

# ■ Flaneuse or Innocent: Blind Women in Chinese-Language Visual Culture in the New Millennium

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## Abstract

An attempt to integrate disability studies with Sinophone studies, the article locates the models of the blind flaneuse and the sweet innocent in Chinese-language visual cultural texts. These texts are from the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the rise of China and neoliberalism loom ever larger. The type for the sweet innocent is Charles Chaplin's *City Lights*, in which a blind girl, sweet and innocent, passively awaits help from male benefactors. In opposition to the dependent sweet innocent, who is taught to stay at home to avoid participation in the city, the blind flaneuse, a notion inspired by Walter Benjamin's flaneur and modified by feminist and disability studies scholars, insists on venturing into the urban scene largely on her own. Zhang Yimou's film *Happy Times* focuses on a blind girl, pitied by a group of able-bodied benefactors who manipulate her trust, who decides to seek independence as a blind flaneuse. In *The Eye* from Hong Kong, the blind girl as a flaneuse supported by a disability-friendly city is ironically transformed into a sweet innocent, relying on a male professional after a well-intentioned sight-restoring optical surgery is imposed on her body. In the pictorial book *Sound of Colors* by the acclaimed artist Jimmy in Taiwan, the blind girl, who relishes more colors in her mind's eye than the able-

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bodied citizens who are bored with their colorless everyday life, affirms her self-reliance through her complicated but regulated survival skills in the city; however, likely motivated by neoliberalist logic, the adaptations of *Sound of Colors* work to undermine this blind girl's autonomy and impose companionship upon her. Singapore's *Be With Me* reveals how an ethical relation of trust can be maintained in a global city by featuring a senior woman whose multiple disabilities challenge the manifold biases against gendered and disabled minorities.

**Keywords:** disability, Zhang Yimou, Pang Brothers, Jimmy Liao, Wong Kar-wai, Singapore

This article focuses on representative texts in Chinese-language visual culture in the first years of this new millennium: the films *Happy Times* 幸福時光 (China, Zhang Yimou 張藝謀, 2000); *The Eye* 見鬼 (Hong Kong, Pang Brothers 彭氏兄弟, 2002); the pictorial book *Sound of Colors* 地下鐵 (Taiwan, Jimmy Liao 幾米, 2001) and its film adaptation (Hong Kong, Joe Ma, 2003); *Be With Me* (Singapore, Eric Khoo, 2005). These texts are similar not only because each foregrounds a disabled heroine, but also because they are set against the background of the oft-cited “Rise of China,” a grand narrative inextricably associated with global neoliberalism at the turn of the new millennium. These texts appeared during the preparations for spectacular events nominally mounted for disabled citizens, the 2008 Beijing Paralympics and the 2009 Taipei Deaflympics Games, which promoted Beijing and Taipei as players in global capitalism in the humanitarian dress of honoring the disabled worldwide. The blind figures in the text stand on the one hand in stark contrast to these enormously self-congratulatory global cities and on the other hand owe to those very cities the existence of a commoditized visual culture where the texts were produced and reproduced.

Drawing on recent advances in disability studies, I focus on both the blind woman and her negotiation with the urban environment where she is located. The environment in question includes both the non-interpersonal and the interpersonal: a physical infrastructure that can impede the blind woman’s mobility or even threaten her survival; the urban dwellers who may ignore, cheat, confine, or overprotect her because of her disability. I am more concerned with the interpersonal environment, and thus the question of ethics: the proper ways in which the blind woman, the marginalized other in the city, ought to be treated. Inspired by Annette Baier, a philosopher known for her discussion of trust in moral philosophy, I propose that the notion of trust saturates the thoughts on the blind woman and her hostile or patronizing environment. Each of the characters under discussion is intricately embedded in diverse relations of trust.

Admittedly, representations of the blind in Chinese-language visual culture are scattered throughout history, across regions, and in different forms (television soap operas, photography, comic books, etc.), but I choose to focus on texts that are easily circulated as transnational commodities across and beyond Chinese-speaking areas. Readily accessible to the wider international audience, they can serve as basic texts for transregional discussions; all are readily available in North America and Western Europe, where interest in Chinese-language cultural creations continues to grow.

## Two Models: At Large or At Home

Two models describe the ways in which the blind woman takes shape in each text. One is the blind “flâneuse,” who is expected to move around in the city in the mode of Walter Benjamin’s flâneur, seemingly unaffected by her lack of sight (Benjamin 35-66). The other, by contrast, is “the sweet innocent,” who is watched over by a typically male benefactor and actively prevented from loitering in the city. Whereas the former is at large and exposed to unexpected threats, the latter is protected from dangers or even confined at home.

I find the notion of the blind flâneuse in David Serlin’s discussion of Helen Keller’s shopping. A disability studies scholar, Serlin, translates Benjamin’s conventional flâneur doubly into the blind flâneuse, and cites Keller as an example: gendered female rather than male, and embodied as disabled rather than able-bodied (Serlin 193-208). The model of “the blind flâneuse” for its connotation of mobility in the city seems to describe better the blind figure than the more general “blind woman,” which implies neither motion nor urbanity. Nonetheless, while attracted to the notion of the blind flâneuse, I also recognize the warning from feminist critic Janet Wolff, who focuses on the challenges to women in the city. She has long cautioned that the notion of a flâneuse, or the possibility of a female version of a flâneur, is an illusion prior to the twentieth century. Where Benjamin’s flâneur enjoys his strolls alone in the streets nonchalantly without being noticeable or noticed, the imagined flâneuse, with her crucial sex difference, is barred from anonymous participation in the city. Only when women started to become consumers and employees outside of the home did the female version of the flâneur become imaginable (Wolff 37-48).

Whereas Serlin is optimistic that even a blind woman such as Helen Keller can be as mobile as a flâneuse, Wolff is concerned that sex difference will always prevent a woman from flânerie. Between the two poles of optimist and pessimist, cultural studies scholar Elizabeth Wilson challenges Wolff by noting that, in nineteenth-century Europe, the flâneuse actually participates in the city and the male flâneur as a socially marginalized character turns out to be less carefree than Wolff presumes (Wilson 72-89). The flâneur envisioned by Baudelaire and Benjamin appears to be free, as Wilson warns in the chapter “The Invisible Flâneur” in her *Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women*, partly because the social conditions that bind the flâneur are hidden from view. If Wolff pessimistically announces the impossibility of the flâneuse and presumes that women in the city are destined to be victims, Wilson, hoping to empower women in the city, prefers to affirm the viability of the flâneuse, arguing that urban women can resist subjugation. Just as the flâneur is not fully emancipated, neither is the

flaneuse entirely restricted.

