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Imagem [modificada]: Vivian Wu in movie scene *Dead Pigs* (Cathy Yan, 2018): Credit: <https://www.asiancinevision.org/interview-cathy-yan-dead-pigs/>.

Impacts of Feminism on Mainland Chinese Cinema: Gender, Class and Women's Representations

Impactos do Feminismo no Cinema da China Continental: gênero, classe e representações femininas

Marina Soler Jorge*

ABSTRACT

In this paper we intend to think about the influence of feminism on the cinema of mainland China, elaborating, first of all, an overview of the female presence in classical cinema and in the Maoist era cinema. Next, we will analyze the film *Dead Pigs* (2018), a Sino-American co-production directed by filmmaker Cathy Yan, seeking to identify critical positions to certain capitalist and masculinist values that have developed in China since the opening of the economy in 1978. Our methodology unites the review of the relevant bibliography, whether on cinema or on contemporary China, with emphasis on Zheng Wang, and also film analysis. Our hypothesis is that, by showing the intertwining of capitalist and masculinist values that permeates contemporary Chinese society, Cathy Yan updates the legacy of Chinese cinema feminism, which at important moments in its history was able to elaborate an inseparably feminist and class critique.

KEYWORDS

Feminism. China. Chinese cinema. *Dead Pigs*. Economic opening.

RESUMO

Neste artigo pretendemos pensar a influência do feminismo no cinema da China continental elaborando, em primeiro lugar, um panorama sobre a presença feminina no cinema desse país no período clássico e na era maoísta. Em seguida analisaremos o filme *Dead Pigs* (2018), uma co-produção sino-estadunidense dirigida pela cineasta Cathy Yan, procurando identificar posturas críticas a certos valores capitalistas e masculinistas que se desenvolvem na China desde a abertura econômica em 1978. Nossa metodologia une a revisão da bibliografia concernente, seja sobre cinema seja sobre a China contemporânea, com destaque para Zheng Wang, e também a análise fílmica. Nossa hipótese é que, ao mostrar o imbricamento de valores capitalistas e masculinistas

que permeia a sociedade contemporânea chinesa, Cathy Yan, de certa forma, atualiza o legado do feminismo do cinema chinês, que em momentos importantes de sua história soube elaborar uma crítica indissociavelmente feminista e classista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Feminismo. China. Cinema chinês. Dead Pigs. Abertura econômica.

Introduction

Discussing the impact of feminism in mainland China is both challenging and stimulating. On the one hand, this is a country that went through a communist revolution in 1949, which was strongly inspired by feminist ideas aimed to extinguish the prevailing gender inequality within traditional Chinese society. These ideas clearly appeared in the cinema of Maoist China, which was considered by the Chinese Communist Party as absolutely strategic to disseminate the new communist values, and in which strong and fearless revolutionary feminist characters abounded. On the other hand, progressively since 1978, with the closing of the era of Chairman Mao ZeDong and the beginning of the economic opening, China progressively engaged in a process of conspicuous consumption, creation of social hierarchies, and economic as well as symbolic distinction of social classes. This process was associated with a masculinist vision that rejected some of the feminist ideas of Maoist China and advocated for a reestablishment of more conservative gender representations, with less “masculinized” women. The market opening brings the culture of contemporary China closer to those of capitalist countries, with the influence, for example, of a mainstream or hegemonic feminism, which can be seen, for instance, in Zheng Wang’s analysis of current Chinese women’s magazines (Wang,

2017). Like several other elements of Maoist China, the radicalism of some of its feminist ideas has become something curious and exotic, which no longer suits contemporary China.

The first part of this paper proposes an overview of the impacts of feminism on Mainland Chinese cinema, from classical cinema to Maoist-era cinema. Aspects of female representation and also the participation of women in the formulation of guidelines for the cinema in China are proposed. In the second part of the paper, we analyze *Dead Pigs* (Cathy Yan, 2018), a film made by a Chinese-American director, which addresses moral issues arising from the masculinist aspects of the post-1978 economic opening, and creates female characters who either offer counterpoint or take on awareness of these issues. Although not overtly feminist, this movie's propositions allows us to consider how gender and class are articulated within a society that has been defined by the incorporation and subsequent critique of certain values associated with market economy. *Feminismo na China e sua influência no cinema chinês*

Feminism in China and its influence on Chinese cinema

Literature on mainland China considers that feminism first arrived in the country in the early 20th century, along with a series of modernizing social movements that sought to bring China out of its international isolation and transform it on a social and political basis¹. The first decades of the 20th century saw the creation of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 1921), which would guide China's anti-imperialist struggle against foreign domination and the movement for the modernization of the country. Women's emancipation was part of the modern and progressive worldview presented by the May Fourth Movement (Wang, 2017: 4) and the CCP, which strongly opposed the

patriarchal culture of Chinese society – still very rural and traditional.

The CCP openly advocated gender equality and became a space of refuge for many women fleeing the oppression of Chinese patriarchy. According to Zheng Wang, “while not every Communist woman was necessarily a conscious feminist (...), each would feel attracted to and empowered by the CCP’s slogan of equality between men and women” (Wang, 2017:11). The party’s appeal was so great among Chinese women that, according to Wang, Chiang Kai-shek² reportedly lamented that all women preferred the CCP to the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) (Wang, 2017:11).

Feminism, therefore, exerted a profound influence on the political movements that transformed China in the early 20th century and led to the creation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. It was strongly tied to anti-imperialist, anti-classist, and, above all, anti-feudal ideas. In relation to anti-feudalism, one of the most important banners of the Chinese communists, it was considered that China needed to free itself from the feudal patriarchal system, based on arranged marriages and patrilineality.

When the Communists gained power in 1949, the first law passed in the new PRC was the Marriage Act of 1950 (Wang, 1991: 177), which shows the strength of feminist ideas in China at the time. The Marriage Act prohibited practices hitherto common in the country, such as concubinage, child betrothal, and family interference in the choice of partners. It also established that men and women were equal before the law, which made it, according to Wolf, more radical than U.S. legislation at the same time (Wolf, 1985: 144). According to Jiexiang Wang (Wang, 1991: 177), future revisions of the Marriage Act have deepened the principle of equality between men and women, but the author points out that although the situation of Chinese women has greatly improved since 1949, the existence of legislation does not always guarantee effective equality.

