, therefore, adopts Yu's body in the sex scenes in *Summer Palace* as a case study and raises the question that, when sexual intercourse and the female body enter political discourse, how do we deal with the complex and dynamic power structures behind bodily attributes and the "anachronistic" historical objects that do not fit into the mainstream narrative and epistemological spaces? Drawing on body politic theory, feminist film theory, and a semiotic framework, we adopt multimodal critical discourse analysis to assess power relations and ideologies behind Yu's body attributes in the sex scenes of the film and to discuss how artists should respond to sensitive topics that do not fit into the mainstream narrative, such as female body, sex, and traumatic events. In making the argument, the article contributes valuable scholarship to the film studies focused on sexual, gender, and political marginalised discourse.

### HISTORICAL COMMON SENSE IN FEMALE BODY IN SEX SCENES OF CHINESE CINEMA

The Chinese cinema's portrayal of the female body is often a mirror image of patriarchal social structures and gender biases in history—the traditional philosophical view of the body as a reproductive organ diminishes female desires and pleasures. After 1980 Chinese cinema entered a phase of reflection on modernity, and the female body entered the history of cinema as a code of cultural significance (Shu 2011). As an effective symbolic form in the cinematic medium, the female body is a social body—society constantly transforms the natural, material, and conceptual body. Filmmakers began to consider women's culture, economy, status and the construction of values from the perspective of gender politics behind their bodies; the cinematic medium began to use the female body as a vehicle to complete the gender narrative (Shu 2011).

However, the historical periods are ambiguous in their understanding of sexuality by male and female Chinese directors, who deconstructed the female body, identity or other subjective factors through the "Other" discourse and patriarchy. Film critics often criticise acclaimed fifth generation director Zhang Yimou for his representation of women for men's sexual pleasure. For example, Zhang addresses a theme in *The Red Sorghum* (1988): oppressive feudal, patriarchal practises (Chow 1995). Though praised for showing a woman's emancipation from an arranged marriage, this is undermined by Jiu'er accepting her sexual assaulter as her spouse (David 2021). Film critic and feminist Dai (2002) reproaches Zhang's portrayal of female subjectivity in the film—the female body only appears to fulfil men's desire and create male subjectivity. Such examples are plentiful, not only among renowned male directors but also among female directors.

David (2021) cites female directors Joan Chen and Vivian Qu as examples to argue the ambiguity with which they interpret sexual violence and consensual sex in their films. *Xiu Xiu, The Sent Down Girl* (1998), a debut film of female director Joan Chen is the story of Xiu, a 14-year-old girl pushed into prostitution because of circumstances. By emphasising return permits as a driving force for Xiu, the director blurs the distinctions between rape, sexual exploitation, consensual sex, and prostitution. At the same time, Xiu's body is the sexual target of corrupt officials who have power; she is a fragile girl who cannot compete with the officials' power (David 2021). Therefore, the director's portrayal of sex scenes is ambiguous; the description of the female body still does not escape the androcentrism and male gaze. It signifies the female consciousness's repression and inability to liberate—the sex scenes in Chinese cinema construct the female body as an empty signifier.

There are scarce studies and films about the body in sex scenes due to China's particular cultural context and film censorship policy. "Sex as the 'priority' of consumer society, and it incredibly determines the entire field of meaning of mass communication in many ways" (Baudrillard 1998). The purpose of sex scenes is to emphasise human gender differences, which are personal and social issues (Ward 2003; Hou 1926). However, Chinese scholars have paid little attention to the body and sex, despite their importance on screen, for two primary reasons. One reason is that the Chinese feminist and film scholarship focuses more on ethics—whether sex scenes and nude female images should be shown in cinema (Cui 2003).

Before 1985, people discussed love without any sex element; sexuality was generally referred to as "unhealthy tendencies" in the portrayal of love (Zheng 2005). Irrespective of the sex or form, even explicit sex sells well, although people may be shy to admit this truth (Harris and Scott 2002). Because sexual intercourse is always associated with words such as private and sensitive, it is combined with the medium when people are too difficult to discuss. In the past cinema, female bodies were often subordinate to men and became objects to be looked at and observed. This way of "being appreciated" did not express the essence of women's oppression (Li 2003). Therefore, some Chinese scholars argued that the nudity of women and sex as commodities to solicit audiences is dirty and have called for a "cleaning movement" for the screen (Cui 2003).