Faced with these three positions of two poles and the proverbial middle ground, I posit an alternative neither taking the flaneuse for granted nor unconditionally denying its existence. This outlook recognizes the resilience of the marginal flaneuse by attempting to link Wilson (who does not discuss disabilities) with Serlin (who does not consider the female sex as a liability), and contends that the blind woman, presumed doubly distanced from flanerie owing to both her sex and disability, can find her way almost safely and even fully in the open, under certain circumstances.

While the model of the flaneuse should be estimated with caution, the model of the sweet innocent, which has been always comfortably subsumed the blind, should be interrogated with no less wariness. In his *Cinema of Isolation*, an encyclopedic history of disabilities in first-world cinema, Martin F. Norden notes that “sweet innocents” are stereotypically disabled characters perfect in every aspect except for their disabilities (Norden 33-36). A memorable early example of the sweet innocent is found in *City Lights* (Charles Chaplin, 1931), in which a blind flower girl (largely seated and immobile in this silent film) is cared for by the little tramp. The blind girl is noted for her beauty; even writer Jorge Luis Borges, who himself became blind, emphasizes how much he enjoys the extraordinary beauty of the blind girl in his otherwise negative review of *City Lights* (Borges 3-5). The sweet innocent does not stand alone but always exists in relation to a man; she is characterized with markers of bodily performance (blind), sex (female), age (youthful), and sexual orientation (tied to a man rather than another woman). She is diametrically opposed to the blind flaneuse: whereas the blind flaneuse is imagined to enjoy a certain negotiated or compromised freedom in general, the sweet innocent is watched over by and thus bound to a caring man in the name of doing good for her.

### **The Flower Girl Leaves Home: *Happy Times***

Both film scholar Rey Chow and Asian American scholar David Leiwei Li interpret *Happy Times* primarily as a critique of global capitalism (Chow 673-88; Li 293-317). Although their concern with the sociopolitical context is indispensable, my discussion differs from theirs by emphasizing that the film is also a sophisticated expose of an ableist society that manipulates the disabled. As is typical of a Chinese film industry that commonly bases films on fiction, *Happy Times* is adapted from a novella by Mo Yan, a Nobel Prize laureate. Curiously, the original novella mentions no blind character at all; the blind heroine

in the film is invented by the crew of the film rather than by Mo Yan. *Happy Times* thus becomes less similar to Mo Yan's work than to Chaplin's *City Lights*, although the makers of *Happy Times* were worried about the imposing influence of *City Lights*, according to Gui Zi 鬼子, scriptwriter of the film (Gui Zi 272). The crews' fear of the legacy of *City Lights* ends up, ironically, urging them to inherit it more effectively.

Like *City Lights*, the plot of *Happy Times* features a blind woman (who also serves as eye candy) is paired with a male benefactor. *Happy Times* is dominated by a pseudo-Freudian triangle of a family romance: the father figure is Old Zhao, an unmarried senior worker, the mother figure is a nameless woman whom Old Zhao is dating, and the child is Little Wu, a blind girl who is the nameless woman's stepdaughter. The *City Lights* scenario takes place between the Little Wu (virtually the flower girl) and Old Zhao (the tramp). Both Little Wu and Old Zhao are attached to, and conditioned by, their prosthetic artificial families. The unmarried Zhao's "family" consists of his mostly retired coworkers, who interact with him in a spirit of socialist camaraderie. Such a prosthetic family is called a "danwei" 單位, which literally means "work unit."<sup>1</sup> The *danwei* in the movie, as a residue of the socialist legacy, survives on the margin of the rapidly growing city of Dalian (as shown by the street signs in the movie), where everything from the past (from the buildings and to the intangible mores) has been torn down and replaced by something more profitable. Dalian thus serves as a synecdoche of today's China on the rise. The first encounter between Little Wu and Old Zhao is at the apartment of Little Wu's stepmother, whom he tries to impress with the disguise of a well-off gentleman and bouquets of roses. Both the image of the bogus gentleman and the bouquets are strongly evocative of the bouquet-carrying tramp in *City Lights*. The penniless Old Zhao, like the tramp, is actually a bricoleur who recycles withered roses into presentable bouquets.

As soon as Little Wu appears in the narrative, Old Zhao's attention to the stepmother is distracted by Little Wu's corporeal presence, which Old Zhao sees for the first time; he is startled by what he sees. This "first encounter," the first face-to-face experience between the disabled and the able-bodied, as discussed in American disability studies,<sup>2</sup> disturbs the able-bodied person confronted by the corporeal other in similar ways that a "normal" person would react to another ethnicity or another sexual orientation. According to Rosemarie Garland-

<sup>1</sup> See *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Xiaobo Lu and Elizabeth J. Perry.

<sup>2</sup> Tobin Siebers locates relatively earlier discussions, in the 1960s and 1980s, of the first encounters between the disabled and the able-bodied (182-216).

Thomson, a pioneer in American disability studies, when an able-bodied person sees a disabled other for the first time, this able-bodied subject “might feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol” (12). Shocked by the first encounter with the disabled other, the able-bodied self is at a loss, not knowing how to respond to the other, whether the self should reach out (to assist the other) or retreat (to avoid embarrassing the other). The first encounter happens to Old Zhao and many other (male) characters in the visual texts under discussion; they are disturbed upon seeing the blind women at first, but become fond of them despite, or actually because of, their blindness.

The shock at the first meeting, during which it is the sighted (and thus privileged) rather than the disabled (and thus underprivileged) who is unsettled, is amplified by the shock at the second exposure. This time, Little Wu is so scantily clad that her body's outline is exposed to him. On the first occasion, the man is shocked to find the girl is disabled, while on the second he is even more shocked to find the disabled can be so sensuous. Later on, evicted by her unfriendly stepmother from home, the blind girl angrily walks into heavy traffic, whose monstrous noises ominously signify the fatal threat of the city. At the sight of the solitary girl overwhelmed by the loud traffic, Old Zhao decides to take her under his wing. In the process of winning the confidence of the blind girl, Old Zhao has tried to situate Little Wu and himself in a relation of trust. As Annette Baier warns, “trust is accepted vulnerability to another's power to harm one, a power inseparable from the power to look after some aspect of one's good” (133). The blind girl, passively contained in a relation of trust, has her vulnerability exposed to both villains and benefactors. Even when the girl is in good hands, in Baier's words, she “is necessarily vulnerable to the limits of that good will” (99). The protector of the blind girl, as a caregiver, exemplifies the person “in the best position to harm something [that is valued]” (100). This something to be harmed could be the blind girl's autonomy: her right to her own body and her right to her own perception of the situations that accommodate her body.

