

# Vivian Qu's *Angels Wear White*: Vulnerable Young Girls and Resistance in Contemporary China

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**Abstract** Focusing on Vivian Qu's *Angels Wear White* (2017), this paper uses Judith Butler's discussion of vulnerability, resistance, and performativity as a theoretical framework to analyse the film's narrative and directing choices when addressing issues of sexual assault on minors and genders norms in contemporary China. The film's depiction of social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption, and the construction and performance of femininity demonstrates the way Chinese women are vulnerable to violence – sexual or not – and to gender norms they are expected to conform to, without falling into the trap of paternalism and victimisation.

**Keywords** Chinese art-house cinema. Feminism. Vulnerability. Resistance. Sexual assault.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 What Does 'Vulnerability' Mean?. – 3 Addressing Sexual Assault as a Systemic Issue. – 3.1 Vulnerable Characters. – 3.2 Violence and Visual Pleasure. – 3.3 Systemic Issue. – 4 Addressing Gender and Class Issues. – 4.1 Women in Today's China. – 4.2 Gender Performativity in *Angels Wear White*. – 4.3 Mia Resists. – 5 Conclusion.



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You see, in this world, there is one awful thing, and that is that everyone has their reasons.<sup>1</sup>

Jean Renoir, *The Rule of the Game*, 1939

Special attention should be paid to women's unique role in propagating Chinese family virtues and setting up a good family tradition. This relates to harmony in the family and in society, and to the healthy development of children. Women should consciously shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young, as well as educating children. Women in general should carry forward the fine tradition of hard work and self-improvement of the Chinese nation, the pursuit of a positive and civilised life, and promote the formation of good social morals.

Xi Jinping 2013

## 1 Introduction

My aim in this article is to provide the first English analysis of the film *Angels Wear White* (2017), a powerful and controversial work that mainly exposes the problem of sexual assault on minors in China. The film is the second work of art-house producer-turned director Vivian Qu (Wen Yan 文晏). Co-produced with France, with a Belgian director of photography known for his collaboration with the Dardenne brothers in Europe, and with no famous actors starring in it, *Angels Wear White* is a typical art-house film.

The film describes the case of two girls' sexual assault by the godfather of one of them in a hotel. The two victims, Xiao Wen and Xin Xin, are middle school students and best friends. With the help of a female lawyer called Hao, the parents try to prosecute the perpetrator, President Liu, the head of a local company well introduced in the local gentry. The latter uses his influence to bribe or intimidate them, while the police stall on the case, deeming the evidence insufficient. A second examination performed by corrupted doctors affirms that none of the girls were victim of rape and the case is closed. Intersected with this storyline is the one of Mia,<sup>2</sup> nearly 16, who works at the hotel where the assault took place. She possesses the proof that would convict President Liu – some footage of the security camera showing him entering the girls' room while they try to push him away – but she is reluctant to help Attorney Hao and is more preoccupied with keeping her job, since she does not have a proper ID af-

<sup>1</sup> "Tu comprends, sur cette Terre, il y a quelque chose d'effroyable, c'est que tout le monde a ses raisons". Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>2</sup> Mia's original name in the film is Xiao Mi, but I chose to use the name given to her in the international versions to avoid confusion for the readers.

ter running away from home a few years ago. She attempts to blackmail President Liu to gather enough money to buy a fake ID, but she fails and is beaten up by the perpetrator's underlings. After being rescued by Attorney Hao, she entrusts the evidence to her and resolves to sell her virginity to get an ID. When she hears on the radio that President Liu and his accomplices, the police head and doctors, were just arrested, she eventually decides to run away.

In this article, I will argue that Qu's film sheds light on issues of vulnerability and gender performativity for contemporary Chinese women. Judith Butler's key work on each of these concepts will serve as a theoretical framework to analyse the film's narrative and the directing choices made by the filmmaker. At the end, I will discuss Qu's own vulnerable position as an art-house and a woman director in the Chinese industry.

## 2 What Does 'Vulnerability' Mean?

Originating from the Latin word *vulnus*, 'wound', vulnerability,

expresses the capacity to be wounded and suffer. As bodily, social, and affective beings, we all have the capacity to be vulnerable to one another and to conditions of inequality, discrimination, exploitation, or violence, as well to the natural environment. (Koi-vunen, Kyr ola, Ryberg 2018, 4)

Butler is a key scholar in this field and her discussion on vulnerability as informing resistance is especially useful to comment on *Angels Wear White*, which articulates both at the same time.

In Butler's view, if anyone can be vulnerable, there are various degrees of vulnerability depending on the context, which is always connected to relations of power and the political. It allows then some welcomed intersectionality by encompassing issues of age, class, gender, and ethnicity, and can also be mobilised locally to read into films like *Angels Wear White*.

The terms we examine take on very specific meanings under neoliberal and austerity conditions when the state structures of social democracy and institutions of social welfare are losing their own resources and standing, thus exposing more populations to homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate health care. How, then, is the political demand to address these issues to be directed toward those institutions that should be responding to these conditions, at the same time that we seek to resist the models of power represented by those institutions? Are we stuck in the situation in which there are two opposing alternatives, paternalism and victimization? (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 3)

The situation described is meant for Western countries but can also apply to post-reform China. The new market economy has led the state to progressively withdraw from the welfare it used to provide since 1949. Nowadays, the accent is put on individualism and consumerism for social progress and economic development, which can be seen as contradictory to Confucian values of interdependency and social harmony; however, scholars of the neo-Confucianism have been promoting Confucianism at the same time as the cement of the spread of capitalism in East Asia since the 1980s. In this context, both neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism join hands when it comes to define "the normative femininity against which women are measured and evaluated" (Zuo 2018, 532).

How to articulate resistance to these norms in this context? The dichotomy paternalism-victimisation evoked by Butler is a real dilemma in feminist activism.

Of course, feminist theorists have for a long time argued that women suffer social vulnerability disproportionately. [...] The claim can sometimes be taken to mean that women have an unchanging and defining vulnerability, and that kind of argument makes the case for the provision of paternalistic protection. If women are especially vulnerable, then they seek protection or protected status, and it becomes the responsibility of the state or other paternal powers to provide that protection. According to that model, feminist activism not only petitions paternal authority for special dispensations and protections, but affirms that inequality of power that situates women in a powerless position and, by implication, men in a more powerful one. And where it does not literally put 'men' in the position of providing protection, it invests state structures with the paternalistic obligation to facilitate the achievement of feminist goals. (2012, 169)

This is particularly relevant in the People's Republic of China (PRC), where the state has a profoundly paternalist approach to feminism. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the All-China's Women Federation (ACWF), a state organisation dedicated to the defence of women's right, was created to promote and implement state feminism's policies. Feminist movements became more diversified in the 1980s-1990s but still relied heavily on the ACWF's structure and network to enable their actions (Wang 2021). To this day, feminism is very diverse in the PRC and designates different trends, the word 'feminism' sometimes even being rejected as a Western concept. Since it remains hard to implement large-scale actions without the state's support, the most radical activists operate at a grassroots level. The ACWF, still active today, has relative leverage but is very often considered as more or less a mouthpiece for the government regard-

ing women, following the Chinese Communist Party's line. Feminists of all kinds have taken the Internet by storm since the 2010s, thanks to a new generation of young, urban and educated activists (Wang 2021; Fincher 2018). At the same time, the masculinist backlash is also very strong, and Chinese feminist movements are often perceived through a Western-biased lens in scholarship (Wu, Dong 2019).

