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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bodies of water: Hydrofeminism in contemporary Chinese cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates contemporary Chinese films made by women directors as hydrofeminist 'bodies of water' in terms of elemental imagination and care. The elemental turn in cinema and media studies marks a return to the elements such as wind, earth and water as conditions of modern media. Elemental media studies often focus on the infrastructural side of media, such as our dependence on underwater sea cables for data traffic or cooling water for data servers. Here I will suggest to return to imaginations of the element of water in both Western culture, as exemplified by the work of Gaston Bachelard as well as classical Chinese elemental philosophy, or *wuxing*. By engaging a reading of *The Cloud in her Room* and *The Cord of Life* I will turn to the concept of hydrofeminism as a way to suggest an ethics of unknowability and care that shows multiple relationalities between eastern and western elemental conceptions of 'bodies of water'.[1]

KEYWORDS

Elemental imagination; elemental care; ethics of not-knowing; Bachelard; Wuxing; Yinyang; relationality; *The Cloud in her Room*; *The Cord of Life*

Introduction

In light of the devastating consequences of the global climate crises in times of the so-called Anthropocene, cinema and media scholars have returned to thinking about the basic elemental bases of nature and the way they are related to our contemporary media environment. Jennifer Fay, for instance, has shown how cinema holds important lessons how to live in an 'inhospitable world', already present in the human designed catastrophic environmental conditions in Buster Keaton's slapsticks from early cinema (Fay 2018). Much of the work in elemental media studies has picked up the idea of nature at the basis of media in a material and infrastructural way, looking for instance at mining and the earth minerals we need for our media technology (Parikka 2015); at the ways water is needed to transport information through undersea cables (Starosielski 2015); how we can think through sea water taking diving as a method of terrestrial estrangement (Jue 2020); or how air can be considered a medium of envelopment and transportation (Horn 2018). In his seminal work on elemental media philosophy, *The Marvelous Clouds*, John Durham Peters argues for a return to a philosophy of nature to understand the elemental nature of media and mediation: 'Media, like human beings, are always in the middle between sea, earth, and sky. Media

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studies is thus a form of philosophical anthropology, a mediation on the human condition, which also means a mediation on the nonhuman condition' (Peters 2015, 12). This more philosophical approach will also be my starting point when zooming in on the element of water.

Water is the central focus of so-called 'blue humanities' (Alaimo 2019; Oppermann 2023) that investigates not only water ecologies but also the manifolded stories contained in water. In *Bodies of Water* Astrid Neimanis (2017) proposes the concept of hydrofeminism that I will investigate in an elemental reading of the films of contemporary women directors in China. With 'bodies of water' Neimanis refers to both bodies of water in nature (seas, rivers, lakes), as well as the human body (that consists for roughly seventy percent out of water). Since ancient times, water has been associated with the female body and feminine principles. This has, for instance, been described by Gaston Bachelard in his book *Water and Dreams* (Bachelard 1983). In Chinese elemental philosophy (*wuxing*) water is connected to the feminine energy principle of yin (Cheng 2008; Wang 2013, 2019). After a brief introduction of the element of water in western and eastern imagination and philosophy, and feminist re-readings of these elemental myths, I will argue that the films I will discuss, mainly *The Cloud in her Room* (Zheng Lu Xinyuan, 2020) and *The Cord of Life* (Sixue Qiao, 2022) embody, in very different ways, a 'hydrofemnist' ethics of water and (non)human relationality.

Material imagination in Bachelard's poetics of water

The focus on material and infrastructural dimensions of elemental media studies, have more or less neglected the more poetic, immaterial imaginations that the elements carry inside their material conditions. In 1938 Gaston Bachelard caused a stir when he published his elemental alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis with his book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (Bachelard 1964). It was the beginning of his work on the imagination of the four Greek classical elements (water, earth, fire and air) where Bachelard investigates the material, elemental basis in Western myths and dreams, fears and desires, expressed in literary imagination (Bachelard 1983, 1988, 2002). In his introduction to *Dreams and Water*, Bachelard indicates that he was struck by the absence of 'material causes in aesthetic philosophy', whereas 'poetic images also have their matter' (Bachelard 1983, 3). As he puts it poetically himself 'in the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter's darkness. They already possess a velvety touch, a formula for perfume' (Bachelard 1983, 2). According to Bachelard, each element has its own specific system of poetic fidelity. The majority, if not all of his literary examples are from western male writers. And while some elemental imaginations are shared widely across different cultures (Eliade 1962), his observations certainly embody an occidental male perspective on elemental imagination.

This is evident when he introduces the elemental imagination of water, or the water mind-set as he calls it, as the most feminine element of all. The femininity of the water element is an association that is shared by many cultures and traditions across the world (Kattau 2006). So in part, Bachelard's work holds transcultural value, but as we will see, there are more perspectives to add. Bachelard remarks that poets have been 'more often entertained than captivated by play of waters' that they often see as an 'embellishment of their landscapes', rather than the 'substance of their reveries' (Bachelard 1983, 5). And yet, he argues, by reading beyond the surface and opening up the imagination, water will slowly

but surely reveal its depths. And thus he shows how in the imagination, water is the element par excellence that is firstly, associated to death and rebirth; secondly, to the maternal unconscious; and third, to the idea of ethics, or in Bachelard's words, a morality of water. Derived from this elemental imagination, Bachelard proposes water myths as alternative psychological complexes, akin to Freud's Oedipus complex but intimately related to nature as it basic source. Let me briefly develop these three general patterns in the water mind-set that we can find in Western poetry and literary imagination.