Modernizing and feminist ideas strongly influenced cinema in China as early as the 1930s. Western spectators who encounter the classical

Chinese cinema will probably be surprised by the heroines who acted as the protagonists of those narratives. It was a cinema of clear leftist and feminist inspiration that contested the gloss and glamour of Hollywood films (as did other national cinematographies in the 1930s) and often depicted strong women fighting against the Japanese invasion, as in the film *The Big Road* (Da lu, 大路, Sun Yu, 1934), and women who were victims of social or gender inequality, whose trajectories were exemplary of the female condition, as in the film *Spring in a Small Town* (Xiaocheng zhi chun, 小城之春, Fei Mu, 1948). Fei Mu, 1948). Other relevant films of the period with female protagonism are *Sports Queen* (Tǐ yù huánghòu 體育皇后, Sun Yu, 1934), *Goddess* (Shénnǚ, 神女, Wu Yonggang, 1934) e *New Women* (Xīn nǚ xìng 新女性, Cai Chusheng, 1935), which portray a very modern vision of femininity.

In *Sports Queen* we meet Lin Ying, a young runner. She is introduced by her aunt to a possible future husband but prefers to enroll in a school for women athletes and dedicate herself to athletics. The film extols the practice of sports within a hygienist vision of improving the nation's social body, and values especially the women who put it into action. The individualistic "bourgeois" competition, typical of professional sporting events, however, is not celebrated, but rather sport as an expression of collectivity. Li Lili, the actress who plays Lin Ying, was herself a sportswoman (she was even considered to have muscles, which did not fit in the standard female beauty of the time).

In *Goddess* we follow the efforts of a prostitute from the streets of Shanghai, played by star Ruan Lingyu, to raise her young son by herself. As a single mother, she prostitutes herself to pay for the boy's education. Although she is an excellent mother and the boy is a diligent, loving, and obedient boy, he is expelled from school when the other mothers find out about her occupation. The film stresses the importance of education in promoting social equality and argues that prostitution is not a question of morality, but rather a social issue. Ruan Lingyu's performance should place

her among the greatest actresses of classical cinema, but the film was made in China and, therefore, not broadly seen by the creators of the world's artistic canons. Film historian Mark Cousins, director of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* series, believes that Ruan Lingyu invented naturalistic acting decades before Marlon Brando, but film history has not given due credit to her performance (2011, episode 3).

Meanwhile, *New Women* is perhaps the film that best exemplifies the influence of feminist ideas in pre-revolutionary China. According to Christopher Rea,

New Women was conceived of and marketed as a 'problem film' about 'the woman question' (...). As presented in the film, the woman question is really a series of questions: What is the current reality of women's status in China? Who are China's new women? And what should their lives be like?" (Rea, 2021: 156-157).

In the 1930s, female emancipation was the order of the day in China and clashed to a great extent with traditional Confucian moral values. At the same time, a "vibrant star culture, which turned glamorous and fashionable young women into fetish objects" (Rea, 2021: 157) was emerging in China. In *New Women*, Ruan Lingyu plays Wei Ming, a writer who, despite her clear talent, cannot succeed professionally because she does not agree with the objectified exploitation of her body. In a society that is still very prejudiced, she has to hide the fact that she is a single mother and leaves her daughter in the care of her sister. Wei rejects the sexual advances of an important man and is publicly vilified by him. At the same time, her daughter falls ill, and she has no money to buy medicine. Shaken by the slander and desperate for her daughter's situation, she commits suicide.

The most impactful fact associated with the film, and which relates to feminism in China, occurred off screen. *New Women* was inspired by the real-life suicide of actress Ai Xia, who swallowed opium after having her private life scrutinized by the press. The film opened on February 7, 1935,

and attracted media attention for its modern theme and the presence of star Ruan Lingyu, at that time known as China's most famous actress. Soon the press turned their attention not only to the film, but to Ruan Lingyu's private life, publicly exposing her personal problems. Depressed by press gossip, Ruan Lingyu commits suicide one month after the film's release, on March 8, 1935, International Women's Day, a date purposely chosen by the actress. Her funeral was considered by the *New York Times* to be the largest of the century and, according to Mark Cousins, three women also committed suicide while accompanying the procession³.

These three films clearly express the influence of feminism in China, embedded in broader social and political transformations that took place in the country aimed at its "modernization". This influence is translated mainly in the presence on screen of emancipated female characters, fighters or victims of gender inequalities. However, they were not directed by women, but by men sympathetic to feminist causes. Women stood out as actresses and were worshiped by the audiences, but the existence of a star system was an ambiguous achievement because, if on the one hand it showed that women achieved a professional space and recognition, on the other hand it made explicit that such recognition was linked to the objectification of their bodies. At that time, the actress and leftist activist Chen Bo'er, 28 years old, herself a rising movie star, elaborates a criticism that can be regarded as quite radical to the situation of women in Chinese cinema, anticipating in many decades what would be called "male gaze" by Laura Mulvey (1989):

In 1936, an essay entitled "The Female-Centered Film and the Male-Centered Society" appeared in *Women's Life*, a leftist-oriented feminist magazine published in Shanghai. The author [Chen Bo'er] cautioned readers not to take the popularity of female movie stars as an indicator of women's liberation, and then proceeded to present a critical analysis of unequal power relations in a male-dominated capitalist society in which the film industry was reducing female actors to sex objects catering to male desires (Wang, 2017: 1).

Linda Nochlin (2016), in the influential essay “Why have there been no great women artists”, first published in 1971, faced with the realization that no female artists in art history are equivalent to great male artists such as Michelangelo and Picasso, explains that the first reaction of feminists to this realization is an attempt “to dig up examples of insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; to rehabilitate modest, if interesting and productive, careers” (Nochlin, 2016: 3). Nochlin’s entire argumentation in her essay seeks to show that strategies like this fail to touch the heart of the problem, which lies not only in the obvious barriers that patriarchal society imposes on women-exclusion from art schools, double shifts, essentialisms around sex differences, etc. – but above all in our own conception of art. In our view, this does not invalidate the research that attempts to rescue from invisibility women who played a creative role in the history of art. These women existed and many were somehow excluded from the history of art, as shown, for example, by the recent (re)discovery of Alice Guy-Blaché (1873-1968), one of the first filmmakers to direct a fiction film in the history of cinema – *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896) – and the first to make a film with black actors and actresses without the use of blackface.