In this context, Butler's idea of vulnerability is useful to discuss Chinese feminist movements. In Butler opinion, "political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilisation of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (2016, 24). This "exposed and agentic" condition allows us to rethink how we perceive locally situated feminist movements.

It is also important to stay clear of the masculinist conception that "a political subject [...] establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability" (24). On the contrary, this paper will consider "the role of vulnerability in strategies of resistance" (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 6), on how vulnerability is "a potentially effective mobilizing force in political mobilizations" (Butler 2016, 14) in *Angels Wear White*.

Vivian Qu's film goes beyond issues of sexual assault and also addresses social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption and the construction and performance of femininity. In my view, the film demonstrates how women in contemporary China are vulnerable to violence – sexual or not – and to gender norms they are expected to conform to, but successfully avoids both paternalism and victimisation when addressing these issues.

### 3 Addressing Sexual Assault as a Systemic Issue

How does vulnerability as both "exposed and agentic" translate on screen? The film is helped first by its cinematic style. The camera stays at a distance with the characters, inducing an accompanying stance rather than identification with the characters for the audience.<sup>3</sup> There is no play of lights in the image composition to orient our perception of the characters, the editing is light, and the narrative's pace is relatively slow. Finally, the soundtrack is almost raw, with very few moments with music. As a result, our emotions aren't really guided or oriented. Overall, *Angels Wear White* is shot with a very restrained style that effectively encourages a more reflective po-

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<sup>3</sup> The director of photography is Beno t Dervaux, a long-time collaborator of the Dardenne brothers, Belgian directors known for their socially engaged works.

sition. This reflective position offers the audience some room to think. In a way, when watching the film, the audience is also "exposed and agentic" at the same time. They receive the story as it is while having some leverage to make their own judgement.

In the following section, I will first comment on the characters' vulnerability, then on how the director depicts violence on screen, and finally how she manages to turn one particular case into a systemic issue.

### 3.1 Vulnerable Characters

The film adopts the perspective of vulnerable characters in today's Chinese society: more or less isolated female minors. The main characters, Xiao Wen and Mia, are in various vulnerable situations but they are also shown active to defend themselves, developing strategies to survive. Besides, Mia's perspective adds layers not only to the case but also on the socio-economic reality faced by women and minors in contemporary China.

In comparison to her best friend Xiao Wen, the second victim, Xin Xin, is well looked after by her own parents. However, even if both families first try to convict the perpetrator, the way they handle the tragedy differs greatly. Xin Xin's parents are focused on providing the best future for their daughter and accept the perpetrator's offers to settle the case, convincing Xin Xin that nothing bad happened to her for her sake. While Xiao Wen is mostly left to her own devices and to handle the trauma on her own, Xin Xin is sheltered as much as possible by her parents. In both cases, the trauma is not addressed properly.<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy that the two girls don't discuss the event on screen, or exchange about what they feel, except for physical pain the morning after. They play together and only the ending suggests a strain in their relationship. At the exception of acknowledging their pain the morning after, Xin Xin doesn't seem to be particularly affected by what is happening. As Cathy Caruth explains on trauma:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. (2010, 4)

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<sup>4</sup> The film overall criticises the handling of the case by the adults, with the notable exception of Attorney Hao, asking for a more psychological approach when addressing the victims. The denial of each girl's distress can be seen as a call for more involvement of the victims, going "from a discourse of 'protection' towards that of 'participation', where those involved and affected become active players in determining what it means to be safe, and free" (Segalo 2015, 453).

While Xiao Wen is shown affected by the events and by the insensitive procedures they go through, Xin Xin appears oblivious most of the time and is relieved when she is told by the bribed doctors, after their second examination, that nothing happened to her. Consequently, the way Xiao Wen handles the aftermath makes her a more prominent character in comparison to Xin Xin. The latter's lack of overall screen time can then signify the lack of space she is given to process what happened to her. Thanks to her parents' efforts not to address the tragedy to preserve her, her feelings on that matter are repressed but the trauma may resurface later in her life.

Coming back to the main characters, Xiao Wen's parents are divorced. She is under the custody of her mother that is neglecting her. Both her parents are poor and she suffers from a bad reputation in school, where she physically fights a classmate who films her without her consent. When the teachers punish her but not the boy, we are given a first clue of Xiao Wen's lack of support from the adults in her life. Xiao Wen's mother ends up blaming her daughter for her assault and punishes her, provoking the girl's flight to her estranged father's home. After the latter reluctantly accepts to let her stay, she skips school, pretending to come and go in her uniform while spending the day outside.

At this point of the film, Xiao Wen flees the structures supposed to take care of her, her mother's home and the school, to find refuge in 'unsafe places' such as the house of her father, who is not legally allowed to take care of her, the beach, or at a statue of Marilyn Monroe's feet where she sleeps the night she runs away. Her flight is both a result of her vulnerability and at the same time her means to take action against it. Since she no longer has a safe space, she looks for shelter somewhere else.

Xiao Wen is not talkative in the presence of adults. She is regularly scolded by her teachers for being late, her mother is verbally abusive, insulting and provoking her; her father's first reaction is to send her back home to her mother when she seeks refuge with him, and the policemen make her uncomfortable with their repeated questioning. In response, Xiao Wen remains silent. She is aware that anything she says can be turned against her, and that she won't be heard or understood, so she prefers not to speak at all. The stare that accompanies her silence is another weapon of hers. Like her mutism, it is a way to challenge the adults, like her mother when she despises her, or the policeman trying to intimidate her, as if saying: "I know what you are trying to do, and I don't like it" [fig. 1]. She uses it to both highlight and defy the adult's violence, neglect, and intimidation towards her.

Mia, on the other hand, has slightly more leverage, as she is a bit older and more independent than Xiao Wen. She lies about her age to be able to work. As she later reveals, she ran away from home and has been moving from place to place these last few years. Not only



Figure 1 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White*. 2017. 72'49". Xiao Wen's Stare

she is a minor on her own but she doesn't have an ID, which makes her situation very precarious; at the same time, she seems to be ready to do anything for her survival. She lies, even if her nerve is not always enough to convince her interlocutor. She has developed small tricks to save money (falsifying the laundry bill to pocket the difference, exchanging favours with her colleague Lili). She has interiorised that nothing is free in this economy, that even information has value, which is why she asks Attorney Hao for money when the latter comes to interrogate her about the case. She even dares to negotiate deals with people more powerful than her, like Lili's boyfriend, a local gang leader, and President Liu, when she blackmails him with the crucial evidence she holds on the case. Either way, she bites more than she can chew: she is beaten up by President Liu's men and ends up accepting Lili's boyfriend proposition to sell her virginity. Her attempts at undermining their leverage would be a complete failure if she didn't run away from the latter transaction at the end of the film.

