

## FENGYUN ZHANG

*Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, by Mila Zuo



Mila Zuo begins *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* with a dazzling scene from *2046* (Wong Kar-wai, 2004). Film star Zhang Ziyi performs *sajiao*, or tenderness, in a childish way when she flirts with her romantic partner. The self-infantilization of *sajiao*, according to Zuo, can be characterized as vulgar or a form

of bad taste because of its attempt to grab attention in an immature way. This reading of Zhang's performance of *sajiao* is one of many extraordinary observations in this monograph, which surveys the embodied performativity and affective shocks of Chinese feminine beauty. More particularly, *Vulgar Beauty* considers how mediated encounters with Chinese film stars can produce feelings of Chineseness.

Zuo turns to *weidao* (flavor) as a theoretical analytic and structuring device. *Vulgar Beauty* is organized around the qualities of the five minor spices in traditional Chinese medicine: bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour. Each chapter opens with Zuo's personal encounter with a film or star text that conceptualizes the divergent flavors of aesthetic encounter and mediated bodies. Zuo describes the affective experience of seeing representations of Asian women on television: "a blush of shame and fascination blanketed me, a cathexis wherein a libidinal attachment was forged through a longing for identification" (5). By proposing a methodology of tasting beauty's flavor to decenter and decolonize Western thought, *Vulgar Beauty* offers a flavorful theory for analyzing film and media performance and the ways in which performers negotiate the racialization and sexualization of femininity.

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 116–126. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.2.116

As Zuo points out, bitterness was a dominant flavor throughout China's twentieth-century socialist revolution and became a lingering aftertaste in postsocialist literature and films. The first chapter inquires into the "embittered beauty" of Gong Li as an embodied cinematic response to national history in the post-Mao era. If a female movie star's body was once seen as sublimated and desexualized, Gong's presence as Jiuer in *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1988) is vulgar, erotic, and "leaky." Jiuer's body leaks because it has been turned inside out as the nation turns upside down. In this way, Zuo builds on a prominent paradigm in analyses of China's Fifth Generation cinema, which allegorically interprets women as representing the nation. The aesthetic bitterness of Gong constitutes a way of reckoning with past trauma and envisioning a turbulent reform era.

When Gong became an internationally acclaimed actress—notably, as the first international movie star from the People's Republic of China—her exotic Chineseness and embodied bitterness were mobilized across national and cultural boundaries. Zuo observes how, in *Hannibal Rising* (Peter Webber, 2007), the sensorial engagements of Gong as Murasaki—in particular, the hypersexualized racial odor of the clove oil used to clean her ancestor's swords—function as "deodorant" for the West's postwar trauma narratives (67).

Chapters 2 and 3 navigate the politics of tolerance in divergent cultural, racial, and political contexts through ornamentalized Chinese women. Chapter 2 compares and contrasts Maggie Cheung in *Irma Vep* (Olivier Assayas, 1996) and Joan Chen in *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch and Mark Frost, ABC, 1990–91) through their feminine performance of "salty-cool" (74). Zuo puts herself in conversation with Jungian psychology and Chinese aesthetic theory to link the alchemical-psychological account of saltiness and coolness as a minor form of beauty.

In *Irma Vep*, Cheung's comfort with the tight latex outfit and her cool maneuvers when confronting others' erotic desires emerge as her "racial tricks" to grapple with a hypersexual presence in white spaces. Whereas saltiness indicates inscrutability, detachment, and deflection in Cheung's performance, Joan Chen as Josie Packard in *Twin Peaks* engages with masochistic desire in the white small-town setting. Through her close reading of Chen's role, Zuo's emphasis falls on the fetish of Josie in conjunction with Chen's minor acts of frigid ornamentation. Zuo sees Chen's overdose of salt (her oversalted performance) as a racial technique to cope with the impermanent identity of a minoritarian figure on- and off-screen.

If the salty coolness of Cheung and Chen is the spice added to these respective bland all-white casts, chapter 3 investigates how pungent Chinese female bodies are situated in liberal and colonial atmospheres as unwelcome guests. In *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994), Bai Ling—as Myca, an incestuous femme fatale who is ultimately graphically murdered—embodies the dystopic limits of tolerance of 1990s American multiculturalism. Zuo explores Bai’s off-screen “hot mess” performativity—a term she traces back to its colonialist origins and recasts as the requisite heating that racialized subjects must undergo “to join the melting pot of multiculturalism” (123).