Regarding Chinese cinema, Cecilia Mello’s essay “Half the Sky: Women and the Cinema of Mainland China” (2019) lists some female filmmakers who have produced films since silent cinema while many of them still demand subsequent research so that their contribution to Chinese and the world cinema can be pointed out. For instance, as quoted by Mello, Xie Caizhen⁴, stands for the first Woman to direct a film (now lost) in 1925 China; Wang Hanlun⁵, actress who co-directed a film in 1929; Chen Bo’er, Wang Ping⁶ and Dong Kena⁷, who were active in the PRC film industry; Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, who gave the guidelines for Chinese cinema during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); Zhang Nuanxin⁸, Huang Shuqin⁹ and Wang Haowei¹⁰, directors who were active in the 1980s and 1990s; and Li Yu, a pioneer in lesbian cinema in mainland China with films released in

the early years of the Twenty-First century (Mello, 2019: 221). In addition to the filmmakers listed by Mello, more recent ones can be mentioned: Ruoxin Yin, who directed *Sister* (*Wǒ de jiějiě*, 我的姐姐, 2021), a family drama that led to a huge repercussion in China by telling the story of a young girl ignored all her life by her parents due to having been born a woman and who now finds herself obliged to take care of her little brother; and Xinyuan Zheng Lu, director of *The Cloud in Her Room* (*Tā fángjiān lǐ de yún*, 他房间里的云, 2020), an independent art cinema-style film (Bordwell, 2013) in which a young girl spends her vacation with her separated parents and has to deal with the different families as well as with a boy she likes.

Synthesized in Mello's text, this effort to shed light on female artists who effectively worked in Chinese cinema is valid and relevant, since we know that the erasure of women is frequent in an art history that is itself generified and masculinist. We will now try to advance in the issue of feminist influence in the Chinese mainland cinema based on Linda Nochlin's notes because the core of her answer to the non-existence of great female artists is closely related to the conceptions of cinema that were being developed in the PRC. Nochlin says:

The question "Why have there been no great women artists?" is simply the top tenth of an iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception; beneath lies a vast dark bulk of shaky ideas recues about the nature of art and its situational concomitants, about the nature of human abilities in general and of human excellence in particular, and the role that the social order plays in all of this (...). the Great Artist is, of course, conceived of as one who has "Genius"; Genius, in turn, is thought of as an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist (Nochlin, 2016: 13-14).

From Nochlin's text, it may be inferred that the very notion of authorship – as the one of geniality – is generified, created and imbricated in masculinist standpoints that associate the noteworthy artistic feat with the male gender. In theory, therefore, we are in a kind of contradiction as we

search for female authorship, since the concept of authorship is masculinist as well as the idea of artistic genius. Feminist texts such as Linda Nochlin's and Laura Mulvey's influential feminist film theory reached mainland China in the 1980s (Jin, 2007: 8). Meanwhile, the questioning of the concept of authorship and of classical cinema as a producer of male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) permeated China's film culture¹¹ as early as in the pre- and post-1949 period. In addition, the ideas of individual authorship and creative genius in the PRC were not only masculinist, but also bourgeois. In effect, the sociology of art shows the bourgeois genealogy of concepts of authorship and genius in the materialist sense, that is, in its historical connection with the development of the modern era, the rise of the notion of the individual and the autonomization of the artistic fields (Bourdieu, 1996). Within a conception that remains very powerful nowadays, feminist, classist, and anti-imperialist issues were absolutely connected with the militancy of Chinese women in the PRC – so that individualized artistic production, which stands for the expression of creative genius, was put into question by both feminist and anti-capitalist points of view.

Zheng Wang's research for the book *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China* demonstrates that the conception of feminism, the militant style, and the political strategies of Chinese communist feminists placed the notions of authorship and creative genius in the background. This poses a problem for historiography, since many women who were active on the cultural front along with the CCP are unknown to us in this process of revolutionary self-cancellation. Therefore it is often inferred that they did not exist. A great many Chinese films from the Maoist era, such as *Daughters of China* (Zhonghua nuer 中华女儿, Zifeng Ling e Qiang Zhai, 1949), *The White Haired Girl* (Bai mao nü, 白毛女, Chou Khoua e Bin Wang, 1951) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (Hong se niang zi jun, 红色娘子军, Jin Xie, 1961), intensify the use of strong female protagonists on the scene – a trend found as early as in the 1930s and 1940s

–, and now they are effectively revolutionary heroines who rise up and take up weapons against social injustices, and whose bodies are depicted without objectification. Were all these films products of the subjectivity of male directors sympathetic to the female cause?

In the process of producing a cinema that would value the revolutionary contribution of women to society, the PRC artist/filmmaker should engage in a collective effort to create an art form compatible with communism. As presented by Wang, such a process was not free from contradictions, since, as Nochlin rightly demonstrates, it is an entire conception of artistic making that leads to a belief, in Bourdieu's terms, in the oneness of the uncreated creator (Bourdieu: 1983). Even viewers who are politically critical of the capitalist order find it difficult to deal with the idea of an art that does not stem from the artistic freedom of a creative genius. Therefore, all art made under the direction of communist parties is virtually devalued by specialized critics as means of propaganda. The bourgeois worldview identifies the freedom of artistic making with artistic making itself, and so there seems to be no true art when it is not free. The contradictions between the freedom of the artist and revolutionary requirements also appeared in China – and the Cultural Revolution of 1966 does not seem to have provided us with a reasonable alternative in its attempt to abolish all art based on individual creative perspectives as well as to extinguish the very division between manual and intellectual labor.