Another reason is that the SARFT has incorporated “obscenity” (淫秽) into managing and supervising films, television and radio productions. The “obscenity” criteria of censorship invoke the morally “righteous rhetoric” of the 1930s *Hollywood Hays Production Code*, which requires that any Chinese film or television programme with the following sex acts be cut or altered: “scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality, masturbation and private body parts including the male or female genitalia” (SARFT 2008). The tightening of censorship has led directors to become “careful” of the first explorations of sex and the body.

Instead, other East Asian countries in the same cultural context as China, such as South Korea and Japan, are highly pioneering in exploring sex and the female body on the screen, and they have adopted a relatively permissive regulatory approach towards these sensitive elements. In South Korea, pubic hair and male or female genitalia are forbidden to appear on screen. However, they can be digitally blurred and manipulated, and they have a rating system with five different levels: G, PG-12, PG-15, R-18, and Restricted Rate (Park 2002), which provides filmmakers with leeway and artistic liberty. Japanese directors are renowned worldwide for exploring sex scenes and the female body. Japanese film rating regulator not only has a film classification system but also some directors choose to make films in V-Cinema, which refers to producing films intended only for video release. The reason is “the creative freedom afforded by the less stringent censorship of the medium, and the riskier content the producers will allow” (Karatsu 2007). The lack of a classification system in Chinese cinema, coupled with increasingly stringent censorship, has resulted in an uneasy predicament where portrayals of sexuality and the female body in Chinese cinema are notably limited. Consequently, it is imperative to research sexual depictions and the female body in Chinese cinema.

Few directors placed the female body within the sexual discourse, while sixth-generation director Lou Ye began to explore the female body in sex scenes under the influence of Western ideologies. He was born in 1965 and graduated from the (film) directing department of the Beijing Film Academy in 1989 (Han 2013). Lou’s *Summer Palace*, *Suzhou River* (2000), *Love and Bruises* (2011), and *Mystery* (2012) adopt a female perspective to tell their stories while placing women within the sexual discourse. Chen’s (2018) analysis of modernity in sixth-generation directors points out that Lou’s proclamation of the sensual body indicates his call for bodily liberation and resistance to physical oppression. Lou “does not depict sexual activities with a strong subjective prejudice or patriarchal judgement. Instead, these films more objectively record women’s real-life sexual experiences” (Wu 2020). He has created films that place the female body in sexuality, politics, and other more complex topics (Han 2013).

Sex is “decisive” and plays an essential narrative role in Lou’s film—sex scenes often appear as a critical element of the storyline; the emotional development process is often marked by sex (Han 2013). By “exposing” the female body in the sex scenes, women began to play themselves and freely express their inner complexities, desires and fantasies (Han 2013). The female character in Lou’s film is aware of her unequal status in society and the value of self-expression and attempts to find rights and freedom through their body practice—a landmark of the awakening of feminine consciousness. In other words, it is the beginning of a change in the power relations of women on the screen, as the film’s tone is to eliminate the gender difference of women’s subordination to men.

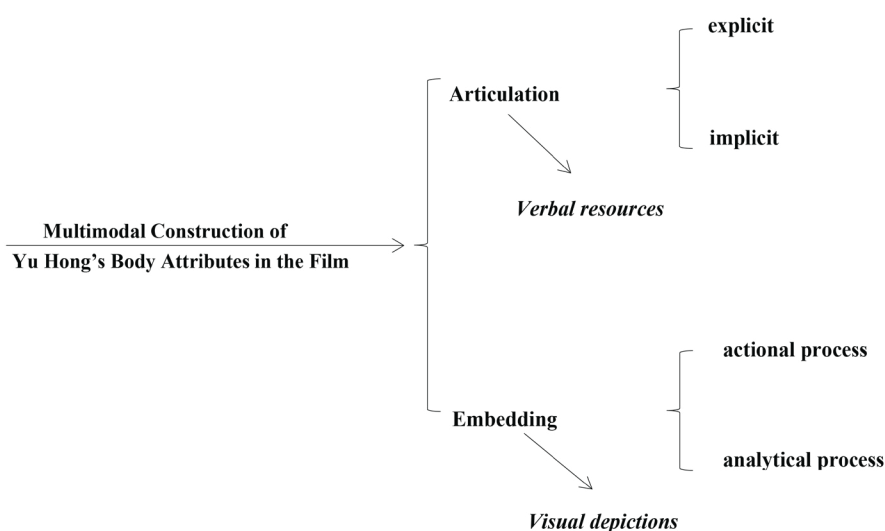
In brief, Lou Ye’s film deviates from the traditional portrayal of the patriarchal social structure and gender bias of the female body in Chinese cinema. He uses the female body in sex scenes as a symbolic representation of political events. This study utilises the film *Summer Palace* as a case study to examine the power relations and ideologies behind the female protagonist’s body attributes in the sex scenes of the film and to explore how artists can address sensitive topics that do not fit into the mainstream narrative, such as female body, sex, and traumatic events. This article aims to address the gaps in Chinese academic literature regarding the depiction of the female body in sex scenes, which are attributed to the China’s particular cultural context and film censorship policy. By doing so, it seeks to provide valuable insights for Chinese directors to enhance their portrayal of sex scenes and the female body.