'All rivers join the River of the Death', says Bachelard in addressing the first qualification of water, the connection between water and death. 'Water is an element of melancholy and sadness, an element of dissolution' (Bachelard 1983, 75). Going back to mythology, he identifies complexes such as the Charon complex and the Ophelia complex in relation to water. Charon, the ferrymen of the underworld river Hades, brings the deceased to their final destination; water in the Caron complex means the acceptance of death: 'Profound imagination (material imagination) wants water to have its part in death; water is needed for death to keep its meaning of a journey. From this, we may gather that for such infinite dreams, all souls, whatever the nature of their funerals be, must board Charon's boat' (Bachelard 1983, 76). Ophelia, on the other hand, means water as an element of desired death. Ophelia, who in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* most famously drowns herself in the river surrounded by a bed of flowers, symbolizes a particular female death, a symbol of feminine suicide: 'For centuries, she will appear to dreamers and to poets floating on her brook with her flowers and her tresses spread out on the water' (Bachelard 1983, 83). The Ophelia complex, Bachelard contends, also stretches out to a cosmic level of the moon and the tides of the seas. He concludes that Ophelia's water connections are the symbol for misfortune and death: 'For certain dreamers, water is the universe of death. Opheliazation, then, is substantial; water is nocturnal. Near it everything leans toward death. Water communicates with all the powers of night and death' (Bachelard 1983, 90).

As opposed to the association with death, water is also the symbol for the maternal unconscious as a rocking, nutritious and safe environment of birth and growth. All liquids, including milk, are a kind of water in the imagination, Bachelard argues. He calls milk 'the first substantive in the order of liquid realities; more exactly, it is the first substantive known to the mouth' (Bachelard 1983, 117). To further elucidate how in the work of many writers the sea is associated with the caresses of the breast of the mother: 'The sea is maternal; water is a prodigious milk' (119). Water is the rocking element, rocking like a mother holding her baby, and the unconscious lives this rocking feeling:

> What is this image of milky water, really? It is the image of a warm and happy night, the image of clear and enveloping matter, an image that takes air, water, sky, and earth and unites them, a cosmic image, wide, immense, gentle. If we really live this image, we recognize that it is not the world that is bathed in milky moonlight, but the spectator who bathes in a happiness so physical and so reassuring that it brings back memories of the earliest form of well-being, of the most pleasant of foods. (120)

Bachelard's Western masculine perspective of blissful symbiosis with maternal waters is of course not a neutral or universal conception on the femininity of water, and I will return to this in the following sections.

But let me briefly end this summary of the Bachelardian water mind-set by addressing the ways in which he describes that water is related to morality, to conceptions of good and bad. He introduces this ethical dimension of pure and impure water by asking 'Who, for

instance, does not feel a special irrational, unconscious, direct repugnance for a dirty river? For a river dirtied by sewers and factories?' (Bachelard 1983,137) Dirty, foul water seems to be cursed, a source of evil that can emerge from it. Clean running water, from a river, a spring or fountain, however, is imbued with the power of purification (of the body as well as the soul), replenishment and cure. He also relates the materiality of water to the idea of eternal youth and health by referring back to the mundane act of washing oneself in the morning: 'Everyone has in his own home a Fountain of Youth in his basin of cold water on a morning bursting with energy. And without this trivial experience, the complex belonging to the poetic Fountain of Youth could perhaps never have been formulated' (145).

All in all Bachelard's contribution to elemental thinking is that he looks for the materialist, elemental substantial basis inside our metaphoric and poetic forms. He also demonstrates that in western literary culture the element of water is associated with death and rebirth, the unconscious and femininity, and the idea of purity/impurity of good/bad morality. While Bachelard's work sometimes is mentioned in elemental media studies, especially in relation to the element of fire (see for instance Peters 2015, 138), Chinese elemental philosophy is less addressed in current elemental approaches.

Water - *Shui* (水) in Chinese elemental philosophy - Wuxing (五行)

In her article 'Of Dragons and Geoengineering' Yuriko Furuhata proposes to rethink elemental media studies by questioning 'the taken for-granted centrality of Western philosophical and cosmological thought that undergirds our discussions of elements in media studies. And yet it should also caution us not to exoticize, homogenize, or Orientalize Eastern philosophy and cosmological thought' (Furuhata 2019, 6). Focusing on geoengineering, evoking for instance the principles of *feng shui* (wind and water) in 'dragon holes' in Hong Kong's high rises to let good energies of the wind flow as natural ventilation systems, she argues that the geopolitical and environmental complexities of current geoengineering and other elemental conditioning should take into account more diverse cosmologies. In a different way this argument is also made by Yuk Hui when he argues for a diversity of what he calls 'cosmotechnics' in thinking about technology from diverse contexts and cosmologies (Hui 2016). In following Furuhata's call, and by looking at the films *The Cloud in her Room* and *The Cord of Life*, I will propose an elemental reading that puts western knowledge less central and acknowledges both Chinese traditional knowledge of the elements, as well as a feminist viewpoint. I need to immediately acknowledge that as a western scholar, my perspective is only partial and incomplete. But I hope to present a modest but productive encounter in global exchange of ideas on material and immaterial conditions of our being in a transnationally connected and mediated world.