Whereas in *City Lights* the tramp's care of the flower girl is intermittent, Old Zhao's supervision of Little Wu's life is total, even smothering. Old Zhao's management of Little Wu's body transforms the once-plain Little Wu into a radiant beauty: after having worked for him, she smiles in a flowery dress he has bought her, as if she were the flower girl reincarnate. He buys the girl's dress by pawning his outdated television set; in other words, an old apparatus used for visual pleasure, the television, is replaced by a new apparatus, the dress, to offer visual pleasure to those who can see the girl. It is both interesting and dis-

turbing to know that *Happy Times* intentionally capitalizes on the image of the beautiful flower girl archetype in the broader Asian market. As the trailer on the official Japanese website for *Happy Times* proudly claims, the actress Dong Jie, who was to play Little Wu, was chosen from fifty thousand “beautiful girls” who applied for the role.<sup>3</sup> With a beauty contest as a marketing strategy, the casting process reinforces the trans-nationally circulated stereotype that the blind in a movie must be rendered competitively good-looking.

The film permits no amorous scenario between the fatherly Old Zhao and the girlish Little Wu, a relation that might smack of pedophilia or incest; however, the film time and again implies that Little Wu is an erotic figure for Old Zhao. In one allegedly comic episode, Little Wu, again almost naked after taking a shower, accidentally locks him in her bedroom because she of course does not see him. Although the narration of the film soon clarifies that they have not shared the same bed, this scene has already teased both the characters and their voyeuristic audience. The film cannot repress the desire to produce a comic skit on blindness, taking part in the age-old tradition of entertaining the audience at the expense of the disabled. As Norden notes, early dramatic films and the early twentieth-century “slapstick comedies” relied heavily on humiliations of the disabled (26); this practice is also found in Chinese cinema. The skit in *Happy Times* is more than a slip of the tongue (of the desire to eroticize the disabled); the comic-cum-erotic skit effectively contradicts the overall repression of quasi-incest in the narrative.

Blind characters are routinely deceived by sighted characters in movies; Little Wu is no exception. She has been ushered by Old Zhao into a world of falsities. His hotel, like the massage parlor, is built inside a deserted factory; her bourgeois clients are his *danwei* members. While the tramp in *City Lights* is a wage laborer in a factory in the growing American economy, these *danwei* members are given neither pay nor work in an abandoned factory in a neoliberal Chinese economy that rapidly phases out its factories and the workers of the socialist tradition. As the false clients cannot afford to consume any luxury such as a session of massage, they cheat on Little Wu by paying her not with real banknotes but plain paper for her service. This false world is made of bricolage in two senses: Old Zhao and his *danwei* members recycle garbage to create this world; bricolage also partially consists of speech acts, which are as free as the waste discharged from the city. The power of speech acts, especially useful in manipulating the blind, is emphasized by a younger *danwei* member who

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.foxjapan.com/movies/happytimes/> (accessed June 1, 2012).



argues that verbal descriptions do things to the blind: you describe the factory as a hotel to the blind girl, and a hotel materializes for her. As the speech acts transform the factory into a massage parlor in a hotel, acts beyond speech such as watching (on the part of the sighted) and touching (on the part of the blind) change the same space into a circus for the *danwei* members. Historically, the disabled have been often recruited to perform at a circus to entertain the able-bodied patrons.<sup>4</sup> The *danwei* members are shown as the audience hovering over the massage parlor, which features a beautiful blind girl massaging her fake clients. The girl shows her own legerdemain, her sleight of hand: her massaging hands are magically therapeutic to the *danwei* members. Meanwhile, her hands function as the legerdemain defined by Michel de Certeau in his *Practice of Everyday Life* (37), a tactic with which she earns a living. Yet she is paid no real money, and the massage parlor-cum-circus is further transformed into a sweatshop exploiting her labor.

There are two versions of *Happy Times* with different endings. Whereas Chow and Li respectively analyze the one ending that mollifies the anxiety toward disabilities, I turn to the other ending, which accentuates the uneasy relation of urban spaces to disabilities. In that version, it is the able-bodied man, Old Zhao, rather than the blind girl, Little Wu, who is eventually severely injured in traffic. A traffic accident in popular culture is usually a banal plot twist, but this accident, which exemplifies what disability studies scholar Ato Quayson calls “radical contingency” (17), is rife with meaning in the disability-themed film. Because of radical contingency, “Every/body is subject to chance and contingent events” (Quayson 17). I would add that not only every/body but also every relation of trust is subject to contingency. Unaware of the accident, Little Wu leaves Old Zhao’s tiny apartment (a space for a cozy, but patronizing, suffocating relationship) for the open street (a space for unprotected, solitary autonomy) all by herself. In other words, Little Wu chooses to reject the model of the sweet innocent at home in order to adopt the model of the blind flaneuse at large.

The blind’s cognition of their own precarious lives, rather than their ignorance of them, characterizes the endings of both *City Lights* and *Happy Times*. During the famous reunion of the flower girl and the tramp in *City Lights*, the newly-sighted girl recognizes the tramp not because of her newly acquired vision, but because of her tactile sense: by holding his hand. *Happy Times* also ends with a reunion. This reunion, however, is uncanny, or the Freudian *un-*

<sup>4</sup> Many researches in disabilities studies have made this point, such as Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, passim.

*heimlich*, for it takes place in their absence: he is hospitalized, and she has left for the street. Ironically, their reunion is also made at home: he has left a letter forged in her father's name to please her; she has left a cassette tape on which her confession is recorded. The Zhao-Wu reunion happens as a *danwei* member reads the (deceitful) letter to a tape recorder playing the (truthful) cassette, but this virtual reunion is doomed to be a miscommunication: his letter is written on the presumption that she, being blind, never recognizes any lie; her cassette emphasizes that she, despite her blindness, has been aware of all the lies. In a tone mixed with gratitude and irritation, she interrogates Old Zhao and his *danwei* members about deceiving her with all the tricks that she easily detected. If the *danwei* members are good at bricolage, so is she: her legerdemain has collected informative fragments of lived factuality.

*Happy Times* is all about the management of a blind person, but it is exceptionally silent about the apparatuses of the Chinese state, which are devoted to managing a blind citizenry. The film dictates that Little Wu relies on Old Zhao, because she has been cast out by her family and has no other social relation, as if there were no law protecting the disabled population or institutions designed for the blind in China. Actually, laws to defend the rights of the disabled were proclaimed before the film was made, and free education for the blind in China has been available for decades.<sup>5</sup> The detailed statistical surveys of the blind in China demonstrate that the state has been aware of the needs of its blind citizenry.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the makers of the film knew that they were in a society where the infrastructure for the blind did exist. Gui Zi notes that, because of the “national temperament” (*guoqing* 國情) of China, the crew could not represent the disabled in a negative light, or they would be subject to protest by the association of the disabled and censorship from the party-state (Gui Zi 272).<sup>7</sup> Although the crew of this film worried about pressure from the organized institutions, such institutions are almost invisible but for some cryptic traces in the finished movie. For example, during the fake job interview, Old Zhao asks

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the city of Jinan 濟南 (much smaller than the metropolitans Beijing and Shanghai), a school for blind children was established as early as 1959. In 2001, tuition and boarding were free for its 81 students (Liu 474).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, one comprehensive survey of the population with visual impairments was done across mainland China in April, 1987. This survey located 70,000 citizens with visual impairments, and addressed such differences as gender, ethnicity, educational status, and employment status in this citizenry. *Shili canjiren ziliao* (*Data of the Visually Impaired People*), ed. The Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Similar ambitious surveys of the disabled are abundant in China.