Thus, both characters have a limited range of action, and are vulnerable in terms of age, gender, and class, but they are also proactive to ensure their own survival and safety. They are "neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region" (Butler 2016, 25-6), in a sort of "vulnerable-and-resistant" state. Thankfully, they are both helped by Attorney Hao in different occasions. Overall, the narrative opposes the behaviour of the other adults to the empathy and care embodied by the lawyer. She is the only person in front of which the two girls allow themselves to be vulnerable or talk about their actual situation. It is in the safety of Attorney Hao's car that Xiao Wen answers questions on the case, and it is in her arms that she allows herself to cry. Mia calls her when she ends up in the hospital



after her beating, and exchanges the proof of President Liu's guilt she retained until then to thank the lawyer for paying her hospital expenses. It is then that we learn about how she survived until now. In the end, it is their collective mobilisation that advance the case and lead to President Liu's arrest with his accomplices.

### 3.2 Violence and Visual Pleasure

In her great 2018 article, Chinese scholar Wei Ying compares Qu's film to the South Korean film *Silenced* (*Dogani* 도가니, 2011) by Hwang Dong-hyuk, that depicts a real-life case of sexual assault on minors in an institution dedicated to deaf children. A newly hired teacher discovers that several members of the school staff are abusing the children but fails to successfully convict the perpetrators. The film encountered a huge success when it was released and provoked a change of legislation on sexual assault in South Korea, as well as a re-opening of the old case accompanied by official excuses from the government. *Angels Wear White* was even promoted as the Chinese *Silenced* when it came out, but did not lead to a similar outcome.

Wei explains that each film's depiction of violence is radically different: while in *Silenced* violence is explicit and repetitive, in *Angels Wear White* it happens off screen (Wei 2018, 59-60). I will first elaborate on what the voluntary concealment of sexual violence on screen entails, then I will argue that there is still some cold-blooded violence on screen in *Angels Wear White*, although an unusual one, that in one instance even involves the audience's participation in an eye-opening and chilling hospital scene.

In *Silenced*, the image quality is visually pleasing, with play of lights and shadows, which contributes to an aestheticisation of violence, sexual or not. Abuse of all sorts is not a one-time occurrence, but repetitive, notably through flashbacks. The assault scenes also last for a long time, displaying the men taking off their clothes, throwing themselves on the children, and beating them. Although the scene always stops before actual penetration, it is painful to watch overall. Violence is thus explicit, repetitive, and last for a long time. This approach is intended to condemn these acts; however, it also presents drawbacks.

Depicting sexual assault scenes in a long and explicit way can be risky. It might aim to shock the viewer, but it might also appeal to their visual pleasure, especially if it shows the perpetrator's point of view on their victim. Staged like this, the audience is aligned with the former's perspective. For example, in *Silenced*, there is a scene that lasts for several minutes where an adult man touches a young boy in the shower. This scene might be disturbing for some viewers, but it might also be enjoyable for others (not to mention

the possibility of film edits being uploaded on porn websites). I do not agree with the idea that finding pleasure in such a scene would necessarily lead to abuse in real life, but I think it is important to discuss how these scenes are constructed. Being explicit and dwelling on the acts can be seen as problematic, but adopting the perpetrator's perspective is even more so for several reasons. First, it is a moving image that leaves little space for the viewer's imagination, next, the recurrence of such patterns contributes to rape culture (that entails blaming the victim while finding excuses for the perpetrator), and therefore influences people's understanding of what is consensual and what is not. One instance is not risky, but the almost systematic use of the attacker's perspective has a significant impact on the viewer. Combined to the lack of satisfactory sex education, this kind of representation is not to be taken lightly. In China, the state holds a conservative view of sex, promoting abstinence as the way to avoid teen pregnancy and the spread of STDs. Therefore, media and pornography are an important source for sex education in China (Zhang, Na 2023; Fang 2020). As a result, this kind of scenes, even framed as something reprehensible, may have a different impact from what the authors intended, or contribute to undermine their original intention.

From this perspective, the concealment of visible violence in *Angels Wear White* can be seen as a political act, a refusal to give in to these problematic tropes of rape representation. Of course, censorship plays a role in this concealment, since it is likely that more explicit scenes would have been cut. However, the narrative is not designed to include assault scenes. Instead, it focuses more on the aftermath and how the characters cope with it. If there is violence, there is no visual pleasure.

Sexual and physical violence is only suggested or take place off screen. We do not see Xiao Wen and Xin Xin's assault, but the film lingers on the morning after, when they come out of the hotel room, shaken and dishevelled. Their bruises and the pain they feel is underlined in a later scene, but what happened to them is never verbally described.<sup>5</sup> The audience is meant to connect the dots themselves and can only imagine it, which is arguably worse than showing it. When Xiao Wen's mother brutally cuts her daughter's long hair – a trait that she deems responsible for her daughter's assault –, the act happens behind a closed door with only the girl's cries filtering to us. The scene cuts next to Xiao Wen, now with short hair, contemplating herself in the bathroom mirror in a mostly silent shot.

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<sup>5</sup> It might be worth mentioning that because of their young age, the actresses playing Xiao Wen, Xin Xin and Mia were not given the full script and thus were not aware that the film was about sexual assault (cf. Qu, interviewed by Dong 2017).

Similarly, when Mia is chased by President Liu's men after trying to blackmail him, she leaves the road and runs behind some trees but the camera doesn't follow her. It stays on the side of the road while we hear Mia's screams as she is beaten up. Then we cut to the teenager at the hospital, bruised all over. As these examples show, Qu is more focused on the consequences and how this violence affects the girls, physically and emotionally. In fact, the only explicit violence on screen comes from gynaecological examinations and internalised misogyny.

Xiao Wen's mother first reaction after hearing the confirmation of her daughter's assault is to slap her. The camera, who was at the girl's head level, stays on her face as the mother goes off-screen and argues with Xin Xin's father. As they yell off-screen, we stay focused on Xiao Wen's face as she takes in what just happened and the harsh words exchanged next to her. With this framing, we adopt her point of view and take a guess on how this is affecting her. This scene is a reminder that violence isn't exclusively male in the film. Xiao Wen's mother is verbally and physically abusive to her daughter, and, in a later scene, blames her daughter's long hair, dresses, and girly accessories for her assault. In her view, biased by internalised misogyny, her daughter is responsible for being raped. She then takes action by destroying the dresses and cutting Xiao Wen's hair.

Like for the slap previously mentioned, these few displays of violence are quiet and cold-blooded. After delivering the proof of President Liu's guilt, which should suffice to arrest him, the two girls have to go through a second examination by several experts. It is an unnecessary procedure, as underlined by a dialogue line of Xiao Wen's father, and we soon understand that the experts are actually President Liu's accomplices scheming to clear him. There is no music to induce tension, the silence is chilling enough. The camera embraces Xiao Wen's point of view on the examination table while doctors take turns to inspect her. As she lays down, her legs are placed on each side of the frame and jolt every time the nurse and gynaecologists touch her [figs 2-4]. This is already a very vulnerable position to hold, and the exposure is reinforced by the fact that the doctors and staff only stand a few seconds between her legs. This quick succession of characters gives the terrible feeling that Xiao Wen is being assaulted again, right before our eyes. The experience is even more uncomfortable for the audience, forced to embrace her perspective and literally put in her place. Therefore, we share her discomfort and distress, highlighted right after by her silent tears in the next shot once the examination is over.