Zheng Wang shows us that Chinese feminists strategically concealed their struggles within the Party's dominant agendas: once aware of the resistance of a significant number of men, even if communists, these women adopted a discrete way of action within the Party and the state, which Wang calls "politics of concealment". Such strategy avoided shedding light directly on feminist issues and inserted them within the concerns that could be more immediately identified with communism¹². According to Wang, "Anonymity was a key principle in the politics of concealment, with

the result that many effective state feminists, willing to be self-effacing in order to advance women's interests, are unknown to us." (Wang, 2017: 246). This led to the belief that the history of the PRC has been completely dominated by male characters: "Receding into the shadows, socialist state feminists contributed to the myth of a monolithic patriarchal party-state that sporadically showed benevolence toward women (Wang, 2017: 18).

In the PRC, cinema was an extremely important tool for the solidification of revolutionary ideas in a huge country, not least because a large part of the population was still illiterate, and it was also "a crucial tool in their feminist transformation of an ancient 'feudalist culture'" (Wang, 2017: 143). Willing to understand the female contribution to the Chinese cinema in the Maoist era, Wang realized that the name under the direction of a film does not necessarily reflect a creative artistic power, considering the politics of concealment and the communist view of cinema as a collective making subject to the values of the PPC. Several researchers, she continues, especially Western ones, have noted the existence of "a vast range of films centering on representations of revolutionary heroines in both war and peace that constituted a prominent feature of socialist culture" (Wang, 2017: 15). However, such researchers did not seek to learn about the behind-the-scenes production of these films, which led them to believe that they were rather individual works by male directors than collective efforts in which women made key decisions. Zheng Wang's warning is important, since film researchers tend to focus too immediately on the name of the director or female director by associating it without further problematization to the absolute core of artistic creation.

In the Chinese Maoist context, in which cinema is part of a state project and in which, according to Wang, feminists are quietly operating within the state, it is important to understand how the directives and struggles that permeate the film industry play out. Therefore, in order to answer Linda Nochlin's question about why there have been no great women filmmakers

in the People's Republic of China, perhaps we should look at something beyond the figure of the filmmaker. However, perhaps Wang's warning is valid for the whole world cinema, since in our desperation to try to find women filmmakers who have not yet been well enough known, as Nochlin puts it, we lack attention to those who have actually engaged in filmmaking, whether as writers, producers, photographers, art directors, and actresses.

One of the cases studied by Zheng Wang in the film industry is that of Chen Bo'er (1907-1951), as we have mentioned before, and who worked as an actress, activist, screenwriter, and producer. According to Wang, Chen Bo'er worked intensively behind the scenes of Chinese film production: along with CCP leaders, she articulated the aesthetic and content guidelines of the country's cinema, even though she did not direct any films herself. Chen Bo'er's conceptions of a communist cinema with a female protagonism was present throughout Maoist China until the Cultural Revolution so that films directed by men express guidelines created under her leadership. According to Wang,

Chen Bo'er's life history is emblematic of the erasure of the socialist feminist cultural front. Film studies in and outside China have shown remarkably little interest in her, despite the fact that she was one of the most important figures in the film industry in the early PRC. A famous movie star and renowned feminist social activist during the 1930s, Party secretary of the CCP's first state-owned film studio in 1946, director of the art department of the Central Film Bureau and the founder of the Beijing Film Academy upon the establishment of the PRC, Chen Bo'er played a major role in shaping socialist filmmaking in revolutionary China (Wang, 2017: 143).

Chen Bo'er had a heart condition and died at the age of 44, but the influence of her ideas in the PRC cinema endured until the Cultural Revolution and were espoused especially by screenwriter Xia Yan (1900-1995). When Jiang Qing (1914-1991), the infamous wife of Mao Zedong, takes over the cultural sector of the PRC, the influence of Xia Yan and the ideas of

Chen Bo'er were abandoned, and Jiang Qing became the major formulator of PRC cultural policy. According to Wang, Jiang Qing's film heroines were a sheer continuation of those of Chen Bo'er. In essence, however, they differed in the sense that the revolutionary takeover of Chen Bo'er's characters was always linked to a gender issue (the escape from a gender oppressive situation, for instance), or in the sense that these heroines had to deal with issues concerning womanhood, such as reconciling motherhood and militancy. Jiang Qing would have erased this trait from her protagonists, so that the gender issue was subsumed and erased by class struggle (Wang, 2017: 217).

Before we leave Zheng Wang, it will be important to appropriate her critique of the backlash of Chinese feminism upon Deng Xiaoping's (1904 - 1997) economic opening in 1978, as this will be important for the analysis of the film presented in the second part of this paper. We will not call into question the importance of China's entry into the market economy in solving some of the manifold Chinese social and economic issues. The problem Wang points out is that the opening was accompanied by a devaluation of Maoist-era feminist struggles in the name of a return to a more "natural" femininity. It evolved from celebrating the strong women of China that abounded in revolutionary films to a denunciation that this image masculinized and desexualized women. It was regretted that women had gained muscles under working in the fields (Wang, 2017: 239), which seems a step backwards even from the 1930s, when actress Li Lili's small muscles were celebrated. According to Wang, however, a sense of masculinization never manifested itself among the women who lived in Maoist China; rather, there was a pride among these women in performing the same tasks as a man (Wang, 2017: 236).

The denunciation of the masculinization of women in Maoist China and the erasure of genders can be found, for example, in a book that deals with female representation in Chinese cinema. The author, Shuqin

Cui, acknowledges the importance of female protagonists in Maoist-era cinema, but laments what she saw as an erasure of the femininity of these characters, a process that in Judith Butler's time (2018) would be vividly celebrated: "the emancipation of women is concomitant with a process of gender erasure. Female sexuality or the sensuality of the female body is replaced by a genderless and sexless symbol that signifies the sociopolitical collectivity" (Cui, 2003: xiii).

As female masculinization was denounced, a feeling came over among men that they were undergoing an emasculation process promoted by the strong Maoist state, which controlled the vast majority of aspects of production. As a consequence, it was necessary to recover the lost masculinity of Chinese men (Osburg, 2013: 2). Hence, the retrieval of the differentiation between genders was a requisite. Lisa Rofel explains:

(...) a postsocialist allegory of modernity tells a story of how Maoism deferred China's ability to reach modernity by impeding Chinese people's ability to express their gendered human natures (...). In popular discourse, Maoist feminism is blamed for attempts to turn men and women into unnaturally gendered beings. Women are said to have become too masculine, while men were unable to find their true masculinity. (Rofel, 2007: 13).