<sup>7</sup> See *Canjiren jiaoyu tiaoli* (*Regulations of the Education for the Disabled*) in *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiaoshi fa, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo yiwu jiaoyu fa* (*Rules of the Teachers in the People's Republic of China, The Rules of the Obligatory Education in the People's Republic of China*). The book does not indicate the editor.

Little Wu if she has been to a school for the blind, but it does not matter how she answers. After the perfunctory question, nobody is ever interested again if she has been involved in any pedagogical situation. Although her status as a professional masseuse is heavily emphasized, nobody ever wonders how she has become such a professional, as if this blind person were simply born a skillful massager. Such an omission of her potential educational background is particularly noteworthy, as *Happy Times* is thoroughly aware of the educational relation between Old Zhao and his disciple Fu. Fu does not call address Old Zhao by his name; rather, Fu calls him “*shifu*”<sup>8</sup> 師父, which literally means “teacher.” Fu’s respectful salutation to Old Zhao implies that the senior Old Zhao coached the junior Fu in a factory. Whereas the film consistently underlines the educational relation between them, it omits any reference to Little Wu’s educational relation. Such omissions of Little Wu’s social relations, which should have been engendered by various institutions, enable the film to isolate forcibly Little Wu, who is given no choice but acceptance of Old Zhao’s “good” will.

### The Sweet Innocent Returns Home: *The Eye*

In the texts under discussion, the protagonists are female, solitary, ordinary, and situated in the city. Being female and solitary at the same time, these heroines are made to embody vulnerability, which is supposed to elicit humanist reactions from the viewer. However, in the history of Chinese-language visual culture, many blind characters are neither female nor alone. For instance, lithographs that portray the blind can be found in the late-nineteenth-century *Dian-shizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (*Touch-Stone Studio Pictorial*, 1884–1898), a treasury of Chinese-language visual culture.<sup>9</sup> These lithographs portray the blind as an organized community of men, signifying a threat to the normative social order rather than vulnerable to it.

Furthermore, the blind women under discussion are ordinary persons in contemporary cities, and thus are unlike the numerous extraordinary figures in pre-modern settings. I thus exclude those blind women depicted as “knights errant” in popular visual culture prior to the emergence of modernity, who are

<sup>8</sup> This novella by Mo Yan is available in English as *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*.

<sup>9</sup> One example is “*Xiazi saihui*” 瞎子賽會 (“The Festival of the Blind”), in which a huge religious rally of blind men attracts attention from sighted people (Wei 96). Another example is “*Jinu kuanggu*” 激怒狂瞽 (“Infuriating an Insane Blind Man”), whose picture portrays a blind entertainer being humiliated by his patron’s family but the accompanying text of the picture explains, after this humiliation, four hundred blind men show up to protest (Lu 122).

actually more than able-bodied rather than disabled, blessed with extraordinary powers. In Taiwanese cinema (*Taiyupian*), for example, the year 1966 alone witnessed four titles capitalizing on blind women in the tradition of Chinese martial arts movies.<sup>10</sup> The film *House of Flying Daggers* 十面埋伏 (*Shimian maifu*, Yimou Zhang, 2004) also features a blind woman who is magically acrobatic. These popular films merit discussion on their own characteristics, but at present I am concerned with blind women dealing with the “everydayness” that is discussed by de Certeau. As de Certeau criticizes the normative society as belittling the users of everyday things (xxiv), I associate his emphasized users of everydayness with the blind women I discuss.

Although *The Eye* is a horror film predicated on the association of eyesightedness with the eerie and thus transgresses the realm of the quotidian, the work is relevant to the discussion because of its matter-of-fact portrayal of a blind girl’s everyday life in Hong Kong. *The Eye* differs from *Happy Times* in two primary aspects. Firstly, the heroine in *Happy Times* is entrusted to merely one single trusted relation, Old Zhao (and by extension, his *danwei*) in the city of Dalien, where public support for the blind seems nonexistent. In *The Eye*, however, various relations of trust can be found in the city of Hong Kong, where the blind are intricately interwoven in a support network. The heroine Mun is a participant in a Hong Kong community for people with visual impairments, where other blind denizens and social workers interact with each other in a friendly fashion. In the community, she plays the violin not for subsistence but for something beyond monetary calculation: for social connection with other blind musicians, and for self-affirmation. Such a trust-laden network is not even remotely possible for Little Wu in *Happy Times*.

Secondly, Little Wu in *Happy Times* is not given any substantial prospect of an optical cure, but Mun in *The Eye* is fortunate enough to receive one surgery. The infrastructure of medical care for the blind is pointedly ignored in *Happy Times*, but is foregrounded in *The Eye*. However, like the American film *At First Sight* (Irwin Winkler, 1999) written by Oliver Sacks, legendary writer on disabilities, in which the once-blind protagonist suffers after an optical surgery and hopes to return to the old days of blindness, *The Eye* doubts the allegedly redemptive power of the optical cure for the heroine by showing the result of the cure leading not to happy times but to ghost sightings (the Chinese title of

<sup>10</sup> The four titles are *San mangnü* (*A Triad of Blind Women*) 三盲女, *Mangnü shiling* (*The Blind Woman Commander*) 盲女司令, *Mangnü jizhongying* (*The Concentration Camp of Blind Women*) 盲女集中營, and *Mangnü da taowang* (*The Breakout of Blind Women*) 盲女大逃亡, according to *Taiyupian shidai* (*Era of the Taiwanese-Language Film*) 台語片時代.

*Happy Times* literally means “happy times,” whereas that of *The Eye* is “ghost sightings”).

Before her cornea transplant surgery, the blind Mun is very nearly a flâneuse, independently roaming between public and private spaces. Admittedly, she is markedly different from the classic flâneur (male and able-bodied); however, as a blind woman out of the home, she already demonstrates impressive autonomy, despite a dependence on her familiar routes and trusted acquaintances. After the seemingly redemptive surgery, Mun becomes a post-blind person, or a sighted person-in-training. Ironically, though, she becomes a more dependent person than she was previously. As a post-blind person, she is assigned to Dr. Wah in order to be re-visioned as a sighted person. Her dependence on Wah, who soon becomes her boyfriend, gradually replaces her relationships with the community of blind musicians, which starts to isolate her because of her acquisition of vision (or her loss of blindness). After the surgery, she in fact becomes more similar to a sweet innocent than a flâneuse. Not as autonomous as before, she becomes dependent on the medically authoritative Wah.