Chinese elemental philosophy, *wuxing*, consist of five elements: water, fire, metal, wood, and earth. They are considered as interrelated agents that have different generating/creating or weakening/destructive effects.[2] Rather than the substances and their formal translations in poetry and the human unconscious of the Greek four elements, the Chinese five elements are about processes, interaction and change. As Wang explains in his study on wuxing and contemporary China: 'The five agents system was used to describe the processes of *qi* movement and transformation and the interactions between the two kinds of primal power of the cosmos and human life, *yin* and *yang*' (Wang 2019, 131). Whereby qi can be translated as 'vital energy' and yin and yang concern the complementary 'feminine' and 'masculine'

forces (more on this later). What is also immediately evident compared to Bachelard's analysis of Western elemental thinking, is that Bachelard stays close to psychology when he relates the elements to certain psychological 'complexes' and the ways in which materiality stirs the imagination of the dreamer or the poet, while in Chinese philosophy the elements are more immediately cosmically animated, even if this does not mean that the four elements have no cosmic connection, nor that the five agents have nothing to do with psychological processes.

As Charlotte Qin demonstrates, in Chinese philosophy 'water is believed to be the medium through which heaven communicates its judgment to the earth' (Qin 2021, np). The mythical creature that is associated with water is the Chinese Dragon that can govern the water forces between heaven and earth. Water furthermore represents change and transformation, especially in relation to the mountain that remains more static. 'Together, they are intimately entwined in the composition of the transience and continuity in nature' (Qin 2021, np). In Chinese philosophy water is also a feminine principle. It is seen as yin, principle of softness, and pliability not so much associated with the body of the mother as in Bachelards analysis. If anything this principle is formless, most famously summarized by Bruce Lee who explained in an interview: 'Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend'.[3] Finally, like in western mythology, water is also related to death, the Sanzu River as the River of Death, as well as to purity and healing, to the source of life.[4] But in a general comparison, the element of water in Chinese traditional philosophy is more process oriented, more cosmic, and more shapeless and fleeting than many of the heavy imaginaries of Greek cosmology and Westen poetic imagination.

The classical ideas on the Chinese elements as the five agents regain popularity in new contexts, such as online communities, where the elements are taken up as part of new Chinese identity (Wang 2019). Another observation to make in contemporary contexts is that Western readings of well-known concepts of yin and yang perhaps need a reconsideration to address the complexity of these concepts beyond seeing them as simply two oppositional forces. The idea of water as a yin element of femininity (together with the earth, the night, softness and passivity), is often contrasted with fire as the yang element of masculinity (together with heaven, the day and activity). As Robin Wang (2013) argues, yinyang are often seen as interdependent sides that have to be in balance in order for things to function well. Moreover, this balance and interrelation between yin and yang is considered as a model for both the human body and the larger cosmic body. However, Wang argues,

> careful study of early Chinese texts shows that these common accounts of yinyang are far too simple. Yinyang embodies a wide range of linked meanings, many of which are in play simultaneously. The invocation of yinyang itself is always predicated on a particular situation, a unique moment in which we must engage in the world.(Wang 2013, 3)

Wang proposes a rereading of these principles of water and fire, yin and yang, as always in multiple relations, they are not static things with fixed signification or function but living and transforming relations that always depend on context. And 'because of this dependence on context, a single thing can be yin in one way and yang in another' (3). Wang gives the example of hands: 'The left hand is Yang, the right hand is Yin, in this no change is possible, but raise both hands, then they are both Yang, and put them down, and they are both Yin;

and no matter whether you raise them or put them down, when they are hot they are both Yang, and when they are cold they are both Yin' (Forke in Wang, 3). The careful reading of 'living yinyang' as 'multiple relations' is a dimension of an elemental perspective that I will return to momentarily. But let me first turn to the last theoretical elemental perspective that I want to introduce here, the concept of hydrofemnism where, arguably, western and eastern water concepts might somehow come together.