On the one hand, the division of Xiao Wen's body into pieces by showing only her legs visually conveys the dehumanising process the two friends are going through. On the other hand, it can also suggest that it could be any other young girl undergoing the same terri-



Figure 2 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White*. 2017. 92'57". The Nurse

Figures 3-4 Vivian Qu, *Angels Wear White* (2017). 93'10" and 93'29". The Doctors

ble experience. The purpose is to make the audience revolt in order to demand that it will never happen again.

From a narrative perspective, the in real-time superficial examination is not only meant to make an impression on the audience, but also to stress the lack of professionalism of the experts that declare that no rape was committed on Xiao Wen and Xin Xin in a press conference held minutes after seeing the girls. Xiao Wen's father, enraged, tries to protest but is hold back by policemen. Between the doctors and the police intervention to close the case, the scene thus condemns the system that not only does not believe or protect the children from the influence of their abuser, but also forces them to experience their trauma again without consideration of their well-being.

In sum, violence in *Angels Wear White* isn't aestheticised nor dramatised through editing and soundtrack. In contrast with films such as *Silenced*, there is no rush of adrenaline for the viewer but more of a chilling feeling, which can be destabilising for an audience used to mainstream ways of telling stories. Involving the audience in the gynaecological examination is particularly unusual and upsetting. Thus, Qu interrogates our definition of violence, also raising the following question: do we have to show it to denounce it? Here, the filmmaker is clearly more interested in exposing the consequences of these assaults, how they affect the characters and therefore how they can affect the audience in turn, in a reflexive manner rather than an emotional one.

### 3.3 A Systemic Issue

A third directing choice is presenting sexual assault as a systemic issue. This is visually conveyed both by the concealment of the perpetrator's face, which emphasises a collective responsibility, and the lack of a final trial when the culprits are arrested at the end of the film.

Rape in the PRC is included in the Criminal Law where the age of consent is set at 14. Sexual intercourse with a child under 14 is

then considered rape. For minors over 14 and under 18, there are very few measures regarding girls and none for boys. According to scholars Liu Chun and Ren Ruihong, another flaw of the legislation is its definition of rape which is far too narrow (Liu, Ren 2013). Indeed, rape is only described as vaginal penetration, thus excluding other acts that fall then under the scope of 'indecent acts' or 'molestation', that entail lighter sentences. To resolve these issues, Liu and Ren asks for the removal of the gender marker in the law to protect all genders equally, the use of the word 'minor' instead of 'children', and the raise of the age of consent to 18 (while setting aggravating factors depending on different age groups). Liu and Ren's report goes back to 2013, but the most recent amendments made in 2020 in the Criminal Law still do not answer these demands. They add aggravating factors to penalties, but rape remains defined as vaginal sex and still does not include men (only molestation applies since amendments in 2015; cf. *China Law Translate* 2020; Daum 2022; Wang 2022).

Another loophole of the Criminal Law was that the sanction used to be lighter when the child raped was presented as a prostitute. Perpetrators often took advantage of this to reduce their sentence when convicted or to avoid being convicted in the first place, a situation heavily condemned in Nanfu Wang's 2016 documentary *Hooligan Sparrow* that covers a case similar to *Angels Wear White*. This was apparently corrected by amendments to the Criminal Law in 2015 (Daum 2022), but what remains to know is how efficiently the law is applied, and how efficient it can be while the previous issues about age, gender, and definition of assault remain to be correctly addressed.

The current wording of the law is also problematic. By defining rape as an assault on women and girls, it actually enforces both women as vulnerable and violence as male. However, violence is not male in essence - Xiao Wen's mother's behaviour is a painful reminder - but results from a system where male violence is encouraged, permitted and exonerated. On the other hand, as Butler rightfully puts it, we cannot only blame the system.

I don't think individual men can point to 'social structures' as an excuse, i.e. 'the social structure of masculine domination made me commit this act of violence'. At the same time, it is all of our responsibility to ask ourselves how we are living out, reproducing or resisting these structures. (2019)

How do we take responsibility for our actions then and try to advocate for change? Vivian Qu commented on that by quoting Jean Renoir's film *The Rules of the Game* (*La R egle du jeu*, 1939) in an interview:

The terrible thing about the world is that everyone has their own reasons. So, when you think of these characters, they have reasons for doing what they do, and it just reflects a larger, societal problem.<sup>6</sup> (Qu, interviewed by Dzolan 2017)

Then, the director's intention points to a denunciation of a social structure more than advocating for a change in legislation, and the belief that law follows social behaviour rather than transforming it. I argue that she embraces Butler's refutation of vulnerability as a condition that "requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation" (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016, 1). To maintain agency in vulnerability, we must avoid victimisation and paternalism.

One of the first elements supporting this idea is the deliberate concealment of the rapist's face. He has a last name and a title, President Liu, but he remains unidentifiable on-screen. The director uses different ways to do so: his face can be off-screen, or he turns his back to the camera, or he is too far from it. On one instance, we are told he is to be on-screen, but a group of men walks in the frame without a single clue to pinpoint him among them. Nevertheless, the extent of his influence and power is clearly visible. President Liu is able to mobilise police heads, doctors as well as hooligans to threaten the girls and their parents. He uses intimidation, bribery and even violence, if needed, to cover up the case. The dissimulation of his face and invisible influence reminds me of Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hongdeng longgao gaogua* 大红灯笼高高挂, 1990), where four wives and concubines fight for their husband's favours. The husband's face is always concealed to let the audience focus on the wives' schemes, while he has the servants execute the rituals and punishments. The concealment has several implications. First, it does not create a real antagonist but points to a systemic issue beyond individuals. It does not matter who he is, it could be any man that chose to comply with the social system. As Butler stresses when describing performativity (Butler 2016, 24; 2019), I emphasise here both the structure, and the person's agency and free will since they both participate, one by enforcing and the other by following willingly. It is important to take into account those two dimensions, especially in a neoliberal economy that insists on individual choices and responsibility. Both the system and the individuals are accountable here. Going back to the narrative, the second implication is that it is easier – and more comfortable – from a moral point of view to antagonise an aso-

<sup>6</sup> “这个世界糟糕的地方是每个人都有自己的理由’。所以你去设想这些人物，他们做出这些都是有理由的，这恰恰反映出一个更大的，属于社会层面的问题”。

cial and isolated individual that commits violence, to reject them and position ourselves against them. In *Angels Wear White*, the connection between President Liu and many other characters prevents such a position, pushing the audience to reflect on that.