## METHODS

The investigation in this article is about the female protagonist (Yu Hong, in the film *Summer Palace*) and the film is available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwbjWYQk5CY&t=1972s>). The primary analytical unit of the scheme is the “sex scene.” This film has 13 sex scenes, and this article only takes the female protagonist—Yu Hong’s sex scenes (n = 10) as the data for analysis, and the specific data and corpus are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** The Yu Hong's sex scenes in *Summer Palace* (2006)

Sex scene number (SSN)	Time code
1	0:07:41–0:11:24
2	0:25:53–0:27:29
3	0:28:28–0:31:16
4	0:32:34–0:32:53
5	0:35:28–0:37:01
6	0:49:57–0:50:20
7	1:18:01–1:23:18
8	1:37:30–1:39:32
9	1:39:33–1:39:51
10	2:05:00–2:09:03

**Figure 1** Multimodal construction of Yu Hong's body attributes in the film.

Source: Illustrated by the authors, adapted from Feng (2016).

This study draws upon the method of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). MCDA can assess power relations and ideologies (Fairclough 2013) behind female characters' body attributes in the film. Cinematic discourse is a complex, integrated, socially and culturally conditioned mental-communicative phenomenon that is polycoded and multimodal and whose structure is defined by a combination of linguistic and non-lingual codes (O'Halloran et al. 2011). Therefore, we consider that the complex symbolisation process of Yu's body should be evaluated based on the systematic analysis of MCDA (van Dijk 2007). This article draws on a systematic framework proposed by Feng (2016); Figure 1 depicts the film's multimodal construction of Yu's body attributes.

The framework focuses on verbal resources and visual depictions generated in a "field of meaning" (Machin and Mayr 2012) in which meaning can be repressed (backgrounded) or foregrounded. The framework distinguishes between a character's articulated (verbal resources) and embedded (visual depictions). Articulation, whether in film subtitles or character speech, can be further classified as explicit or implicit. Explicit articulation relates to attitudinal lexis, whereas implicit articulation relies on facts or actions that lead to a certain meaning. At the same time, Yu's body attributes are also constructed by embedding in the visual depiction can be further categorised into the actional and analytical processes. Visual constructs have a strong capacity for insinuation because they frequently allow power and ideology to masquerade as objective representations in multimodal texts (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The actional process refers to what Yu does in the film (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006); the analytical process refers to the parts that make up Yu, such as her facial expressions and body posture.

The data analysis method combines identifying body attributes with examining how they are discursively manifested, making the analysis more explicit and reliable (Bateman and Schmidt, 2012). Every

time we built an attribute using verbal text or visual images, it was recorded in the data set's coding. Only one code was recorded when verbal and visual elements in the same shot jointly constructed the same attribute. The authors independently co-coded the film text, and differences in the coding results were resolved through discussion.

## **ANALYSIS: COMMUNICATION**

Lou constructs a complex system of communication—using the body to express self-consciousness and the diary to express the body. The sex scenes that reflect the body as a communication carrier are sex scene number (SSN) 2 and 8. In SSN 8, the actional process in visual depictions is Yu and Wu Gang having sex in a cramped and dark toilet (Figure 2). The analytical process is Yu's sad facial expression. In terms of verbal expressions, she explicitly expresses her definition of her body in sexuality by voice-over, "Zhou Wei, why am I always so anxious to make love with the men in my life? Because it's only when we make love that you understand that I'm gentle. I've tried countless ways. In the end, I've chosen this very special, very direct path."