A transplant does not guarantee a trajectory from a non-normal body to a perfectly normal body; in fact, the trajectory might deviate dramatically from the imagined normal body, an experience analogous to what the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy experienced after his heart transplant, as described in his *L'Intrus*.<sup>11</sup> Nancy finds that the older part of himself rejects the newer part of himself, as his immune system resists the heart newly transplanted to him (8), and realizes that “medical practices thus renders the graffee a stranger to himself” (9). Mun also struggles with her new cornea, which is already a part of her. She is overwhelmed with ghost sightings, which are signs of the resentful ghosts haunting every corner of the seemingly complacent Hong Kong. When she cannot see, she is generally cheerful; when she can see, she is so horrified by what she sees that she becomes depressed. She does something evocative of *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967), a thriller that capitalizes on the blindness of a victim played by Audrey Hepburn. Having persistently been attacked by a sighted man, Hepburn’s blind character, in despair, resists the hostile world of sight by destroying all the light bulbs she can find. Darkness restores her autonomy, which feels safer than a relation with others whom she cannot trust. In other words, a blind woman can improvise, make decisions, and prove her own agency. Similarly, Mun climbs on a chair to remove a light bulb, in a way simi-

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Intrus*, trans. Susan Hanson (2002). The translator leaves the French title untranslated intentionally, but indicates that “l'intrus” might mean “intruder” and “trespasser,” among others (14n2).

lar to a suicidal attempt, so that she, having fallen back into darkness, can resist the invasive and unsettling sight. The surgery brings her an unexpected curse rather than the anticipated redemption.

It turns out that her new cornea has been procured from Ling, a cursed girl who had committed suicide in rural Thailand, whose only connection to the global matrix seems to be the (legal or illegal) harvesting of her organs. To exorcize the curse on her eyes, Mun flies with Wah to Thailand. Once in the village in Thailand, however, Mun's relationship with Wah, a man of modernity, has to compete with her connection to the dead Ling, a woman of the past. Whereas Wah guards and even surveils Mun's body, Ling is more intimate with Mun by inhabiting and haunting her body. If Ling provides Mun surrogate eyes, Mun offers Ling surrogate corporeality in return. The more ethically challenging first encounter occurs not so much between Mun and Wah, as between Mun and Ling. At a moment recalling the Lacanian mirror phase, where the baby-in-training misrecognizes its own image, Mun first sees Ling when she scrutinizes her own photograph. It turns out that the face in Mun's photograph belongs to Ling. Mun experiences both an ethical crisis (how to relate herself to the other) and an identity crisis (how to recognize oneself). The self (Mun) sees the other (the unfamiliar woman later identified as Ling) rather than herself; instead, she has to accept that the self and the other are one and the same. She feels like Nancy, who finds himself "more double or multiple than ever" after his medical procedure (4). Mun eventually decides to reach out to her own "intruder," Ling, thus finding a resolution to her ethical and identity crises, a resolution that creates Mun's relation of trust with her intruder.

As soon as she pacifies Ling's ghost and bids it farewell, Mun loses her eyesight in an accidental explosion of vehicles in a bustling city, presumably Bangkok. On the geopolitical map, the global city of Bangkok and the rising city of Dalien impose dangers from modernity (explosions and a car accident, respectively), whereas the countryside, so out of sync with modernity, turns out to be therapeutic. Radical contingency catapults the re-blinded Mun back to a relation with Wah in Hong Kong, where she cannot be a flaneuse-like blind person supported by the blind community as before, in multiple relations of trust with various community members, but has to play the role of a sweet innocent paired with Wah, in whom she now has to invest all her trust. Either Mun's narcissistic self-reliance or her homoerotic if noncorporeal intimacy with another woman is to be corrected into her normalized heterosexual relation with a loving man. While the ending demonstrates that the re-blinded Mun can enjoy happy times like other marriageable or married sighted women and thus suggests that blindness does not necessarily foreclose happiness, this happy ending accentuates the

necessity of the model of the sweet innocent and erases the viability of the blind flaneuse model. Whereas the blind girl in *Happy Times* finally chooses to be independent from men, the blind heroine in *The Eye* ultimately accepts the status quo with a man, without bothering to think of her own agency.

### From the Nonchalant to the Paranoid: *Sounds of Colors*

Whereas the once autonomous Mun in *The Eye* happily accepts her role as a sweet innocent, the former flower girl Little Wu rejects a domesticated role and chooses adventure on her own as if she were a flaneuse. As the heroine constantly mixes in crowds in urban space, she seems to relate to nobody. She even does without a name, which seems a necessary first step in interpersonal communication. Such a stark picture of a girl without vision, a name, or social relations would hardly seem to be attractive on the market, but *Sound of Colors* is likely the best-selling book on disabilities in recent Chinese-language culture. Wong Kar-wai 王家衛, world-famous director in Hong Kong, bought the right to produce a film based on the book, for he recognized the book's phenomenal popularity in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China.<sup>12</sup> Printed in a format like *The Cat in the Hat* series and evoking the style of Jean-Jacques Sempé, *Sound of Colors* is drawn and written by the Taipei-based Jimmy Liao, a cancer survivor commonly known as "Jimmy" to the Chinese-language reader.

In eighty pages, *Sound of Colors* unfolds a sequence of watercolor paintings showing a fifteen-year-old girl always in motion, regular, trained, and self-disciplined. The book dutifully depicts the girl's Sisyphean routines of subway commuting, one cycle repeated after another. She walks into a subway entrance with a white stick, the stick conventionally adopted by the blind, climbs from the upper left corner of the verso diagonally down to a platform at the lower right corner of the verso, squeezes herself into a packed train, and climbs from the lower left corner of the recto diagonally up to a subway exit at the upper right corner of the recto. The girl greets nobody during her commute, as if she never bumps into anybody she knows. With her tinted glasses and occasional smiles, the girl looks nondescript rather than either attractive or unattractive. The drawings are laced with short sentences, which serve more as the girl's interior monologue than explanatory notes to the reader or communications with any character in the book. It is never clear why she commutes or what her des-

<sup>12</sup> Jimmy Liao and Jet Tone Films Productions, *Dixiatie: dianying zhenchang jishi* (*Sound of Colors: The Treasured Notebook of the Film*). The book has no pagination.



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tinuation is. She does not go to a hospital (which would define her as a patient), a workplace (which would define her as a wage earner), or a shop (which would define her as a consumer).

In *Sound of Colors*, two worlds coexist: the one world, seen through the eyes of the able-bodied, is remarkable for its constraint, while the other world, in the mind's eye of the blind girl, is redolent of liberation. The first, normal world is drawn in low-saturated colors and is what the able-bodied passengers are supposed to see. By contrast, the alternative world is fantastical, with free-floating, richly saturated colors. The heroine's cycles of commuting exemplifies what de Certeau calls "pedestrian speech acts," where "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language" (97). During her pedestrian speech acts, the heroine, as a creative user of space, can be said to "transform each spatial signifier into something else" (de Certeau 98). She can see the "sound of colors," the English title of the picture book; the title recalls Charles Baudelaire's and Arthur Rimbaud's poetic experiments, in which visual signs are associated with the aural rather than the optical sense, as analyzed by such scholars as Naomi Schor (Schor 76-104). The myriad spectacles the heroine sees, such as stained glass and fairy tale figures, look markedly non-Chinese or generic, as global capitalism looms large.