Overall, the film emphasises the responsibility of society as a whole. The film's narrative describes a typically Confucian micro-cosmos, where every individual is somehow connected with the others through different types of interdependent relationships where one's actions inevitably affect others. When interrogating Mia about the case, Attorney Hao shows her a picture of Xiao Wen and tells her she ran away from home. "What if it was you?" she asks, hoping to convince the teenager to cooperate. This line highlights the link between the two girls: Mia has the possibility to help Xiao Wen, and her inaction can also turn the girl into another isolated minor like herself. What is also implied here is that there should be no other victims of sexual violence, and each character has some leverage, even small, to act on that.

The attitude of the parents, teachers, policemen and doctors towards the case actually advocates for a collective responsibility and points to the failure in protecting the girls, before and after the assault. Xiao Wen's mother neglects, then blames her daughter. Xin Xin's parents chose President Liu as their daughter's godfather in the hope of providing her a better future thanks to his influence and connections. Teachers call Xiao Wen a 'bad element' and try to antagonise the two best friends. The head of police blames the girls for drinking alcohol the night of the assault even though it is not grounds for being assaulted, and asks them to recount again and again what they have been through without consideration for their well-being. Nurses and doctors act with the same carelessness regarding the girls' feelings, do not explain any procedure to them and even accept President Liu's bribery to cover up the case.

The second element is the absence of a trial at the end of the film to judge the culprits. As I mentioned before, the law is problematic, as well as its fair application, and relying on the state to resolve the case leads to paternalism without subverting the structure. At the same time, a direct attack to the state could prevent the film to be released, thus limiting its possible impact. Qu then takes another path for the conclusion of her story.

In the last part of the film, Mia hears on the radio that President Liu was arrested, as well as the corrupted police head and doctors that assisted him. The radio report is followed by an official statement by the ACWF, the state organisation dedicated to the defence of women's rights, calling for a better protection for the children, and to secure them a better growing environment. This report could seem to bring a relative settlement to the story, however, several elements in this scene tend to subvert this conclusion.

First of all, even though the culprits have been arrested, nothing guarantees that they will be actually be convicted. Besides the issues with the wording of the Criminal Law regarding rape and corruption, mentalities regarding sexual violence evolve very slowly in China. Police and officials often discourage people to file a lawsuit, or offer mediation instead of protection. Domestic violence and sexual assault in families and couples are usually considered as 'private matters' that do not need the state's intervention. This attitude is slowly evolving but social stigma remains very strong, as demonstrated by Xin Xin's father discourse when trying to convince Xiao Wen's father to drop the lawsuit: "[President Liu] will serve a few years in prison and will start again as soon as he goes out, but our daughters will be tainted forever. It will follow them for all their lives. We must think of them". Even with the possibility of a trial, the characters are lucid on how the system works. The father's lines also stress the cultural shame bared by 'tainted' women. Even if they had no responsibility in it, that is not how others will perceive it. In this context, it is then not surprising to read in a study conducted by the UN on men and violence in Asia, that the majority of the men interrogated in China that admitted committing rape did not face any legal action or condemnation (Fulu et al. 2013, 9).

The director's decision not to hold an official trial in the film has been criticised, since it could have opened a public debate on the lack of adequate laws, like it happened in Korea after the release of *Silenced* (Xie 2017). The audience may also feel unsatisfied without a solution provided. However, I claim that by doing so, Qu effectively removes any paternalism from the narrative, because a trial could have contributed to glorify and reinforce the authority of the state. We cannot rely exclusively on the state, since it is partly responsible for the lack of protection of victims, and sanctions of rapists. It is not about demanding a change of the law since the laws are written and implemented by the same people that protected the perpetrator in the case. Also, a public debate on these issues would be difficult since it could be a source of social instability, and therefore at risk to be quickly shut down by the authorities. Refusing a trial therefore successfully undermines any state paternalism while not putting the filmmaker in a difficult situation with the authorities.

Finally, the official statement by the ACWF is also subverted by what we see on screen. As she listens to the radio, Mia is dressing herself up in a bedroom where she is meant to give her virginity to an unknown man in exchange for money to finally buy an ID. At that moment, she embodies all the children who are being left behind and whom the ACWF calls to protect but for whom then fails to do so. Even if the two other girls have reached a relative 'conclusion' with President Liu's arrest, Mia's future remains uncertain as she has lost her job and therefore a place to stay. This subtle subversion of state dis-



course is later reinforced by how Mia takes action. After hearing the report, she ultimately decides to run away on her scooter after breaking the chains that were locking it down. The last shots of the film show her riding on a highway, desperately following a big statue of Marilyn Monroe tied to a truck. This is by no means a satisfying conclusion nor a happy ending for her, since she is once again left to her own devices, without Attorney Hao to help her. On her frail scooter, she starts again her search for a better place to ensure her survival.

Qu's directing choices when addressing sexual assault suggests an anti-paternalist stance while not directly attacking the Chinese state. It is a subtle approach that not only allows the film to pass through censorship - another proof of the negotiations filmmakers undertake in the market - but also points to a both local and global issue of systemic violence. Once again, exposure and agency are intertwined.

#### 4 Addressing Gender and Class Issues

When presenting her idea of vulnerability, Butler explains that vulnerability embodies a similar process as performativity. Performativity is "both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting" (Butler 2016, 18). She then elaborates further:

we are invariably acted on and acting, and this is one reason performativity cannot be reduced to the idea of free, individual performance. We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them on our own. In this way we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose. (24)

Choice comes late in this process, insists Butler. I argue that Qu's film represents her take on gender performativity for Chinese women. In an interview in MUBI's publication *Notebook*, the filmmaker explained that she wanted to explore how women are constrained by patriarchy and capitalism in their life choices.

when I look at a woman, I realize the set of values that she has actually come from when she was growing up, how she was taught and what kind of choices she was given. Most of these women didn't have the opportunity to break out from what [their lives were] directed towards. It is really sad. I wanted to really look at the whole past of a woman, from the young adolescent to the mature woman, and really examine how we became what we became. (Qu interviewed by Dong 2017)

Indeed, *Angels Wear White*'s female characters are exposed to a set of conditions, but arguably only one character seems to acquire the possibility to choose, Mia. Before looking into that, I believe it is necessary to draw a picture of the conditions of gender performativity in contemporary China.

#### 4.1 Women in Today's China

Drawing on the words of Simone de Beauvoir "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one", and Butler idea of performativity, Mila Zuo affirms that Chinese women face today an intricate combination of neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism values that define a normative femininity.

The Confucian woman is not born but 'becomes' through kinship performances as daughter, wife, and mother - thus she is located within various relationalities with men, namely her father, husband, and son, each of whom she is expected to obey as her moral superior. (Zuo 2018, quoting Rosenlee 2006)

With the reforms, neo-Confucianism thinkers have turned to a differentialist approach to gender and sex by enabling biological arguments to naturalise what is a man and a woman, and the part they play in society. This was partly coming from the feeling that men were castrated by the Maoist era (1949-76), by the authoritarian state on the one hand, and the promotion and support of women in the professional and political life on the other hand (Zhong 2000). The accent is then put on the naturalisation of women's gender roles as wives and mothers, deemed more important than a professional career. In official discourses, women's role in the family, and in society at large, is to ensure its stability (Evans 1997). Xi Jinping as a leader has reinforced this view by describing the wife as 'virtuous' and the mother as 'kind': *Qi xian fu an, mu ci zi xiao* 妻贤夫安, 母慈子孝, which literally means "virtuous wife - husband at peace, kind mother - filial piety" (Xi 2016). By doing so, it reaffirms women's role in the family to raise children and transmit Chinese values (Xi 2016; Hird 2017).