According to Yu's voice-over, the female body serves as a carrier for communication, a subject of desire to express self-consciousness, thereby constructing the feminine discourse. Because "discourse would have to be seen as the form of language in which claims to validity are founded" (Frank and Ebrary 2004). Lou's protagonists do not have many dialogues and communicate poorly with the outside world (Han 2013). Yu is eager to communicate with men in the spiritual world, but this desire consistently hits a wall. She even invites Mr. Tang to read her diary to understand her but is refused. As in the movement, students had difficulty communicating with the government, which they were eager to do. However, "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find the language of our body, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story" (Irigaray 1985). Thus, Yu discovered a kind of body language—sexual intercourse; through body language, she desires and fantasy to complete the expression of self-consciousness and a political vision of democracy and freedom. Fantasy drives her compulsively to wander through different physical spaces, bodies, and multiple sexual relationships. As she says, "there is no way out, only fantasy, and fantasy is a deadly thing."

The film constructs female subjectivity against gender marginalisation through feminine discourse. The feminine discourse (voice-over) adopts Yu's first-person narrative, establishing the female subjectivity that breaks the male gaze and androcentrism. In SSN 2, the actional process is Yu and Zhou Wei having sex in the dormitory; Yu explicitly expresses by voice-over (diary), "he is the man I always dreamed of meeting. It's as if I've always been waiting for him." The narrative in sex scenes is told in the position of "I"; the female character becomes the narrative subject. The discourse is generated by Yu's body "controlling, selecting, organising and redistributing" male roles to produce a female "norm" (Norris 1983). Foucault defines "discourse" as "a form of oppression that does not require physical force" (Norris 1983). Thus, feminine discourse constructs female subjectivity, which leads to the female body no longer receiving the male gaze as in traditional narratives. The role of the different male characters' bodies in sex scenes, such as comforting her, satisfying her libido, or fulfilling her search for romance, are all referred to as "he" in the third person. The male characters' "docile bodies" become objects of her gaze, under the admonition of female power, and accept her discipline.

Yu's diary is an essential prop for interpreting/writing the body in the sex scenes, as conveyed through voice-over narration. One of the primary goals of the student movement was to achieve the freedom of the written word—the written body is politicised in the sex scene (Zuo 2019). The students formulated a set of demands for the government amidst the protests, wherein one of the demands pertained to "allow privately run newspapers and stop press censorship" (Zhao 2001). As Yu says, "the most frightening thing happened again. I couldn't sit still or remain calm. I wanted to keep writing." The act of writing a diary is a manifestation of the freedom of the written word, which Lou places within the complex communication system. The film eroticises Yu's political yearning, using her body as a carrier of communication to express self-consciousness, constructing female subjectivity through the writing of feminine discourse to construct female subjectivity, with the political purpose of seeking the freedom of the written word.

## **Transgression**

The film uses Yu's transgressive body as a site of anti-government political mobilisation, seeking sexual liberation through a rebellion against inherent power relations—the establishment of extreme or radical "new norm." The transgressive body goes beyond the rules institutionalised in practises, subverting them in concrete interactions (Monceri 2012); SSN 5 and 7 represent Yu's transgressive body. In SSN 7, the actional process is Yu and the married Mr. Tang having crazy sex; she explicitly expresses, "a colleague who knows the law

told me that our affair isn't illegal, but immoral" (Figure 3). Sex with a married man is defined as transgressive practice—it is often labelled as "immoral" or "indecent" (Monceri 2012). Foucault (1978) defines extramarital affairs and other sexual promiscuities as a "world of perversion" induced by a heightened curiosity about sexuality. Transgression is the outcome of "an individual exercise of the power to construct rules and establish them as a new norm, a power that does not need to be recognised by those who conform to be legitimated" (Monceri 2012). Therefore, Yu establishes a "new norm": "two people together. I think that's morality." The body is not static; it interacts in space and time (Monceri 2012). The transgressive practice or this difference is resistance to the dominant discourse, as in the context of the film—the student revolution.

The "immoral new norm" established through the transgressive body is a metaphor for sexual liberation and anti-government, as political meaning had been infused into students' sexual activities. The demonstrator argues that "political changes are preconditioned by personal and sexual liberation; sex was somehow an anti-government activity" (Shen 2021). In SSN 5, the actional process is Yu communicating with Zhou Wei after making love to him; she explicitly expresses, "you should get circumcised... It would hurt less. My psychology tutor (told me this) because I slept with him." The scene takes place before the movement, sexual activities among students were part of university life in Beijing and a recurring theme in contemporary accounts about the student movement. Student sexual activity constituted a deviant or rebellious act (Shen and Yen 2001).