Unlike the above texts that accentuate the local features of the global cities, this book created in Taipei notably shows no local characteristic of Taipei or in fact of any other Chinese-language city. The absence of a recognizable Taipei might be owing to the visual impairment of the heroine, who of course does not see the physical realities of the city. Nonetheless, in her mind's eye, these images she captures look like stock images of an imagined Europe as displayed in a shopping mall. European poems, rendered in both Chinese and English translations, also decorate the beginning and end of *Sound of Color*: the book opens with a quotation from Wisława Szymborska's "We're Extremely Fortunate," and concludes with one from Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Blind Woman." The Szymborska quotation demonstrates that it is extremely fortunate to live in uncertainty, whereas Rilke's speaker announces that she senses colors as, and through, sounds, so that she, who relies on the aural rather than the visual, is not afraid of the eye-plucking Death. Both quotations affirm the values of the nonrational world of serendipity.

It remains a question whether this heroine is truly solitary. She claims she has fed her cat before she leaves home for the subway, but the cat does not appear in the book. Although a puppy—far from the standard service dog companion for the blind—follows rather than guides her in the book, the relation between the girl and the puppy, which stays physically distant from the girl,



remains vague. However, towards the end of the book,<sup>13</sup> the heroine suddenly bows on an imagined stage toward somebody unspecified (but clearly not toward the puppy). She announces, “I have always forgotten to say thanks to you. I thank you for always keeping me company.” This salutation is startling, for the heroine, preoccupied with herself, does not seem to recognize any “you” in the book at all. It is possible either that this you is the reader, who is supposed to follow the flaneuse all along, or that the heroine, who does without any partner, is sarcastically mocking the presumption that a blind girl must be assigned company.

The Chinese-language reader of *Sound of Colors* could be too attracted to “the imaginary of exoticism” and “the imaginary of modernity” in the book to find the blind girl’s autonomy deeply unsettling. “The imaginary of exoticism” is peopled by the visions of an imagined Europe, whereas “the imaginary of modernity” is represented by the subway system. The picture book’s original title in Chinese is “Subway,” which likely connotes innovation far more strongly to the Chinese-language reader than it does to the English-language one. Unlike their counterparts in first-world countries, subways are relatively new in Chinese-language cities: Beijing’s was inaugurated in 1969; Hong Kong’s in 1979; and Taipei’s, where Jimmy is based, in only 1997, just four years before the publication of the book. The imaginaries of exoticism and modernity effectively distract the Chinese-language reader from the basic life of the heroine so that the heroine is left alone to enjoy her autonomy.

A comparative reading of the Chinese original and the English adaptation reveals that the blind heroine’s autonomy is so discomfoting, as if the blind were never allowed to be left alone, that it is to be quietly diagnosed as a problem to be resolved. The English version adapted by Sarah L. Thomson, which has license to depart from the Chinese original, announces that the blind girl is guided by a butterfly in the way a blind pedestrian trusts a service dog.<sup>14</sup> In other words, an unlikely relation—with an insect—is imposed on the girl. The Chinese edition sends the message that uncertainty in life is to be savored, but this message is suppressed in the English adaptation, from which the quotations from Szyborska and Rilke, and the girl’s seemingly mysterious salutation to an invisible “you,” are all removed. It seems that the reader of the English text, unlike the reader of the Chinese original, cannot be distracted forcibly enough by the imaginaries of exoticism and modernity, that this reader cannot but look at

<sup>13</sup> The book has no pagination.

<sup>14</sup> The original edition shows the very same butterfly, whom she overhears but does not follow, or trust.

the bare life of the blind heroine. Thus, the heroine in the English adaptation is tailored to be less autonomous, less unpredictable, and thus more acceptable to the ableist mainstream.

Both the English adaptation and the film *Sound of Colors* (*Dei haa tit*. Joe Ma, dir. Wong Kar-wai, prod. 2003) attempt to deny the heroine's autonomy by providing her with some company. The nonchalant attitude of the blind girl in the Chinese book is overhauled in these adaptations, in which the blind girl is obsessed in her search for a companion to attach herself to. In the film, the blind girl even becomes paranoid in search of a man. Largely based in a realistically portrayed Hong Kong rather than the abstract locus of Jimmy's book, the film even interprets the blind heroine's acts of commuting, which look purposeless in Jimmy's book, as highly purposeful efforts to procure a boyfriend. The blind girl types her father (who does not appear in the pictorial book) a note in Braille, requesting a Christmas gift; reading her note, her father quickly decides to give her a boyfriend, as if a boyfriend were a commodity. The film emphasizes the Christmas season, which justifies both the romantic relations (not found in the book) and the transplantations of the stock images from Jimmy's book to the film.

The relation between the film's blind girl, Yeuk, and her boyfriend-to-be, Ming (played by the internationally acclaimed actor Tony Leung), both resembles and subverts the *City Lights* scenario. *City Lights* presumes the changeability of the blind girl and the immutability of the sighted man: she is to be corrected into a sighted person, but he, having always been "normal," goes without any alteration. However, in the Yeuk-Ming relation, Ming does not remain permanently sighted. Normally sighted man at the beginning of the film, he suddenly becomes a newly blind man in the middle, then abruptly becomes a sighted man again, or literally re-visioned. Pre-blind, post-sighted, and post-blind Ming is analogous to the heroine in *The Eye*. Both Ming in *Sound of Colors* and Mun in *The Eye*, and their relations with intimate others, are subject to radical contingency.

The Yeuk-Ming relation is characterized not by one single significant encounter but by several: she first meets with him as sighted, then re-knows him as newly blinded, and finally discovers him as re-visioned, as if he were three different people. Her relation with him is not simply unitary, but trifold. The first encounter is facilitated by Yeuk's father's visit to Ming, who is a matchmaker by profession. As the father tells Ming that he seeks a good man, Ming, not yet knowing about Yeuk, presumes the father is a gay man seeking a male partner. This skit of miscommunication, which might have been easily dismissed by the viewer, actually discloses the operation of the heteronormative ideology that is

also ableist. Serving as a warm-up before the first actual encounter between the blind Yeuk and the sighted Ming, this skit firstly implies that a gay customer consulting a matchmaking agent is a joking matter. Second, the skit functions as comic relief, which mollifies the tension between Yeuk and Ming, who looks tense and clumsy as soon as he sees the blind Yeuk in person. Third, the skit juxtaposes a gay man and a blind girl: they are made similarly undesirable customers-cum-commodities on the matchmaking market, which is heterosexist and ableist at the same time.