With *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007), Zuo delineates the pungent backlash around the sexual performativity of Tang Wei as Wang Jiazhi, one who pursues her feminine jouissance and betrays the nation during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The rejection of its ambivalent moral messages by Chinese and Sinophone audiences once again reveals the limits of tolerance. The flavor of pungency, therefore, cannot erase the boundary between tolerance and intolerance.

In the next chapter, Zuo turns to the contested nature of Chineseness as an open signifier, exploring how Taiwanese stars Shu Qi and Vivian Hsu perform Chineseness in films directed by mainland male directors. Zuo correlates the embodied sweetness and tender beauty of women film stars with China’s “soft power” ambitions in the context of cross-strait conflicts. The stardom of Vivian Hsu—her indigenous identity, her embodied adolescent sexuality in the 1990s, and her performance of over-the-top cuteness—complicates the pervasive One China ideology in *The Knot* (Yin Li, 2006). When it comes to Shu Qi in *If You Are the One* (Feng Xiaogang, 2008) and its sequel, *If You Are the One 2* (Feng Xiaogang, 2010), the extradiegetic Taiwanese-ness of Shu similarly complements the character’s hesitation and recalcitrance in a romantic relationship with a mainland man.

The final chapter shifts attention away from glamorous movie stars to explore how the racial sourness of Asian-American comedic performers envisions a refusal of the hegemonic capitalist order. By describing Charlyne Yi’s improvisational performance on YouTube videos as “off-beat” and “quirky,” Zuo refers to the notion of anacrusis, connecting Fred Moten’s discussion of anacrusis as an aesthetic form to the Nietzschean embrace of chaos. Meanwhile, in the mockumentary *Paper Heart* (Nicholas Jasenovec, 2009), Yi’s offbeat rhythms provide a sense of genderqueerness that deviates from the norm of heterosexual romance.

Both Ali Wong and Charlyne Yi, according to Zuo, “sour the charm of the ornamental Asian beauty by humorously over- and underperforming their sexuality” (232). Zuo

zooms into the vulgar materialism in Wong’s two star-making stand-up specials, *Baby Cobra* (Netflix, 2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (Netflix, 2018), where Wong wields her sour cynicism to overturn the dominant moral, social, and political order. The racial sourness of Yi and Wong produces affective responses to the model minority myth in American society.

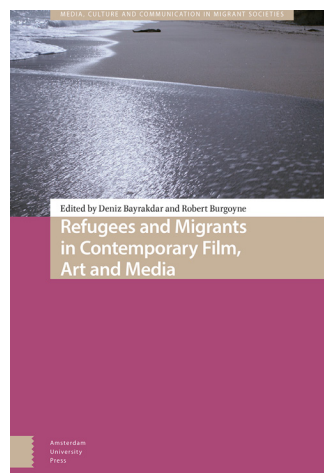
Zuo’s close reading of Chinese female stars is theoretically engaged and convincingly argued. Among the growing literature in Chinese and Sinophone cinemas, what distinguishes *Vulgar Beauty* is the way it constructs a fresh critical framework for understanding feminine beauty. With Zuo’s theoretical perspective and erudite analysis, *Vulgar Beauty* is a necessary addition to aesthetic theory and critical theories of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

FENGYUN ZHANG is a doctoral candidate in cinema and media studies at UCLA. Her research interests include Chinese cinema, transnational media flow, and media urbanism.

BOOK DATA Mila Zuo, *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. \$104.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper. 312 pages.

## HANNAH HUSSAMY

*Refugees and Migrants in Contemporary Film, Art and Media*, edited by Deniz Bayraktar and Robert Burgoyne



How might film, art, and media move beyond merely acknowledging the unprecedented scale and urgency of migration and displacement and begin to generate new language through which to respond to these realities? What insights into the interior lives and experiences of migrants are film, art, and media capable of providing? How do cultural

products address a more extensive range of experiences of migration and displacement, including trauma and loss, without reducing migrants to “media objects” (12)? These are a few of the concerns that circulate through this collection, which developed out of the Twentieth New Directions in Turkish Film Studies Conference: Cinema and Migration, held in Istanbul in 2019.

As part of their introduction to the collection, editors Deniz Bayraktar and Robert Burgoyne emphasize