Bodies of water: From *ecriture feminine* to hydrofeminism

From a feminist perspective, European female authors such as Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray also made connections between the sea water, milk and motherhood, albeit in much less Romantic terms than Bachelard's male perspective. It is worthwhile recalling that in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Cixous invites women to not remain stuck in passive, feminine receptivity but to take agency of her own body and to write 'with their body', including the milk of motherhood, and by considering milk as 'white ink' (Cixous et al. 1976, 881) Women should claim writing as an embodied practice. 'Write yourself', she summons, 'your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth' (Cixous et al. 1976, 880). Without mentioning Bachelard explicitly, she does refer to the 'phallic mystifications' (880) of rendering each women into a 'mother figure' and designating her desire as a mysterious (Freudian) dark continent, whereas Cixous argues 'the dark continent is neither dark nor unexplorable, … we have just made believe that it was too dark to be explored' (884–885). In a similar way, Trinh.T Minh-ha posits that women's writing,

> draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water - a water from the source, a deep, subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages. This keeping-alive and life-giving water exists simultaneously as the writer's ink, the mother's milk, the woman's blood and menstruation. (Minh-ha 1989, 38)

While Minh-ha takes an explicitly post-colonial perspective on women's writing, challenging the implied universalized position of European feminists, both Cixous and Minh-ha invite women to write, and write differently, in resonance with their differently embodied and situated position in the world. I will momentarily investigate if and how this translates or transmutes when Chinese female directors pick up the invitation and write with the camera.[5]

In her more contemporary update of feminist water conceptions as proposed by Cixous and Minh-ha, Astrid Neimanis proposes a more explicitly elemental/environmental concept of 'hydrofeminism'. She argues that the relation between women and water (whether the amniotic fluids in the womb, milky water of the breasts, or the sea as the vast feminine unconscious) should not be seen not as an essentialist concept. Rather water is an essential element in *all* bodies, male and female, human and nonhuman: 'Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world: *we are bodies of water*' (Neimanis 2017, 1). Compared to the previous generation of feminists, Neimanis takes a 'new materialist' approach in Western theory sometimes conceived as posthuman because of the acknowledgement of the nonhuman and more-than-human in the human (Braidotti

2013). But perhaps it is also possible to make a connection to Chinese philosophy where the human body is intimately connected to and resonating with other nonhuman bodies in nature and on a planetary and cosmic scale. Water, in Neimanis's conception, serves as a medium of connection: 'Just as oceanic currents convey the sun's warmth, schools of fish, and islands of degraded plastic from one planetary sea to another, our watery bodies serve as material media' (Neimanis 2012, 86). She refers, for instance, to the concept of the 'hypersea' to indicate how both in an evolutionary sense, but also materially, when we drink a glass of water, 'we come into contact with all of our companion species from which that water was drawn' (Neimanis 2012, 86) And at the same time we also connect to the clouds that harbour rain, and to the technological objects such as water tanks and water cleaning systems. 'Hypersea extends to include not only terrestrial flora and fauna, but also technological, meteorological, and geophysical bodies of water' (Neimanis 2012, 86).

All these different bodies of water indicate that the connection to the feminine principle of water has nothing to do with an essentialist femininity, but rather, they operate like the variegated yinyang relationalities described above. We have to consider our multiple relations to water anew, especially in light of the questions of the Anthropocene. As Neimanis asserts, 'the fluid body is not specific to woman, but watery embodiment is still a feminist question; thinking as a watery body has the potential to bathe new feminist concepts and practices into existence." (Neimanis 2012, 89) To focus on bodies of water from a hydrofeminist perspective, implies a new ethics of care. 'Aqueous transcorporality' implies a crossing of boundaries into what is knowable from a singular human (male or female) perspective, 'a new way of being responsible and responsive to our others' (Neimanis 2012, 95). Neimanis proposes to call this 'an ethics of unknowability'. As she puts it:

> To follow our bodies of water along their rivulets and tributaries is to journey beyond the cleaving and coupling of sexually differentiated human bodies: we find ourselves tangled in intricate choreographies of bodies and flows of all kinds—not only human bodies, but also other animal, vegetable, geophysical, meteorological, and technological ones; not only watery flows, but also flows of power, culture, politics, and economics. So if projects that move us to think about animal ethics, or environmental degradation, or neocolonialist capitalist incursions are still 'feminist', it is not because such questions are analogous to sexual oppression; it is rather because a feminist exploration of the inextricable materiality-semioticity that circulates through all of these bodies pushes at the borders of feminism, and expands it. (Neimanis 2012, 95)

Taking all the above conceptions of Western, Eastern and feminist conceptions of water into consideration, now my question is, how can we sense this elemental (re)turn as hydrofeminism in the films of contemporary female Chinese directors, and do we recognize the material/immaterial watery connections in these works that can help us rethink our elemental connections to the Earth and to each other. Do they imply an elemental ethics of care?

Atmospheric wetness: Bodies of water in *The Cloud in her Room*

It is not my intention here to give an extended overview of Chinese female directors and/or the particular feminism that is embodied in important female directed films such as Li Yu's *Lost in Bejing* (2007) or Cathy Yan's *Dead Pigs* (2018) or the ways in which women directors in China have responded to the global #Metoo movement. Others have been doing this in

most convincing ways (See Jorge 2023; Li 2017; Marchetti 2024; Zhang 2023) As Liu and Dahling demonstrate in their article on the films of Li Yu, Chinese feminism is a multifaceted phenomenon (Liu and Dahling 2016) with complex relations to the Confucianism, to China's communist past, to Western feminism, and to contemporary patriarchal power structures. Yu's films, Liu and Dahlin argue, represent the less outspoken, 'quieter side of Chinese feminism', by brining authentic women's stories to the screen 'without undermining them as women or making them a punch line' and 'by presenting authentic women, even as it reflects negative cultural attitudes' (Liu and Dahlin 2016, 5). In addition to the existing scholarship on Chinese feminism and film, I will here simply probe an elemental, hydrofeminist approach, looking at two films made by female directors, to see how they embody different elemental legacies and express a hydrofeminist ethics of care.