As Angela Xiao Wu and Dong Yige put it in their illuminating 2019 article:

China's transition to postsocialism has set in place a new gendered structure of power that culminates in the predominance of a particular marriage market, a heterosexual institution governed by a market logic which emphasizes women's economic dependency on men and their sexual objectification by men. (Wu, Dong 2019)

The institution of (heterosexual) marriage is, socially speaking, mandatory. The pressure to get married is put up by families and state discourses as testified by the "leftover women" campaigns targeting unmarried women over 25, whereas women's access to property is endangered by this same institution and the successive laws on divorce (Fincher 2014; To 2015). Marriage is seen as an opportunity of social progress, and polygamy has returned, since "how many women a man owns is proportional to the power and capital he owns" (Wu 2021, 106), which illustrate both women's economic dependency and their objectification. In this context, refusing marriage is thus a strategy of resistance to these power structures. Some feminist activists actually encourage women to work in order to be financially independent instead of getting married (Wu, Dong 2019).

Marriage is not the only concern. Reproduction is also under the scrutiny of the government, whether when it was enforcing the "hard birth planning", as Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) call it, until the 2010s, or when shifting to a two to three child birth planning policy. In addition, both the state and the consumer market have been promoting motherhood and the importance of the mother's role in her children's education, reaffirming and naturalising women as natural mothers in the process. Because of the birth planning policies, most Chinese couples have to support four grandparents on their own, and having children is getting more and more expensive, so even both parents' salaries are sometimes not enough to support the entire family. Women then find themselves in the contradictory situation where they are encouraged to have more children, but the job market is not supportive since they are precisely discriminated at work or laid off for having children in the first place (Angeloff 2012; Song 2011), preventing them to be able to provide for their family.

At the same time, women's appearance and sexuality has become commodified by consumerism, without really being able to transform gender norms (Evans 2008). Consumerism and socio-cultural values stress the importance of beauty for women to succeed professionally as well as finding good marriage prospects, both with the aim of social progress, which is a discourse that women internalise, as studies show (Wu, Mulken, Alleva 2022).

In sum, these socio-cultural, economic and political constraints shape women's appearance, behaviour, professional and personal lives. In this context, femininity is a performance that must comply to more than often contradictory norms and expectations, whereas deviating from these very norms is socially condemned. These two dimensions lead to vulnerability in Butler's sense.

## 4.2 Gender Performativity in *Angels Wear White*

Some of these issues are depicted in *Angels Wear White*. In the film, female characters experience sexual and domestic violence, economic precarity, unbalanced relationships, and a lack of emotional satisfaction and of genuine connection with one another.

Some female-female relationships are friendly (Xiao Wen and Xin Xin), or an alliance formed by circumstances (Mia and her colleague Lili), others are marked by internalised misogyny like Xiao Wen and her mother. The latter blames her daughter's feminine appearance (long hair and clothing) for her assault, holding her responsible and punishing her for it by throwing away her dresses and cutting Xiao Wen's hair. When her daughter gets back at her, she throws away her mother's make up and nail polish, which are other symbols of this femininity. Each character has internalised what characterises femininity in this environment, and use it to hurt one another instead of supporting each other.

Dong Guang (2020) has remarked that some characters have the potential to become one another. First, when the youngest, Xiao Wen, runs away from home, she is likely to become like Mia who is always moving from one place to another after fleeing her own home. This link is emphasised by Attorney Hao, when she tries to convince Mia to help her in the investigation. Next, Mia, as a virgin, may resort to a hymen reconstruction surgery like her colleague Lili, after losing or selling it. Finally, Lili, currently working as a receptionist and shown using her charms to obtain favours from men, can later embrace Xiao Wen's mother occupation: a bar dancer, relying on her charms to earn a living. Lili's disappointment in her boyfriend can also later evolve into Xiao Wen's mother resentment for her ex-husband. This creates a possible chain reaction from one generation to another.

However, according to Dong Guang, the film fails to deconstruct the gender binary, with only negative male characters and no, or too little, solidarity between female characters. While I don't agree with the two latter statements (all the characters are complex or even morally grey), I will focus on the former: I argue that Mia's character is in a privileged position to expose the different aspects of gender performativity in today's China. She is as vulnerable as the other female characters to norms and expectations, but she ultimately opposes them. Like Butler said, choice comes later, here at the end of the film.

As an isolated minor, Mia seems to only rely on herself to guarantee her survival, and is exposed to several issues for contemporary Chinese women. While being fascinated by the performances of feminine behaviours and representations, as I will demonstrate in the following section, she eventually resists conforming to them. I will focus on three main elements that signify this performance of femi-

ninity: Mia's relationship with her co-worker Lili, a statue representing the American actress Marilyn Monroe, and finally the symbolism attached to the colours pink and white.

#### 4.2.1 Lili

Mia is a growing teenager, and in her process of becoming an adult, she relies on the women around her to see what it means to be a woman in this society. Her closest relationship is with Lili, an older employee at the hotel. She is also more qualified as she is responsible for the hotel's reception while Mia is in charge of cleaning the rooms. She has a boyfriend, a local gang leader, and exchanges favours with Mia when she wants to spend time with him, which is the reason why Mia managed the reception the night of the assault and accidentally became a crucial witness for the case.

Spending time with her, Mia witnesses how Lili uses her charms on men, whether it is to alleviate their boss' anger or to distract policemen. Mia observes her as she takes good care of her appearance, wearing make-up and jewelry, dying her hair, smiling and acting sweet and harmless to look appealing in men's eyes. In return, men are attracted to her and she revels in it. Meanwhile, her attitude varies greatly when she is not gazed at by them, showing her true personality. Mia watches besides her or from afar, impressed, absorbing everything she can. When she later discovers a tattoo on Lili's hip after helping her to bed, she can't help but caress it reverently. This tattoo is another example of the teenager's fascination and attraction for femininity.

However, this performance is not without risks. Mia also witnesses the eventual backlash when Lili is hit by her boyfriend and goes through a surgery to rebuild her hymen after being dumped by him. In her post-operation haze, the older declares that since the doctor told her she could still have children, she will give birth to a son and bring him to her ex-boyfriend to scare him. She then starts to cry and pray to not be reborn as a woman in her next life. These few lines of dialogue clearly underline the social pressures Chinese women endure during their lives, such as giving birth to children (preferably a son, even if this preference is not as strong as a few decades ago) and remaining pure until marriage (even if this belief tends to be more and more contested, marriage is still posed as the only legitimate setting for sexual acts in official discourses).