The defense of the restoration of the sexual differentiation that would have been erased by Maoism is therefore part of a broader worldview that criticizes the strong presence of the state in the economy and celebrates the market economy as the locus in which male power can itself become manifest. This is not simply a reactionary view about a female essence, but an ideological strategy to keep women out of the labor market, especially in higher positions, and leave the way open for men. Zheng Wang quotes "economic" arguments that were aggregated in the defense of the restoration of sexual difference: women were less productive and therefore decreased the efficiency of enterprises; what women received from the

state was greater than their contribution to society; gender equality in the labor market violated the law of value and therefore should be abandoned in a market economy; for the Chinese economy to take off, an increase in productivity was needed and hence women should leave the market or take positions such as those of secretary and public relations; Chinese women should do what Japanese women did and go back home (Wang, 2017: 232).

Dead Pigs and the Critique of the Masculinist Morality in Market Society

After addressing the influence of feminist ideas in classical Chinese cinema (1930s and 1940s), the striking female presence on and off screen in Maoist-era cinema – which forces us to question the notion of authorship as a criterion for the presence of female artists in this period –, and quoting what we consider a backlash in feminism with the economic opening of 1978, we shall now analyze *Dead Pigs*, a China-USA film production, released in festivals in the USA (2018), in China (2019), and then worldwide (2021). The analysis of this film is justified since it addresses issues related to the economic opening in China in connection with gender issues and the discussion about masculinist morality of the newly rich and female resistance to economic power.

Dead Pigs is the first feature film directed by Cathy Yan, a filmmaker born in mainland China who grew up in Hong Kong and in the USA, having graduated from Princeton University and the Tisch School of the Arts in New York. This film belongs to what we could call the diasporic Chinese cinema with strong influences from mainland Chinese cinema in its mix of art cinema and entertainment. The celebrated Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke is the executive producer, and the film received a good reception as it premiered at Sundance, so as to attract the attention of the MUBI

platform, which became the official distributor of the film, as well as of actress Margot Robbie, with whom Yan worked on her second feature film, *Birds of Prey* (2020). On Dou Ban (豆瓣), the largest Chinese movie audience metrics site, the film has an average rating of only 5.3, and one can tell from the reviews that many Chinese were bothered by the nonsensical ending¹³.

Dead Pigs is set in the city of Shanghai, where two stories are connected:



FIG.1. Vivian Wu in movie scene *Dead Pigs* (Cathy Yan 2018). Credit: <https://www.asiancinevision.org/interview-cathy-yan-dead-pigs/>.

The first plot revolves around Candy Wang (Vivian Wu), a beauty salon owner who lives in a “nail-house”, that is, a house left alone on the outskirts because everything else has been demolished for the construction of a

land development. This development is a neighborhood inspired by Antoni Gaudí's *Sagrada Família*, whose architect in charge is North-American Sean Landry (David Rysdahl). The irony is evident, since the real *Sagrada Família* has been under construction for over 130 years now. In addition to the notably kitschy aesthetic element that stems from the imitation of the Catalan architect's work, the Chinese ability to copy is humorously thematized. Candy's older brother, Mr. Wang (Haoyu Yang), a pig farmer, is debt-ridden after having bought a very modern video game with virtual reality (VR) and, just to make matters worse, his pigs are dying of unknown causes. Thus, Mr. Wang also begins to pressure Candy to sell his house so that he can pay off his debts.

The second plot revolves around Xia Xia (Meng Li), a young girl who belongs to China's super-rich class thanks to her father's business. Zhen Wang (Mason Lee) is a young waiter who observes Xia Xia when she goes to the restaurant where he works. A poor guy, he lives in the housing provided by the company and helps his father financially, hiding from his dad the fact that he works as a waiter. One night, Xia Xia and a friend talk to him about her *sugar daddy*, who is buying her dinners in extremely exclusive restaurants. Xia Xia is shocked when she realizes that the *sugar daddy* at issue is her father. Next, she drives drunk, runs over a fruit vendor, and ends up in hospital. In such a messy night, Zhen finds Xia Xia's cell phone and takes it to her at the hospital. This is the chance he has to get closer to her. At first, she snubs the boy because of their social class difference, but later on she begins to cultivate a friendship with him. Zhen Wang is Mr. Wang's son and Candy's nephew, and it is through him that the two plots connect.

We shall begin our analysis with the story centered on Candy. She is the starting point for the first theme of the film we want to address: the issue of female resistance to real estate speculation and major urban redevelopment. Mainland Chinese cinema is full of characters who are surprised by the transformation undergone by the cities where they used

to live in their childhood, which can be barely recognized nowadays, or who wander in the urban environment in a confused and dislocated manner as they are not able to keep up with the urban remodeling process that followed the economic opening of China¹⁴. Shanghai is a city that has experienced a major process of transformation and gentrification. This was also understood as a process of moral reconfiguration, which created a new social segregation:

Shanghai's ongoing transformation of geographical and social spaces—unprecedented in magnitude - has changed the nature of moral experiences and reshaped power relationships among individuals, institutions, and localities. (...) the English speakers had taken over the inner ring of the city, the Mandarin speakers had moved into the middle ring, and the Shanghainese speakers could only find their niche in the outer ring (Tianshu, 2011: 154).

As we have previously mentioned, in her refusal to leave her house, Candy is the character in *Dead Pigs* who leads the resistance against the alteration of the urban landscape of Shanghai. The identification of female characters concerned with the resistance to radical urban interventions deserves to be studied more profoundly: in China and Brazil alone, four films that clearly place women as protagonists of this resistance can be identified: in the PRC, in addition to *Dead Pigs*, one can mention *The Chinese Mayor* (Datong, 大同, Hao Zhou, 2015), and, in Brazil, *The Cambridge Squatter* (Eliane Caffé, 2018), and *Aquarius* (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2016).