In *The Cloud in her Room,* Zheng Lu Xinyuan's first feature film that won the Tiger Award of the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2020, Muzi (Jin Jing), a young woman of twenty-two years old, returns to her home town Hangzhou for Chinese New Year. While she roams the city she does not seem to feel completely at home, meeting her divorced parents who both are in new relationships, seeing her boyfriend from Beijing, hanging out with old and new friends. The film is shot in black and white and told in a fragmented and elliptic way that nevertheless feels intimate because we always stay close to the main character: we move with her through the city, visit places, but also enter her inner worlds, her dreams and her longings.

From an elemental perspective, this is a watery film. The first thing that is striking is the moody, wet, foggy atmosphere that evokes an underwater world, even if we are on dry land. Muzi arrives in a night bus in a thunderstorm and pouring rain. In the streets of the city people often walk around with umbrella's, we hear the rainfall on the soundtrack, and even when its dry the air is filled with humidity, fog drifts near the ground around the trees, the streets are still wet with pools of water, the roads are glistering wet, the haziness of the street lights at night is filtered by the water molecules in the air. This evokes an atmospheric world (Hven 2022; Pisters 2025) marked by the element of water, and complemented with actual bodies of water everywhere in the city of Hangzhou compose the infrastructure of this aqueous urban environment: ponds, basins, lakes, the Qiantang river and its banks (Figure 1). Hangzhou is also famous for its tidal bore, known as 'the silver dragon', and the presence of the sea is palpable in the images as well.

In this aqueous world, the characters seem to float, rather than walk. None of them really seem to feel steady at home, people connect, but there is a soft uncertainty about what they actually mean to each other. We first see Muzi in an empty apartment, the apartment that she grew up in when her parents were still together and that now is inhabited. Her father wants to rent it out again, but while still empty though furnished, we see her regularly in this place. Muzi visits her father in his new home, with a new wife and their daughter, Muzi's young half-sister. She has conversations with her father on the balcony, smoking. When Muzi asks him if he'd not rather would have stayed single, he says that 'it is still nice to have someone', without any further deep attachment. Her mother lives with a Japanese boyfriend and later she has a new lover, a Dutch guy named Thomas. When Muzi and her mum go out and her mum gets very drunk. Perhaps, we can infer later, this is after breaking up with the Japanese man – but nothing is made explicit. Her relation with her boyfriend Yu Fei, who visits Muzi from Beijing is marked by tidal waves, in the sense that they get together and then separate again, back and forth. We see them in several intimate and tender scenes

Figure 1. Wet atmosphere in the city of hangzhou. Screenshot T*he Cloud in her Room* (Zheng Lu, 2020).

Figure 2. Muzi and Yu fei, drifting into a tunnel. Screenshot T*he Cloud in her Room* (Zheng Lu, 2020).

making love, immediately followed by scenes of sadness that express doubt, and non-commitment. In a remarkably choreographed scene in an empty tunnel where they walk across the road in different formations, he confesses that he has once been in love with someone else and that he never wants to be in love again (Figure 2). Then they kiss and move to a hotel making out under the shower. Their entire relationship is marked by this wavelike back and forth dynamic.

Muzi is also attracted to the owner of a bar, whom she meets taking her half-sister to school, another relationship marked by buoyancy. Yet, they all seem connected through cigarettes, they always smoke together, often in silence. Some critics have seen here a reference to the French New Wave films of the 1960s (Romney 2020). And the images of cigarette-filtered conversations in the streets and apartments of Paris in films by Godard and Truffaut certainly can be evoked as a sort of hidden screen memory. In an elemental atmospheric reading, however, the smoke would be the visible evidence of the connections of their drifting lives, their breath or *qi* perhaps, sharing the same heavy humid particles of

air, searching for an anchoring place, only fleetingly managing, without big drama, just going on in a continuing yinyang dynamics of passive and active relations.

Through a more hydrofeminist 'diving goggles' (to stay in the water and dive deeper), we can see the connotations between water and femininity more clearly. On a first level, there are some references to the female body, and its leaky moon cycles of menstruation when Muzi visits her mum who points out that she bleeds through her jeans. There is also a reference to the amniotic fluids of her womb, when in a very moist and dripping construction side that looks like a grotto, a gay friend asks Muzi to carry his child so that his parents would have a grandchild. Muzi does not take the request seriously as she continues to inspect the dripping walls of the site and we hear the friend quarrelling in the background with his boyfriend about the request. And there is a remarkable scene in negative stock, where Muzi and her mother kiss. The image is marked as dreamy or phantasmatic, and it may be an expression of a desire to connect in a different way to her mother or her femininity.