However, the chaotic and anarchic circumstances irritated students politically, emotionally, physically, and sexually (Shen 2021). Students gradually overcame moral restraints and initiated sexual orgies—she maintains a romantic relationship with Zhou Wei but sleeps with her psychology tutor. The demonstrator said, "In my memory, what happened that year in Beijing, at Tiananmen Square, and on campus was the first sexual liberation movement in New China" (Feigon 1990). The student political movement is preconditioned by personal and sexual liberation: "Since we lived in a restrictive society, I naturally felt that having sex was somehow an anti-government activity. I already believed that before we could change society, we had to change ourselves, and for me, sex was part of that" (Shen and Yen 2001). Thus, the director puts Yu's transgressive body in multiple sexual relationships that are chaotic, pathological, disturbing and "immoral." Sexual liberation is sought through the establishment of a grotesque "new normal" that is not accepted by the mainstream and opposes the inherent power of government.

## **Pleasure**

The pleasure of the female body is emphasised in the film, which is a figurative bodily practice of sexual liberation. The pursuit of bodily pleasure is infinite—it can seem to be sustained by heterosexual relationships, or it can come close through politicised ecstasy and masturbation to achieve the kind of ethical finitude that intimacy promises. In SSN 6, the visual depictions are Yu teaches her roommate, Dong Dong to masturbate; her hand guides Dong Dong's hand to explore bodily pleasures (Figure 4). The repression of bodily pleasure is the beginning of all other repressions (Li 2003). Yu does not repress the pleasure that sex brings to the body, as described by feminist Leclerc (1995), "it will be necessary for me to speak of the joys of my sex... the joy of my woman's belly, my woman's vagina, my woman's breasts, sumptuous joys of which you have no idea." In the grips of bodily pleasure, Yu's voice-over describes students assembling at Tiananmen Square, and frantic images depict Yu with her friends leaping onto a worker's truck-bed and excitedly singing. Students with exuberant smiles carrying placards and marching through the streets are seen on camera demonstrating. The bodily pleasure and culmination of political movement sutured together—the expression of a narcissistic individualism through bodily pleasure, resulting in a vision of political ecstasy (Zuo 2019). Political participation is gendered as female labour, resisting "justice" and coital collectivity through the female body in sexual discourse.

Pursuing bodily pleasure can also be maintained through heterosexual relationships, as in SSN 3. The actional process in visual depictions is Yu having sex with Zhou Wei; the analytical process is Yu putting headphones into Zhou Wei's ears, and her facial expressions become more engaged, submerged, and enjoyable. Verbal expressions are missing, leaving only her experience of bodily pleasure and romantic intercourse. Yu's sexual intercourse with different men of the opposite sex recurs throughout the film, and not every collective orgy and moaning is related to bodily pleasure or ecstatic. The bodily pleasure maintained through a heterosexual relationship is only embodied in Zhou Wei because she only loves Zhou, the only man accompanying her in the student movement. Nevertheless, she never gives up on exploring bodily pleasure and political ecstasy, even though the dissipation of ethical erotic practises follows the failure of the Tiananmen protests. She says, "I'm living in an unbearable situation, and my heart is heavy... but despite that, I'm able to comfort myself at will. I have a talent for that. I still have a future."

## Melancholy

The body attribute of Yu in most of the sex scenes is melancholy, and they are distributed in SSN 1, 4, 9 and 10. Such melancholy is a metaphor for the discomfort and confusion that preceded the student movement—the absence of orgasm places political desire under the precondition of a failure of body and sexual liberation in the film; after the failure of the student movement, the post-traumatic ambivalence led to a messy enervation of melancholy body, thus attempting to fill the void left by a failed revolution.

When the film begins, in 1987, Yu receives admission to Beijing University from her boyfriend Xiaojun, the local mailman, in the border town of Tumen in Northeast China. The following sex scene in Tumen introduces the violence and melancholy that will be fully developed in Beijing. Lou explained, “we originally wanted to start the story in the north and progress along a north–south axis, a parallel of overall development in China” (Levy 2008). Before Yu departs, they argue with some youths on the basketball court, and Xiaojun receives a beating. In the visual depiction of SSN 1, the actional process is Yu and Xiaojun’s eager and passionate kissing and simulated sexual intercourse; the analytical process is her confused and melancholy facial expressions and unnatural body postures. There are no verbal expressions; the sex scene lacks elation or orgasm.