In *Dead Pigs*, Candy's resistance is also presented as a moral resistance to the new consumerist and hedonistic China that seems to have originated from Deng Xiaoping's reforms. She clearly opposes the employees of the construction company by accusing them of only caring about money. Candy is not interested in the money she will make by selling her house, because the most important thing for her is the family memories associated with the house. In addition to memories, Candy cares for the neighborhood pigeons in a nursery placed in her backyard and worries that they will have nowhere

to go if her house is demolished. It's hard to interpret Candy's attachment to the pigeons, but perhaps it should be thought of in conjunction with an art direction that filled the film with animal references, including Mr. Wang's pigs. In addition to pigeons, Candy has a poodle that stays with her all the time, and her house is packed with stuffed animals. She wears animal print costumes at various times. The hospital room where Xia Xia stays is also filled with huge stuffed animals. Zheng and his father have lunch in a restaurant with giraffes painted on the walls and wild animal sounds on the sound system. Zhen gives Xia Xia a necklace with a pendant of a horse, her sign in the Chinese horoscope. But Candy is the only one who lives with and cares for actual animals – the poodle and the pigeons –, which ascribes to her an eccentric but also very friendly feature.

Another element that configures Candy's resistance is her independence. Her routine is filled with commonplace, everyday gestures that fill and give fullness to her life. She is not married and lives well on her own. She takes care of her beauty salon, housekeeping, plants, pigeons, exercises; she paints pictures, even though in a very amateurish way. Candy is neither a female heroine from the classical cinema, a supporter of social injustice, nor a fearless revolutionary from the Maoist cinema. What we envy in her is her ability to fill her life with personally meaningful elements that give her satisfaction and that do not boil down to material goods. The fullness of her modest everyday life contrasts with the *malaise* felt by Xia Xia, the rich girl, and likewise it also appears in the film as an ethical attitude towards life.

Candy is someone who benefited from the 1978 economic opening because she owns a business, a small private company, but who again contrasts with Xia Xia as she is not a super-rich and does not display the consumption habits of a super-rich. It is quite the opposite: the cheap and kitschy knick-knacks that decorate her house would never put her in the upper rung of the hierarchies of distinction. Her entire universe of taste – her home decoration, her permed hair and her animal print

clothes – characterize her as an outsider from the universe of conspicuous contemporary elite consumption.

At the beginning of each day, Candy practices motivational shouts with her female employees, what in the corporate world has been called a motivational cheer. The shouts are placed here to express her worldview, her business vision, and her patriotism: “Our values are honest people, honest business! Our vision is: China first, then the world!”. The female employees also practice phrase chants about helping each other and always being loyal to each other. Sean Landry, the American architect, also listens to motivational phrases on his cell phone for ego-boosting, which creates a parallel with Candy. However, Candy’s motivational cheer is an expression of collective values – honesty, nationalism, camaraderie among female employees, and the use of first person plural personal pronoun –, whereas Sean’s motivational audio is hedonistic and individualistic, always spoken in the pronominal form “I”, clearly an expression of a fragile and insecure ego. When the salon opens, Candy addresses several customers by their names and shows that she is attentive to each of them. Candy’s business actions and the values they express are opposite to those of Xia Xia’s father, also a businessman, but a much richer and dishonest businessman.

Another trace of Candy’s personality that is worth mentioning is her view of female beauty. Candy repeats to her clients the slogan: “remember, there are no ugly women, only lazy ones”. Although the film does not advocate a radical break with the beauty care that is important to many of us, it does suggest that we can all be beautiful, and that beauty is related to self-care rather than to an external standard to which we have to conform. It is interesting to note that Cathy Yan directed *Birds of Prey* (2020), a film that provoked repercussions on social networks because some male viewers wanted the female characters to be more objectified¹⁵. It is still early days for us to analyze this filmmaker’s cinematography, but perhaps refusing an objectifying gaze or questioning the hegemonic standard of beauty is an important topic for her.

At the end of the film, Candy eventually agrees to the demolition of her house. Unlike *Aquarius*, where the character Clara will fight to the end against the constructors, even taking advantage of her privileged class condition, in *Dead Pigs* Candy gives in. She does not, however, give in to the construction company, but to her brother, who also owns the house and who needs the money badly. Thus, even though she wants to keep the house for the memories of her family, it is also her family that may be harmed by her resistance. Candy's relinquishment of the house is not treated as necessarily a defeat, but rather as an accommodation of interests. In a nonsensical ending, when Candy accepts the demolition, all the characters sing the song *Wo Zhi Zai Hu Ni* (meaning "I only care about you") by Teresa Teng, a Taiwanese singer who is very famous in several Asian countries for her emotionally charged songs and messages about the meaning of life. Candy's resistance, therefore, is not taken to its ultimate consequences, which allows all the characters in the film to move on with their projects: architect Landry leaves for his next project, Xia Xia proceeds to resignify her life, Zhen goes back to school, Candy and Mr. Wang have lunch together as a family, and the mystery of the dead pigs is solved out.

Let us move on to the story that revolves around Xia Xia. This whole part of the film makes a more direct questioning on the social rise of the new rich in China and the (lack of) morality associated with this social class, especially by the contrast it establishes with Candy's morality. We shall be reminded that this is a comedy, so the complaint proposed by the film is built in a light and funny way. Candy and Xia Xia are from different generations – Xia Xia must be 20 or 25 years younger than Candy – and wears different clothes: Candy likes leather and animal print, which are associated with the organic world, whereas Xia Xia has metallic bomber jackets, a print associated with the material world – in Mandarin, the ideogram for metal, 金, is also used in words related to money. Candy lives her life modestly but fully, while Xia Xia lives in material abundance but is unhappy.

An important part of the contemporary literature about China is dedicated to analyzing the new subjectivities arising from the market opening and the encouragement of individual entrepreneurship (Pinheiro-Machado, 2007; Rofel, 2007; Kleinman, 2011; Osburg, 2013). According to Rofel, the consumption of material goods is an important part of the new Chinese subjectivity, constituting itself as a “technology of the self” that creates identities and makes young Chinese feel part of the “world” (Rofel, 2007: 118). According to Pinheiro-Machado, “the expression of capitalism in large Chinese cities reveals a striking aesthetic permeated by symbols of global capitalism, as well as intense consumption practices among the younger generations” (Pinheiro-Machado, 2007: 149). Indeed, the Shanghai of *Dead Pigs* is marked by colorful city lights, and Xia Xia and her rich friends seem highly prone to conspicuous consumption as they go to fancy restaurants and wear brands such as *Gucci* and *Louis Vuitton*.