But beyond these typical female watery images, there is also a posthumanism that is central to hydrofeminists bodies of water, as argued by Neimanis. In *The Cloud in her Room* we can see this in several images where the human environment is linked to the seaworld. There is a moment in the film when mother and daughter are in a karaoke bar. We see them only through a thick glass window in the door, from the outside, that gives the impression they are fish in a bowl. This is reinforced by the fact that a moment later we see the same window shape, this time only filled with air bulbs, as if the room is filled with water and fish blowing air bulbs. Another remarkable 'posthuman' feminist moment is when we see Muzi taking a bath, the camera lingering on her pubic hair that in close-up seems to become a sea urchin. And in an even more intimate close-up, it is like seaweed moving in and out with the tides. The aesthetics of the images seem to call forth these inhuman connections and embodiments.[6]

Returning to *The Cloud in her Room*, we can dive one level deeper still, and enter the dream worlds that are also dispersed throughout the film, evoking the element of water in various ways. There is a moment where we see abstract images that feel like they are shot in the deep sea, while the soundtrack recalls the fast breathing of Muzi in erotic ecstasy, followed by her dancing in a night club, clearly happy 'like a fish in the water'. The status of the abstract images are not clear but they certainly can be connected to the deep waters of female desire.[7] Another very remarkable image is a scene in a swimming pool where Muzi and another women (perhaps a double of herself) are floating underwater, filmed from a strange camera angles, so that the pool water seems to have become the sky (Figure 3). This image appears in the middle of a dream where she remembers another dream about a woman hanging in the staircase, never showing her face, and then disappearing. Her boyfriend Yu Fei will disappear, just like that, leaving Muzi in a restaurant. And also the film itself 'disappears', it just stops without any narrative conclusion. The credit are washed away by a wild sea, the silver dragon, perhaps.

The bodies of water in *The Cloud in her Room* can be called hydrofeminist in all these different ways that they express multiple forms of relationality. The buildings we see being demolished in negative imagery at the end of the film is not just a criticism on the destruction of the city because it is connected to a soft lullaby song. It is a yinyang dynamic of change and transformation, destruction and regeneration. Perhaps it could be argued that in the multiple yinyang dynamics of the film, the overabundance of the yin elements makes

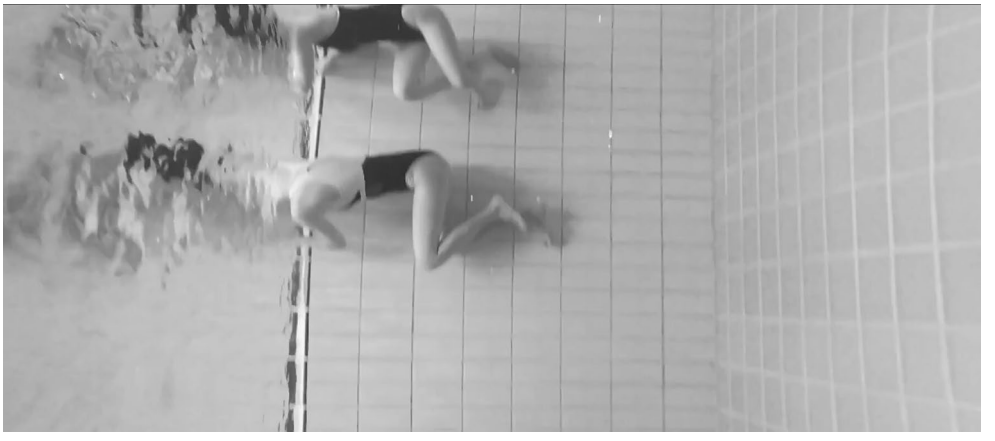

Figure 3. Muzi and her double in surreal underwater scene. Screenshot T*he Cloud in her Room* (Zheng Lu, 2020).

Xinyuan's Hangzhou an intimate and floating universe, where human relations remain ambiguous, yet loving at the same time. Care in this universe is fragile, ambiguous, marked by a hydrofeminist ethics of unknowing, combining western feminist water elements with a more fleeting and dynamic wuxing perspective. Characters seem lonely yet their connections can be sensed in the wet atmosphere of almost every image – they all swim in the same human and nonhuman bodies of water in this posthuman urban landscape.

Traditional hydrofeminism and Yinyang thinking in *The Cord of Life*

Narrated in a more linear way than *The Cloud in her Room*, the film *The Cord of Life* presents a more traditional view on elemental connections and ethics of care. As such it presents a different take on the younger generation of female directors in contemporary China that neverthess could be seen in a hydrofeminist perspective. In *The Cord of Life*, a young musician in Beijing, Alus (played by the musician Yider) is called back home to take care of his dementing mother Naranzug (a role by Badema). He decides to take her to the Inner Mongolian Hulunbuir grasslands where he reconnects to the elements of his origins.

Let's start with the evoking the elements in the film. While *The Cord of Life* actually has a strong connection to all the elements, the element of water stands out. The opening credits present a sublime snake-like river landscape running through Inner Mongolia that we see from above. As such the elements of water and earth, both female connoted elements, present the territory of origin that Naranzung longs to return to. These images immediately convey a material environmental pull (Figure 4).