Lili's story embodies the idea that femininity is a performance that provides socio-cultural legitimacy to the one performing it, however, the same performance can motivate violence towards her, whether the result of other's actions or internalised misogyny, coming from herself as well as other women.

At her side, Mia learns the monetary and moral value of a woman's virtue in this society. Lili's boyfriend offers to help her get a fake ID in exchange of a certain sum of money, and suggests that selling her virginity would be very lucrative for her. Mia then understands that her virginity is a commodity, apparently worth more than her workforce at the hotel. The issues of purity and chastity are emphasised by Lili's operation in a clinic dedicated to surgeries for women, showing the extent one woman can go to preserve her virtue. Mia has observed that a woman must look and act nice before men, hide her true personality behind charming smiles, and that marriage offers social legitimacy.

With no parental figure around, Mia takes inspiration from the adults around her. Attorney Hao is another role model, but in contrast to Lili, she is more masculine-coded: she wears no accessories, very little make up, and her hair-style is practical. She sticks to black and blue clothes, certainly to appear professional and be taken seriously by her male colleagues. She displays a tough exterior while still acting caring to the girls. But Mia is very reluctant to accept her care.

#### 4.2.2 Marilyn Monroe

Another 'role model' is a statue of the actress Marilyn Monroe. Opening the film and appearing regularly during the narrative, it is located on the beach. The actress is depicted in her famous pose from Billy Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), with her white dress lifted by the air blowing from the subway's vent. Vivian Qu explained that she took her inspiration from the news of a real statue of the actress that was built in a Chinese city, then destroyed because it was deemed too indecent (Rezo Films 2018, 5-6). Following this narrative, this local attraction - as demonstrated by the number of people taking pictures with it in the beginning of the film - is later removed and sent away.

When we discover the statue at the beginning of the film alongside Mia, we first don't see the whole structure and stay at its feet. Mia is shown fascinated by the pink nail polish that decorates the actress' toes as she strokes them. Next, the camera, poised as her gaze, timidly goes up the statue's leg to frame its underwear. But it doesn't linger and goes right back down, which suggests a feeling of something forbidden, illicit or even shameful. Mia then tries to take a picture of it with her phone but because of the sun she fails to get a satisfying shot. Her several attempts are finally cut to black before she goes back to her workplace. She isn't shown returning to the pictures she took in the remainder of the film, which indicates that this focus on the underwear may have been an impulse of the moment. She may have felt desire but it was fugitive. However, her attachment to

the statue remains as she goes back several times to see it and even takes care of it by removing the ad stickers that progressively cover the statue's ankles, as if to preserve her appearance and integrity.

This statue is an ambiguous figure in *Angels Wear White*. On the one hand, she is a symbol of the influence of American soft power and globalisation in post-reform China through the actress's image. She is an icon, selling people a sensual image and influencing beauty standards for Chinese women. Her blonde hair in particular is desired by the three young girls. Xiao Wen and Xin Xin are shown playing with a blonde wig the night of their assault, experimenting with their appearance and attitude to look like a grown woman. After finding it when cleaning the hotel room, Mia preciously keeps it. The star is thus a model of femininity and sensuality for the girls.

She is also a figure of comfort. When she leaves her mother's apartment, Xiao Wen spends the night curled up between the statue's feet. And when Mia runs away at the end of the film, she decides to follow the statue that is being moved away in a truck. After losing her job and thus a place to stay, the statue appears as the only remaining landmark for her, which could explain why she decides to trust it with her fate for the time being.

On the other hand, the statue exudes too much sexuality for the morality the government tries to enforce, provoking her removal. She is both a sexual fantasy and a threat as a woman embracing her sexuality, which are targeted by repressive regulations from the patriarchal power. She then embodies the inherent contradictions of women's condition in post-reform China. Women are objectified and commodified by capitalism, while expected to preserve their virtue and fulfil their roles as mothers and wives. Marilyn Monroe's personal life is an example of what patriarchal capitalism can do to women if we consider the sexual violence, and the commercial objectification and exploitation she went through. However, the actress' agency has been rehabilitated by feminist scholars and journalists these last few years, who now consider her as a vanguard of the #MeToo movement for denouncing her rape experience, and warning aspiring actresses of predatory Hollywood producers in her autobiography (Banner 2012; Baillet, Chass e 2022). As another victim of rape and economic exploitation who tried to resist both, her bond with the girls becomes even more meaningful.

### 4.2.3 Pink and White

Finally, these tensions around femininity's performance are visually conveyed by the recurrent use of white and pink colours for the female characters' clothes or accessories. The symbolism embedded into these two colours is likely to be intentional, considering the film's international title.<sup>7</sup>

Angels, like the colour white, are beings associated with purity. In a similar way, in the film, white is connected to female purity and innocence, as demonstrated by the young girls' dresses, especially when they have to go through medical examinations, or the supposedly innocent white dress of Marilyn Monroe's statue (embodying the actress's part of a beautiful and naive neighbour). Similarly, at the end of the film, when Mia prepares herself to lose her virginity to a client, she is given a white dress to emphasise her virginal purity, her pure, untouched condition.

According to historians Michel Pastoureau and Dominique Simonet (2005, 21-2), white was originally associated to purity and innocence, and became a symbol of virginity with Christian marriage. To ensure their lineage and transmission of patrimony, fathers had to make sure their children were truly their own, and virginity was thus demanded of the brides. With the rise of bourgeois values, young women and girls had to display their purity-virginity by dressing in white, which led to the still on-going custom of white wedding dresses.

Thanks to globalisation, the adoption of this custom by Chinese couples when getting married has become more and more prominent, as illustrated by the numerous couples taking their wedding photos on the beach in the background of a few scenes. The beach appears to be a popular spot according to the number of couples. Some brides pose in front of the sea, others ride a horse led by their husband, and other 'romantic' settings, but all brides wear a Western white dress, a colour that clearly stands out in the frame. In one particular scene, Xiao Wen wanders on the beach while skipping school and observes the newlyweds in their various settings, but as they leave the frame, our gaze is attracted to a mother and her child playing on the beach, suggesting that this is Xiao Wen's actual dream: a loving parent instead of a loving husband.

Pink, on the other hand, is worn by women such as Lili and Xiao Wen's mother, who conform to a feminine appearance and attitude. Some of their clothes, accessories or make-up are often pink and worn proudly. The clinic where Mia and Lili go for the latter's surgery presents various pink items and decoration to indicate that this is a la-

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<sup>7</sup> Co-produced by a French company, the film came out in France under the same international title but translated in French (*Les Anges portent du blanc*).



dies' place. Mia and Xiao Wen, still in a formative state, can only borrow these pink items, like when Mia takes Lili's shift at the hotel and temporarily gets to wear her bright pink uniform jacket. The garment gives her a short-term legitimacy as she pretends to be the employee in charge, adopting a cold attitude to appear qualified. The younger ones are still learning and experimenting with this concept of femininity.

The colour pink, as a recent attribute to women in Western history and later on reinforced by consumerism (Paoletti 2012), is clearly associated with a certain idea of femininity based on biological arguments, and embedded in a dichotomy with masculinity. Because of this association, it is often considered as a lesser colour that must not be worn by men. It represents expectations for women as well as their subordinated position in patriarchy. In the film, wearing pink seems to indicate the character's compliance with normative femininity. Pink is also the colour of Lili's cheek after her boyfriend hits her. The colour personifies, once again, the contradictions of this gender performance.