As we have already mentioned, however, Xia Xia’s material abundance does not prevent her from feeling a great existential emptiness, which will become more pronounced throughout the movie. In the hospital, her friends fill her room with stuffed animals and colorful balloons – something that infantilizes her, by the way –, but only the waiter Zhen is there to keep her company. Throughout the film, it is as if Zhen’s modest universe contaminates Xia Xia’s, and the emptiness of her abundant, carefree life becomes more and more evident. The change is noticeable in her way of dressing, which becomes less and less showy and metallic. She moves away from her snobbish friends – who she starts to see as arrogant and affected people –, eats simple street food with Zhen, and wanders the more modest streets with her new friend. Zhen’s romantic interest is evident, but the film does not move in this direction. What becomes more important is how much these characters transform each other. Finally, riddled with remorse, Xia Xia seeks out the fruit vendor she had ran over and discovers that he is now paraplegic. She tries to give money to the man’s wife, who refuses

it through a moral discourse similar to Candy's, in the sense that money doesn't buy everything: take your dirty money and go away, your money won't make my husband walk again. Xia Xia's journey between alienation, emptiness, and remorse expresses the sense of anomie and lack of meaning to life that several theorists verify among rich and successful young Chinese (Kleinman, 2011: 8). Osburg, in his field research with the newly rich in China, notes a similar process:

Despite their growing political and social acceptance, the new rich I encountered were beset with an array of anxieties about their position within Chinese society and how they were perceived by both their domestic peers and the outside world. Many were unhappy with aspects of their professional and personal lives and critical of the lifestyles and values of their peers (Osburg, 2013: 10).

The contrast created by the movie between Candy's and Xia Xia's positions is quite evident and is an expression of a certain unease concerned with the moral consequences of the emergence of the super-rich in China and is displayed even in the way the editing connects the characters (connecting elements that intensify the contrast). The references are two female characters who express different ethics in relation to work and capital accumulation in the market society emerging from Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Both emerged from private entrepreneurship, but one represents the excesses of capital accumulation and the existential emptiness that follows (Xia Xia), whereas the other lives a middle-class life full of meaning and personal satisfaction (Candy). None of them is immobile, however, and they show themselves flexible to give in and resignify their lives: Candy accepts the demolition, and we see her contentedly having lunch with her brother in her new "modern" apartment, and Xia Xia ends the film packing her bags and heading to the airport (we don't know where she is going, but we do know that her life has been transformed). The women in the film, therefore, are able to adapt, evolve, negotiate, reconfigure their lives, and give in as required.

Before closing our analysis, it is necessary to approach the male characters, which are also important to express subjectivities arising from certain aspects of the market society. We understand that the representation of the genders is built in the relationship so that male and female characters define themselves in the contrasts and approximations they engender. Our analysis seeks to show that, if the female characters represent the capacity for adaptation, re-signification, and change within ethical standards that are relevant in the film, the male characters demonstrate more clearly the failure to adhere to the more individualistic values of the market society.

Zhen is ashamed of his position as a waiter, so much so that he pretends to his father that he is a successful young man. When his father discovers that Zhen is not what he pretends to be, the boy will say that “he is not good enough”. It all plays out as if success in market society is the highest value a young man can aspire to, and that failure is an individual problem, a character issue, something shameful to be hidden from his family. When he becomes unemployed and needs money, Zhen starts to practice a scam that signals his moral decadence: he fakes fake bicycle accidents, demanding the car driver who “ran him over” to pay him so that he will not call the police or post videos on social media¹⁶. After being seriously injured and lacking help from the driver who hit him (another sign of a decadent morality), Zhen is found and rescued by Xia Xia from this questionable option.

The film avoids limiting its critique of how young masculinities are lured, swallowed, and shredded by market society to the case of Zhen, a young Chinese man. The Chinese are not the issue here, but the promises of success and personal fulfillment that capital offers young men – and which, more often than not, do not materialize. Architect Sean Landry is another professional who resents the fact that he has not yet achieved the professional success that he feels he deserves. He needs to convince himself by means of motivational audios that he is good enough to stand out in the market society: “My life is starting to get better. I believe in myself. I can accomplish anything I put my mind to. I am a happy and successful

person. I am getting better every day. I am talented. I am important. I will be successful". Sean's reality, however, is quite different: throughout the film, we learn that he is in China because he cannot work in the USA, since he has not passed his country's architecture board exam, so he is a character who has experienced a clear professional failure. With projects stalled by Candy's resistance to selling his house, he must start modelling, playing clearly stereotypical Western characters. On the one hand, the film jokes about the Chinese interest in everything from the Western world. On the other hand, meanwhile, it plays with the stereotypes of what a Westerner would be, in the same way that the West stereotypes the East. Feeling lonely and unsuccessful at a bar counter, he believes that a Belarusian woman is interested in him and opens his heart to her only to discover that she is a prostitute. Let us remember that the economic opening of 1978 was associated with a masculinist discourse of reclaiming male political, economic, and sexual power (Wang, 2017: 230). However, what *Dead Pigs* suggests is that while a few super-rich people, like Xia Xia's father, may feel effectively potent in market society, the vast majority of boys like Zhen and Sean will continue to experience a great sense of failure.

Zhen's father and Candy's brother, Mr. Wang is a modest pig farmer who goes into debt because he can't resist the temptations of market society. He buys things that he doesn't need and can't afford – like virtual reality (VR) equipment –, which leads him into huge debt. Yet in his simplicity, he is a character treated in a sympathetic way: generous, he calls the whole neighborhood to use the VR; he also makes a resolute speech about how difficult it is to be a pig farmer (he will say that the life of his pigs is better than his). This is how he simultaneously thematizes the notorious capacity for criticism and revolt of the Chinese farm worker, the social class that was largely responsible for the communist revolution of 1949, and the temptations that the market society poses to simple people inserted in a universe of hyper valuation of consumption. At the humorous end of the film, Mr. Wang says that he is no longer interested in VR and criticizes the

programmed obsolescence of the technology market.