When Alus takes his mother to their old family house on the grassland near a lake, the water is always nearby. Naranzung, however, does not recognize the house nor her son, and she keeps on running away into a landscape, getting lost. Alus then ties himself to his mother with a long, heavy rope; the symbolism of a reversed umbilical cord is hard to escape. But it creates funny and moving scenes, for instance when Alus lures his mother into the house by playing music and dancing backwards to the inside. We see them in epic sequences walking along the water, the rope between them, or sitting at the lake-side to watch the sun

Figure 4. The river through the mongolian landscape. Screenshot T*he Cord of Life* (Qiao Sixue, 2022).

Figure 5. The son tying the cord of life to his mother. Screenshot T*he Cord of Life* (Qiao Sixue, 2022).

set into the water. All evoke a classic idea of mutual bond between mother and child, the roles now reversed, the son taking care of the mother (Figure 5).

What we also see is that, in hydrofeminist terms, there is actually nothing 'posthuman' in connecting to the elements, the earth, the animals. It is a natural way of being and connecting, that younger generations, especially growing up in urban environments, have often lost. This is evident from small moments in the film, for instance when the mother welcomes a colony of ants in the old family home and is upset when Alus wants to chase them away with fire. In a similar vein she connects to animals by talking to the cows, and when a lamb has lost its mother, there is nothing that could withhold her from looking for its mother. But we do sense here a hydrofeminism of care beyond essentialist western feminism. *The Cord of Life* stretches out into the nonhuman and also beyond death, as I will return to in a moment.

Another remarkable thread that runs through the film is the non-oppositional duality between tradition and modernity. Here we can return to the reading of 'lived yinyang' and the multiplicities of relations that it entails. As Robin Wang has analysed, yin and yang dimensions of life are never in strict opposition, but go by mutual inclusion, like the yinyang symbol 'which includes a small circle of yang within the fullest yin and a small circle of yin within the fullest yang' (Wang 2013, 5). Moreover they are marked by change and transformation:

> Yinyang thought is fundamentally dynamic and centers on change. In nature, there is decline, deficiency, decrease, and demise, as well as flourishing, surplus, increase, and reproduction. In the human world, life is filled with trouble, failure, exhaustion, and insufficiency, as well as fullness, fruition, mastery and success. Considering these various states of being, one can derive that change is perpetual, never ending. (Wang 2013, 6)

I would like to argue that the way the film presents the integration of old and new (old and new generations, old and new traditions) follows this yinyang dynamic. This is first of all remarkable in the landscape, where modern windmills provide power to local towns people. And when mother and son drive through the immense and empty pastoral fields in an old motorcycle with sidecar, a drone suddenly appears to tell them that they are on private property and they have to turn around (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Tradition and modernity meet. Screenshot T*he Cord of Life* (Qiao Sixue, 2022).

But the most salient way in which modernity and tradition blend in new ways, is through the music. The film opens when Alus performs his music in Beijing. He combines in a beautiful way electronic music with the traditional Mongolian string instrument, a *monin khuur* (horsehead fiddle). During his journey with his mother through the grasslands, he records the sounds of his mother jumping through the grass and splashing of a wooden stick in the lake. Every sound can be turned into music, especially when integrating it with electronic tools, computer and synthesizer.[8]

In terms of an ethics of care, *The Cord of Life* first of all presents the values of generational care, as the mother becomes more child-like because of her Alzheimer conditions, the son takes the role of care giver. And as mentioned, care also stretches into the nonhuman world as well as into old and new technologies and traditions. The electronic sounds are sometimes also accompanied with traditional Mongolian lullabies that stretch over the landscape: 'I send my voice out into the universe. I use my voice to pray for all living things'. But what the film is also about it the necessity of letting go, the cutting of the cord. There is a scene in the middle of the film where a drunken shepherd drives his car into the wall of the old house, leaving a huge opening that they cover with a plastic sheet. But it is exactly through this opening in the wall (the house is otherwise quite dark and almost windowless) that a door to another dimension seems to have opened. At night, the mother sees a group of dancers and singers carrying torches, who invite her to come over to them. She sees her long deceased family members sitting at their table. Alus holds her back from joining them

in this other dimension by pulling her back into the house. But in the final scene the Alus, his mother Naranzug, and his girlfriend Tama who has joined them, meet a group of dancers and musicians. In a beautiful symbolic ritual that involves all elements of the wuxing (fire of the huge stake, wind that blows hundreds of pieces of cloth, wood and metal of the monin khuur, the grassland and the lake nearby) Naranzug is called again by her ancestors. Now Alus cuts the cord as his mother walks into another realm. But it is for an open-ending, hinting at the ever changing continuations of the cycle of life, fully embracing the dynamics of yinyang transformations and the continuing cycles of qi energy.

The tree that Alus at the end of the film finds (the tree his mother was looking for) is half dead, half alive, not the Eternal Fountain of Youth of the Tree of Life in many Western mythologies. Though the Charon complex mentioned by Bachelard is about the psychological acceptance of death, we could perhaps call this a Yinyang tree that offers a cosmological perspective that injects hydrofeminism with wuxing elementality.