The chemistry between Yeuk and Ming does not materialize until the second encounter, after Ming suddenly becomes blind. Taking the initiative to visit the newly blind Ming, Yeuk as an experienced blind person urges Ming to visit a hospital and the community center for the blind, both of which will prepare Ming for the life of disability that is so new to him. At first, he avoids both places. The hospital diagnoses a once “normal” person as blind, and the center ushers that “normal” person into the world of the blind; eager to disavow his newly acquired disability, he rejects both institutions. Thanks to Yeuk’s persistent care, however, he is eventually transformed from a post-sighted person, or a blind person-in-training, into a blind one. At the center for the blind, which accommodates a Braille library, he takes lessons in walking with a white stick. Thus, he finally admits his own vulnerability, his trust of the other. He becomes so dependent on the blind girl that he presumes that he loves her. Both the films *The Eye* and *Sounds of Colors* pay close attention to the supportive matrix in Hong Kong, where community centers and health cares designed for the blind are envisioned to be available. Mun in the former and Ming in the latter enjoy a support system that is not necessarily available in many other global cities.

The third encounter occurs after Ming’s vision is miraculously restored—in front of a Christmas tree—in a department store, which ironically is one of the most effective healing loci. With his re-vision, he feels the able-bodied person’s guilt toward the permanently blind Yeuk, and fears he will be weaned from this girl; hence, he pretends to remain as blind as usual so that he can keep his fragile relation with her intact. His feigned blindness can hardly escape Yeuk, whose nonoptical perception detects his re-vision. Unspeakably disappointed, she immediately withdraws herself from her relationship with him, as his re-vision shatters the hierarchical equilibrium between them. This equilibrium is indeed hierarchical; as Baier notes, “trust can coexist, and has long coexisted, with contrived and perpetuated inequality” (131). The hierarchy in question presumes the subjugation of the disabled (Yeuk) to the able-bodied (Ming), and that of the newly blind (Ming) to the experienced blind (Yeuk). Nevertheless, since the film is a romantic comedy that rushes to a convenient happy ending,

Ming and Yeuk eventually, and suddenly, make up on Christmas Eve inside a department store.<sup>15</sup> This ending shows that everybody is happily united and every tension, including that between the disabled and the able-bodied, is easily removed by consumerism.

According to Jimmy, Wong Kar-wai wanted the film adaptation of *Sound of Colors* to deliver messages of hopefulness, in response not only to the dominance of horror films on the market but also to the traumatic experience of the SARS outbreak from 2002 to 2003.<sup>16</sup> The film *Sound of Colors* is intended both to offset such recent horror films as *The Eye* and to make the viewing public feel good. This feel-good happy ending certainly shields thorny problems from view, including the problem of trust. What Ming fears most in the film is shown to be the loss of his vision, whereas what Yeuk fears most is her loss of trust in Ming. If his normative vision is at the mercy of radical contingency, so is the trust upon which she depends. As a comedy, the film blithely glides over his once-harmed vision as well as her wounded belief in trust, as if trust were a non-issue. As the film transforms the nonchalant girl in Jimmy's book into a paranoid lover, the film itself is actually more cavalier to the felt challenges that the blind cannot avoid.

### **Towards a Blind Flanerie: *Be With Me***

It is an ableist presumption that the blind woman unilaterally depends on the sighted man, that she offers him no support of her own. However, like Little Wu in *Happy Times*, the blind character can be cynical about this dependence. It takes a long time for the suspicious Little Wu to trust Old Zhao, but it takes very little for her to leave him; as Baier warns, trust is difficult “to get started and never hard to destroy” (107). As analyzed earlier, the narrative of *Happy Times* isolates Little Wu so much that she is obliged to depend on Old Zhao. Yet this dependence, made out of bricolage, does not “feel” (for the optically disabled but tactilely sensitive Wu) as reliable as trust. Trust and a mere dependence, Baier warns, cannot be conflated, despite their similarity to each other (98-99).

As the blind do not necessarily want to depend on the sighted, contrary

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<sup>15</sup> A reviewer kindly reminds me that this episode might be inspired by both the legacy of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and the convention of such feel-good Hollywood productions as *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947), both of which dramatize the euphoria of Christmas.

<sup>16</sup> Jimmy Liao and Jet Tong, no pagination.

to the ableist common wisdom, the sighted depend on the blind. The sighted character is neither less vulnerable nor less in need of trust than the blind one. The sighted character might even, unwittingly or not, feel good about this seemingly burdensome relation in which the sighted supposedly help the blind, because this relation maintains the hierarchical equilibrium between the blind and the sighted, the other and the normative, the inferior and the superior. An example of the sighted expecting the blind to be trustworthy is given by Gui Zi, who notes that the makers of *Happy Times* once wondered if the blind girl should be portrayed as a villain, because they reasoned that villains must exist in actual life. They did not do so, however, in order to avoid protests by the association of the disabled in China and censorship from the party-state (Gui Zi 272). A question occurs: Why were they ever concerned whether the blind girl should be a villain? (How about any other marginalized identity group?)

The likely answer is located in the visual texts discussed above. The able-bodied have been concerned whether the disabled are trustworthy at least since the late nineteenth-century *Touch-Stone Studio Pictorial* and the earliest cinema. Blind villains are scattered and identifiable in the four thousand lithographs published by *Touch-Stone Studio Pictorial*; at the dawn of early cinema, blind and other disabled villains were also common (Norden 28). The *Happy Times* crew's near-paranoid suspicion of the blind character is a residual mistrust of the disabled. During the long century between *Touch-Stone Studio Pictorial*, when China was a defeated empire, and *Happy Times*, when China is an emerging superpower, the characters of disability in visual culture have been mostly transformed from trust-shattering villains into trust-needing innocents, despite the habitual hostility toward the disabled in everyday reality. The model of the sweet innocent who needs trust is preferred over the model of the blind flaneuse who does without trust in Chinese-language visual culture, as the sweet innocent guarantees the superiority of the able-bodied denizens much more fully than the blind flaneuse at large does.

The model of the sweet innocent tends to confirm the received relation of trust, while the blind flaneuse interrogates such a relation. The complacent confirmation is found in *The Eye*, the English edition of the book *Sounds of Colors*, and the film adaptation of that book, in all of which the *City Lights* scenario is reiterated to the audience's satisfaction. Meanwhile, the cynical interrogation can be detected in *Happy Times* and the Chinese original of *Sounds of Colors*, in both of which the *City Lights* scenario is upended.