Like SSN 4, the actional process shows Yu and Zhou Wei lying naked on the bed after intercourse. The camera focuses on the analytical process—Yu’s melancholy facial expression as she explicitly expresses, “I want us to break up” (Figure 5). Both two scenes predate the student movement. The revolutionary promise of intercourse without orgasm is presented repeatedly throughout the film. Orgasm is an “ecstatic paroxysm where subjectivity and the ‘I’ decentralise in order to become totalised in mutual voluptuousness” (Dussel 2003). When the body and sex are used to exhaust politics, the female body’s inability to achieve orgasm indicates that political engagement is gendered as unrewarding female labour (Zuo 2019). The absence of ecstatic paroxysm sets political desire under the precondition of democratic impossibility—neither China nor Yu is liberated in the film.

The post-Tiananmen melancholy is a condition of impossible and uncertainty—trauma, nihilism, exhaustion. Life for Yu broke into a sluggish torpor—she suffers the “dual betrayal” of political trauma and Zhou Wei’s affair with her friend. The “dual betrayal” led to a “subsequent downward spiral of sex and nihilistic self-destruction,” which invoked “the post-traumatic replaying of the lingering fantasies and nightmares of 1989” (Berry 2008). She dropped out of Beijing University after the failed student movement and travelled aimlessly from Tumen to Shenzhen, Wuhan, and Chongqing (Shen 2021).

In the visual depiction of SSN 9, the actional process is Yu and Wu Gang lying naked on the bed after sexual intercourse; the analytical process is her melancholic facial expression. Her compulsive and unconscious sexuality leads to abortion; once a promising student, Yu is now “inching forward in peace.” Her fate mirrors the bleak outlook of the Tiananmen generation after university, suspected of being politically unreliable (Shen 2021). The failure of the student movement permeated the entire mood; the exploration of sexual experimentation and bodily autonomy was consequently traumatic (Zuo 2019).

In the visual depiction of SSN 10, the actional process is Yu and Zhou Wei finally meet and engage in foreplay in a depressing motel room. The analytical process is her melancholy facial expression as Zhou wearily grasps her breasts (Figure 6). Verbal expressions flee as nothing can express the state of impossibility and uncertainty. Yu’s melancholy body bears her political grief as an unsettling appendage reflects the post-traumatic ambivalence, mocking the nihilism saturated in a state of tedious waiting.

## CONCLUSION

In *Summer Palace* (2006), Lou constructs a body politic by using the female body in sex scenes, metaphors the sensitive and traumatic 6/4. The findings indicate that body attributes of Yu include communication, transgression, pleasure, and melancholy.

Firstly, Lou constructs a complex system of communication; that eroticises Yu’s political yearning, using her body as a carrier of communication to express self-consciousness, constructing female subjectivity through the writing of feminine discourse, with the political purpose of seeking one of the primary demands of the student movement—the freedom of the written word.

Secondly, the film uses Yu’s transgressive body in multiple sexual relationships that are chaotic, pathological, disturbing and “immoral” as a site of anti-government political mobilisation. Sexual liberation is sought by establishing a grotesque “new normal” that is not accepted by the mainstream and opposes the inherent power of government.



Thirdly, the pleasure of the female body is emphasised in the film, which is a figurative bodily practice of sexual liberation. The pursuit of bodily pleasure is infinite—it can seem to be sustained by heterosexual relationships, or it can come close to achieving the kind of ethical finitude intimacy promises through politicised ecstasy and masturbation. The expression of narcissistic individualism through bodily pleasure produces a vision of political ecstasy that combines with the joy of the hopeful body to re-imagine the collectivity and justice of sexual intercourse.

Finally, Yu's body attribute in most sex scenes is melancholy. Such melancholy is a metaphor for the discomfort and confusion that preceded the student movement—the absence of orgasm places political desire under the precondition of a failure of body and sexual liberation in the film; sexual liberation failed with the student movement, the post-traumatic ambivalence led to a messy enervation of melancholy body, thus attempting to fill the void left by a failed revolution. Nihilism and compulsive sexual intercourse become a technique of escape and instability, a continual delay of comprehension, producing a passive resistance in waiting for that does not recognise a static present and anticipates a future.

Using the female body as a site of political discourse and sexual liberation offers a new reading strategy for analysing the representation of the female body in film and other forms of media. Under China's particular cultural context and film censorship policy, Yu's body is a seminal symbol of women's liberation in Chinese cinema. As a medium for conveying a woman's feelings, the body attests to memory and knowledge production in political-historical hypomnesia; sexuality expresses female consciousness in feminine discourse, thereby constructing female subjectivity and the body politic.

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