Finally, there is a male character who barely appears but who is effectively the catalyst for much of the film's criticism of the direction taken by the market society. Xia Xia's father is the super-rich who effectively feels powerful in contemporary China. The fact that he appears very little is important: as in the case of the patriarch in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1991), he should have little screen time in order to avoid an identification with the spectator, as though he did not deserve the film to be dedicated to him, but rather to the consequences of his actions. He is the one who best expresses the moral decadence that the authors mentioned herein analyze as part of the economic transformations of the 1978 reform. This moral decadence is, first of all, presented from a sexual behavior standpoint, since it is a married man engaging in practices that could be considered concubinage (the *sugar dad* of Xia Xia's friend). The problem of infidelity of the *nouveaux riches* in China is so evident that "The Chinese marriage law was reformed in 2001 largely to deal with the problems associated with the newly wealthy such as *de facto* polygyny, abandonment of spouses, and divorce and prenuptial settlements involving significant amounts of wealth (Osburg, 2013: 11). According to Zheng Wang, one of the recent aspects of the corruption allegations that Xi Jinping has directed at CCP members and big businessmen involves not only exposing the wealth they have accumulated, but also condemning a "revival of polygamy" (Wang, 2017: 241). Ultimately, it is the infidelity of this gentleman that leads to the hit-and-run committed by Xia Xia. Xia Xia's father is also a dishonest businessman: by the end of the film, we know that pigs were dying because his company was adulterating the animals' feed. As with concubinage, this is a theme that the film has taken from the reality of China. As Yan tells us,

Despite all the efforts for consumer protection, the problem of fake and faulty goods exacerbated over the years, culminating in the large-scale production and distribution of fake and contaminated foods and medicine

that directly affected the health and lives of numerous consumers (Yan, 2011: 57).

Xia Xia's father represents the masculinist power in China that emerges from the 1978 reforms in all its negative aspects: in sexual terms, he is a married gentleman who buys the sexual services of a much younger girl; economically, he is a dishonest and greedy businessman who has led thousands of animals to death.

According to Osburg, "(...) many Chinese see prosperity as having had a negative impact on people's character, personal relationships, and morality, as exhibited by the excesses of male entrepreneurs" (Osburg, 2013: 10). Xi Jinping's conduction for a third term as general secretary in October 2022 suggests that the CCP has realized that the Chinese people are not indifferent to what it perceives as the moral decay associated with economic prosperity – and that a few limits must be placed on the newly rich. According to Pinheiro-Machado,

Maoism strongly condemned conspicuous consumption. In recent years, it was the Communist Party itself that encouraged devotion to shopping and opened its economy to the international market. As a remedy for the social and cultural transformations brought about by the economic revolution, the government takes up the Confucian legacy – referring to the old notions of harmony and equilibrium and uniting them with socialism – by understanding that the current problems are the fruit of a loss or distancing from a morality (Pinheiro-Machado, 2007: 152).

In *Dead Pigs*, therefore, the moral decay of Chinese society is immediately identified with one of the male characters: the super-rich, while the others are in a way victims of the desire for masculinist social ascent that has never been really open to everyone. The female characters, on the other hand, oppose this moral decay, either by participating in the market society in a more modest, honest and qualified way, like the small businesswoman Candy, or by being able to elaborate a critique regarding

their identification with the values of the super-rich (Xia Xia). It is not about the suffering heroines of the classical cinema, or the strong and “masculinized” heroines of the Maoist cinema, but a film that, even with a light language, raises current and important questions about the generalization of values derived from the market society and, in this sense, participates in the criticism that the Chinese society itself has made about the excesses of the accumulation of wealth by a certain social class. By showing the intertwining of capitalist and masculinist values that permeate contemporary Chinese society, Cathy Yan, in a way, updates the legacy of feminism in Chinese cinema, which at important moments in its history was able to elaborate a critique that was inextricably feminist and classist.

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Notes

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- 1 Around 1900 the term “feminist” appeared initially translated as *nüquan zhuyi* (women’s right + ism). Later, with the rise of the Communist Party, the term *funü quanli* (women’s right) became preferential to differentiate Marxist feminism from Western feminism, which was seen as “bourgeois” (Wang, 2017:4).
 - 2 Chinese military revolutionary and Nationalist Party leader, defeated in 1949 by Mao Zedong’s forces, who then flees to Taiwan.
 - 3 Online at: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/theasianaesthetic>. Accessed October 26, 2022.
 - 4 Little is known about her, but newspaper stories from the time point to the good reception of her work. See <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/xie-caizhen/>. Accessed February 27, 2023.
 - 5 It is known that she was quite active in China’s film industry. See: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/helen-wang/>. Accessed February 27, 2023).
 - 6 See: (Wang, Lingzhen: 2015: 589-622).
 - 7 Online at: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1275405/>. Accessed February 23, 2023.
 - 8 Online at: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0955392/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1. Accessed February 23, 2023
 - 9 Online at: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0399044/>. Accessed February 23, 2023

- 10 Online at: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0910904/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1 . Accessed February 23, 2023 2023)
- 11 “Chen [Bo’er] articulated a concept of ‘the male gaze’ that, in interesting ways, anticipates British feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey’s famous theorization in 1975 that explicated a passive/active and spectacle/spectator relation in the sexist cinematic apparatus’s representation of women and men. With none of the psychoanalytical tools Mulvey took from Freudian and Lacanian theories, Chen nonetheless emphasized the psychological effects of unequal gender power relations on women viewers of films” (Wang, 2017: 150).
- 12 One of the most interesting examples in the book are the public revelations of marital infidelities regarding party members in a women’s magazine. Instead of simply criticizing the infidelity, the journalists denounce in these men the attachment to a bourgeois morality, which admitted extra-marital affairs. The men involved did not like the exposure, but many others agreed that communist morality should not accept the exchange of wives for lovers.
- 13 Online at: <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26989213/>. Accessed February 23, 2023.
- 14 Many of Jia Zhangke’s films, for example, analyzed by Cecilia Mello in *The cinema of Jia Zhangke: realism and memory in Chinese film*, present characters who feel displaced in relation to the urban landscape.
- 15 Online at: <https://junkee.com/birds-of-prey-sexy-characters-dragged/239675>. Accessed October 29, 2022.
- 16 This scam has actually started to take place in China, as shown at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/world/asia/china-traffic-scam-fraud.html>. Accessed October 31, 2022.

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