I am concluding this article with *Be With Me*, an independent production about a blind woman in Singapore. It offers important insights into topics such as trust, blind flanerism, the *City Lights* scenario, and the "Chineseness" of

the visual culture under discussion. Ironically, *Be With Me* is particularly trustworthy and untrustworthy at the same time. On the one hand, it focuses on a senior citizen named Teresa, who is blind and mute in real life. The film shows Teresa swimming, comparing prices in a supermarket, and even teaching various skills to students. Teresa is a bona fide flaneuse. Yet, on the other hand, the film also “pollutes” this documentary in a heavy-handed fashion by interweaving fictional characters and plots with Teresa’s real life. For instance, inside the framework of *Be With Me*, another drama features a forlorn lesbian teenager seeking a same-sex relationship in stark opposition to Teresa, who thrives without a relationship. While it seems to create faux-pas by mixing and matching the trustworthy and realistic Teresa with the fictional and thus less trustworthy characters, *Be With Me*, with its title suggesting the imperative of romantic companionship, actually reiterates the opposition between the sweet innocent and the blind flaneuse. Although *Be With Me* daringly features an actual flaneuse in Teresa, it at the same time compromises its own boldness by diluting that audacious message with heavy doses of melodrama, emphasizing the indispensability of companionship.

The Chineseness of Chinese-language visual culture is elusive in *Be With Me*. The film cannot be readily and conveniently categorized as a Chinese-language visual text, partly because the film is Singaporean. However, I am less concerned with the national (Singaporean or Chinese?) or cultural (Chinese-language) identity of this text than with Teresa’s disabilities. One crucial reason why this film cannot be categorized as a Chinese-language text is that the central character Teresa does not speak, listen, or read any Chinese language, although she used to speak Cantonese before she became mute. Such terms as “Chinese-language” and “Chinese-speaking,” which are commonly and conveniently adopted to determine a person’s cultural or national identity, are too ableist (by assuming a person is able-bodied enough to speak and hear) to be applicable to Teresa and many others in everyday life.

The languages in question are corporeal rather than national. Teresa is defined not so much by national languages (such as Chinese), which stamp national identities on (allegedly able-bodied) language users, as by non-mainstream (and non-ableist) languages, which recognize the non-standardized corporeality of a language user. Because of her education at the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts, where Helen Keller’s mentor Anne Sullivan was trained, Teresa communicates in English not as an able-bodied English speaker but as a language user with non-mainstream skills. When she “speaks” to students, she makes throat sounds similar but not identical to ordinary English speech. She listens to her students using the “Tadoma method”: she places her fingers along

the speaking student's jaw line to feel the vibrations of the speaker's throat. A social worker "talks" to her in sign language, but the sign language in question is a tactile sign language rather than the visual sign language for the deaf: the social worker signs with his finger on her palm, just as Sullivan did with Keller in the memorable "W-A-T-E-R scene."

Teresa's allusion to her late fiancé, who died young of cancer, comes as an afterthought rather than an indispensable part of her life story. While she is sad over losing her fiancé, she has shown the ability to live on without entrusting herself to a single companion. If the *City Lights* scenario dictates that a blind woman should depend on a male companion, Teresa energetically shows her relatively sufficient independence. Admittedly, she is never "freed" from the biopolitical system. Her independence is predicated upon her deep-rooted dependence on the biopolitical network that has systematically developed in Singapore, whose social work sector has watched over Teresa since her childhood. Without such a network, of which her Singaporean citizenship and religious affiliation are part and parcel, she could not have lived with in such relative autonomy. The conditional nature of her independence is revealing. The representation of Teresa as a dependent on the state reveals how a blind woman is situated in a sociopolitical context, whereas that of a woman dependent on a male companion in the *City Lights* scenario conceals or ignores the historico-material circumstances against which the blind woman materializes.

As noted above, "the first encounter" with the disabled is ethically perplexing. The first such encounter in *Be With Me*, in my view, takes place between Teresa and the viewer. Teresa's bodily history is revealed in the subtitles to the soundless shots in which she cooks herself a meal: a simple act that is more disquieting than it seems. As de Certeau notes, the act of cooking at home (presumably by an able-bodied person), seemingly commonplace but practically complicated, is a prime example of tactics in everyday life (xix). The viewer sees how the blind woman takes shape in time and space: the viewer reads the subtitles full of a disabled person's life trajectory (from her childhood to the present day), and watches the woman's quotidian coping techniques. Biopolitical voyeurism takes place between the film and the viewer, who is cast in the role of investigator of a disabled body. Not a detached outsider, the viewer is obliged to acknowledge her social relation with the disabled other being watched. The disabled flaneuse's vulnerabilities as much as her capabilities are exposed to the viewer, who ought to give something in return in this relation of trust.

Having reviewed Serlin's optimistic conviction of the agency of the blind flaneuse, Wolff's pessimistic suspicion of the viability of the flaneuse, Wilson's empowering interrogation of Wolff's doubts, and Baier's caution regarding the



volatility of trust against the visual culture backdrop in Chinese-language regions, I conclude that the possibility of the blind flaneuse is predicated on sensitively negotiated managements of trust. As long as these managements of the volatile trust are thoughtfully initiated and constantly reexamined, it is possible for the blind flaneuse to be, and to be on the road.

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## 漫遊女或苦命花： 二十一世紀華語視覺文化中的視障女性

### 摘要

本文研究二十一世紀初以視障女性為主角的華語視覺文化文本，含中國電影《幸福時光》、香港電影《見鬼》、台灣圖文書《地下鐵》、改編《地下鐵》的香港電影、新加坡電影《和我在一起》(Be With Me) 等等。本文藉著分析這些文本，討論身心障礙者在多個東亞都會（大連、香港、台北、新加坡等等）中發展的存活方法和引爆的倫理問題。這些文本正好在中國崛起與新自由主義的聲浪席捲東亞的時候浮現，呼應了或挑戰了向「錢」看齊的時代主旋律。本文特別提出兩個用來描繪身心障礙女子的模式：一種是卓別林電影中再現的「苦命花」，將身心障礙女性定義為在高速現代化過程中，柔弱可欺、只能被迫等人（即參與現代化的男性勞工）救援的小可憐；另一種是筆者被身心障礙研究啟發而倡議的「漫遊女」（班雅明「漫遊者」的女性版兼身心障礙版），將同一批女子想像為可能獨立自主、不需枯等好心（男）人的都會生活參與者。在《幸福時光》中，盲女主人翁被一批自以為好心的「身心健全主義者」當作「苦命花」來看待，但她卻寧可自立自強，在處處威脅視障者的都會中自尋生路，她以「漫遊女」之姿，批判好心人的倫理瑕疵（他們騙取她的「信任」）。本文接著指出：《見鬼》展現了漫遊女逐漸被迫成為苦命花的主流化過程、圖文書《地下鐵》打造棄絕苦命花模式的漫遊女、電影版《地下鐵》卻又倒退回到苦命花模式。新加坡的《和我在一起》則以難以被簡單定義的身心障礙生命樣態，挑戰了主流社會看待盲女以及信任感的種種成見。

**關鍵字：**身心障礙，張藝謀，彭氏兄弟，幾米，王家衛，新加坡