Ethics of unknownability and care

Astrid Neimanis has indicated that hydrofeminism embodies an ethics of the unknown: 'We cannot survive in the worlds of some of our closest kin, even as they swim within our own deep embodied channels – and we in theirs. *Intimacy is not mastery*' (Neimanis 2017, 112). We can be close to the people and things we care for, transspecies, transgenerationally, and transgendered if we take the mutual inclusion of yin and yang in consideration and do not try to capture and control the dynamics of transformation and change. But the lesson of hydrofeminism takes 'unknowability as an onto-epistemology and an ethics, which we learn from a feminist posthuman phenomenology of bodies of/in water' (Neimanis 2017, 112). Other elemental feminist thinkers have called this ethics of unknowability 'muddy thinking', combining soil and water, as opposed to the normative transparency and purity of thought 'where we celebrate mud's and muddy thinking's miraculous fecundity' (O'Dair 2015, 154). And Maria Puig de la Bella Casa, speaking from and thinking with the element of earth, soil thinking proposes a speculative ethics which equally entails elements of decentered humanity and thus an ethics of unkownability. She argues that 'thinking with care' has to probe the imagination to thinking in living between human and nonhuman worlds, as to provide a 'requisite of collective thinking in interdependent worlds' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 19).

With their intimate and probing films, contemporary Chinese female directors add their vision of the ways in which we care in uncertainty. The generative force of yinyang, Wang contents, is partly related to its 'reasoning with an open-ended dimensions' (Wang 2013, 7). This contrasts Western thought were often certainty, fixed positions and oppositions, as well as clarity and purity are central. In Chinese thought 'Yinyang thinking emerged as a conceptual apparatus to ease the anxiety of lost control by creating ways of predicting and accepting the inevitability of change' (Wang 2013, 7). In times of the Anthropocene were the unknown seems to be inexhaustible, and the world around us spirals into new changes all along, the cinematografic 'bodies of water' in contemporary Chinese films have important perspectives to offer on the issue of caring without mastery and control.

Notes

1. I want to thank Pengnan Hu and Xinyi Zheng for helping me identifying the films that I will be discussing in this article.

2. The generating cycle: Wood feeds Fire > Fire produces Earth (ash, lava) > Earth bears Metal (geological processes produce minerals) > Metal collects Water (water vapor condenses on metal, for example) > Water nourishes Wood (Water flowers, plants and other changes in forest). The destructive cycle: Wood grasps (or stabilizes) Earth (roots of trees can prevent soil erosion > Earth contains (or directs) Water (dams or river banks) > Water dampens (or regulates) Fire > Fire melts (or refines or shapes) Metal > Metal chops (or carves) Wood. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuxing_(Chinese_philosophy).
3. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJMwBwFj5nQ
4. Sanzu River (Wangchuan) is the River of Death; Naihe Bridge (奈何桥) is a legendary bridge in Chinese mythology and folklore, believed to exist in the underworld. According to Daoist and Buddhist traditions, it is the passage that souls must cross after death to reach the next stage of reincarnation. Standing over the River of Forgetfulness (忘川, Wangchuan), the bridge is watched over by Meng Po (孟婆, Granny Meng), who serves a special soup to the dead, erasing their memories of past lives before they enter the cycle of reincarnation. The bridge is sometimes described as having different paths—one smooth and bright for the virtuous, and another narrow and treacherous for those who committed wrongdoings in life. Naihe Bridge symbolizes the irreversible transition between life and the afterlife in Chinese spiritual beliefs. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanzu_River.
5. Another feminist conception of milk, raised by Luce Irigaray, is perhaps also worthwhile noting. Her essay 'And the One doesn't Stir without the Other' opens with a stifling reference to milk: 'With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen. And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me.' (Irigaray 1981, 60) Irigaray has much to say about symbiotic mother-daughter relations but for my purpose here I just want to point out that Bachelard's view of the blissful, nutritious motherly waters, can be addressed very differently when women speak for themselves.
6. It is interesting to here make a brief side note to another contemporary female directed film, *The Crossing* (Bai Xue, 2018), where the main character is a teenage girl, Peipei, whose erotic senses are awoken when she falls (or rather jumps) in the sea and falls in love with, Hao, a cell-phone smuggler who saves her from drowning. They cross the Shenzen river between Hongkong and Mainland China everyday with contraband until they get caught. All along Hao has been associated with sharks: sharks in a fish tank, shark tattoos on his body, conversations about sharks – at the end of the film when Peppei releases the sharks from the fishtank into the sea, it is as if she releases Hao from prison.
7. Here again a small side step to another film can be made, namely Lina Yang's *Longing for the Rain* (2013), where a Beijing housewife literally falls in love with a ghost lover in her dreams, and the longing for the rain provides this aquatic elemental connection to the feminine unconscious. (Pisters 2020, 116-119).
8. In this sense *The Cord of Life* resembles another female directed Mongolian film *City of Wind* (Lkhagvadulam Purev-Ochir, 2023) in which a young shaman who performs rituals to cure people from his community, falls in love and struggles with finding his place in the modern world. Here too, modern technology, is somehow integrated in much older technics (or, again better 'cosmotechnics' in the sense of Yuk Hui, mentioned earlier).

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