But the symbolism of these colours is not set in stone. When Mia runs away in the end in her white dress, it attributes a new meaning to the colour white: hope.

### 4.3 Mia Resists

In this paper, femininity is understood as a gender performance intersecting neo-Confucian (patriarchal then) and neoliberal values, norms and expectations for women. In the film, as she observes the other women around her, Mia is given the choice to conform to the normative femininity she is presented with. She is shown fascinated by it, even attracted to it, while not being comfortable embracing it for herself.

When cleaning the room where the assault took place, she finds the blonde wig the girls were playing with the night before and keeps it preciously. It is evidence for the assault case but she seems to keep it more for her personal interest than as something to be traded. She is determined to get it back when Lili's boyfriend steals it from her, and in a later scene she is shown eyeing a similar-looking wig in a shop next to the beach. This wig obviously appeals to her, maybe because it is a step closer to look like the Marilyn Monroe statue that she adores. However, she does not dare wear it.

She borrows Lili's accessories (jacket, lipstick, earrings) when she has to stand in for her at the reception, always temporarily. Lili gifts her the earrings when they separate but she only wears when she tries to look appealing as she is about to sell her virginity. This scene is another attempt at adopting these feminine attributes and presenting herself the way she thinks is expected of her. However,

this attempt of conforming to gender expectations is subverted by her flight. At the last minute, she refuses to perform.

When she takes pictures of the statue's underwear, she may feel attraction or even desire but the acting suggests that she does not really comprehend what she is feeling at the moment. Plus, her voyeuristic and fetishist perspective is thwarted by the sun. The fact that the film does not dwell on it indicates that may have been a failed attempt to conform to the male gaze that leaves her puzzled and unsatisfied.

Finally, certainly because of her past experience, she is not kind. She only gives in exchange for something, and rejects any care from Attorney Hao. When she eventually provides her the proof of the assault, it is unclear whether she does it to repay the woman who paid for her hospital bills, or in retaliation to President Liu, or if she genuinely wants to help Xiao Wen and Xin Xin. It may be a combination of all three, which demonstrates again the complexity of *Angels Wear White's* characters.

Most of the issues of gender performativity represented in the film are introduced through Mia's experience. Because she has a backseat on most of them, she has more leverage to determine what she feels is right or wrong for her. I believe it is this difference of affect that leads her to refuse to comply to the normative femininity she has been presented with. She is deeply aware of her vulnerability, but mobilise it to go even further: she runs away, and by doing so, she breaks, at least for the moment, the chain of characters. She will not become like Lili. This breakthrough is significant, as Butler puts it:

Precisely because something inadvertent and unexpected can happen in this realm of 'being affected', we find forms of gender that break with mechanical patterns of repetition, deviating from, resignifying, and sometimes quite emphatically breaking those citational chains of gender normativity, making room for new forms of gendered life. (2016, 18)

Escape is the solution provided but it does not settle the teenager situation. While the ending conveys a message of hope, it does not offer a satisfying conclusion for the audience. President Liu has been arrested but it by no means guarantees that sexual assault will never happen again, and Mia remains an isolated minor. In this situation, the answer seems to be leaving, removing ourselves from patriarchy. It is reminiscent of the question Chinese intellectuals have been pondering since the beginning of the twentieth century, with Lu Xun intervention "What Happens After Nora Walks Out?" (Lu 2017): what happens to the fugitive if she has no money? Mia's vulnerability is both gendered and economic as she has no income, no ID and no home. Her body (as both her workforce and virginity) is the only thing she has to offer. This acknowledgment is to be connected with

the accent on economic self-reliance advocated by feminist movements since the 2000s in China (Wu, Dong 2019).

As I have discussed elsewhere, the escape of the heroine at the end of the story is a recurrent feature in Chinese women filmmakers' works and Qu's film seems to be no exception (Reynaud 2020). I argued that this kind of open-ending is a way for the filmmakers to frustrate the audience used to happy endings and satisfying conclusions thanks to consumerism (leaving the audience satisfied) and the censorship system (no discussion of social and political issues likely to disturb the social harmony allowed). Here, the ending insists on the character's vulnerability. Without a clear destination ahead, Mia is in a liminal space, an in-between that expresses her exposed and agentic state, and a reason enough to raise political mobilisation.

## 5 Conclusion

On 23 November 2017, a scandal blew out in Beijing: the head of one of the private kindergartens in Chaoyang District, managed by the American company Red Yellow Blue Education (RYB), was fired after reports by news state agency Xinhua of alleged sexual assault and abuse on the pupils (*Reuters* 2017). With the lack of public structure for early education since the state's withdrawal on most social services with the economic reforms, private companies such as RYB took the market. The absence of official regulations led to a growing list of similar scandals, and this one in particular fuelled anger online. Coincidentally, the following day *Angels Wear White*, which deals with the very same issue, came out in theatres. The RYB kindergarten scandal offered then an unexpected success to the small feature. In the days following its release, the film's box office tripled as people rushed to see it, raising it to the 160th place out of the almost 300 films distributed that year, which is an honorable score for an art-house film with a limited run.<sup>8</sup> The scandal seems to have benefited the film more than its prize at the Taiwan's Golden Horse Festival. According to some local journalists and filmmakers, people may have gone to see the film because these issues are rarely discussed publicly in China (Fan 2017b; Han 2017). This unexpected success proves that *Angels Wear White* deals with burning issues in contemporary China.

This article has shown how vulnerability helps reading Qu's narrative and directing choices regarding sexual assault and gender performativity for women. The filmmaker follows two vulnerable but resilient young girls in their search for safety, chose to conceal the as-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://piaofang.maoyan.com/i/imovie/1208113/box>.

sault on screen, and instead of establishing visual pleasure, provokes the audience's participation during Xiao Wen's gynaecological examination. The concealment of the culprit's effectively points to a systemic issue, and favouring an open ending to an official trial reflects the director's delicate position between calling for a change in mentalities at large without directly attacking the state. Not demanding the state's accountability has been criticised but at the same time, it successfully avoids any paternalism from the latter.

Next, the film focuses on Mia's perspective to tackle issues of gender performativity in today's China, intersecting economic precarity and gender norms. Through other female characters and a statue of Marilyn Monroe, Mia is exposed to many gendered norms and expectations. She tries to experiment with the normative femininity presented to her but subverts it by running away. She prefers to remove herself from the situation rather than complying with the commodification of her virginity and her future objectification by men. Her flight undermines the symbol of purity associated with her white dress to transform it into a new canvas, the possibility of a new life, as she starts all over again. The uncertainty of her future underlines the economic vulnerability shared by migrant workers and isolated minors in post-reform China, and the open ending is meant to be unsatisfactory to elicit a reaction and a reflection from the audience.

Vulnerability as Butler conceives it, that is informing mobilisation of political resistance, is useful to read *Angels Wear White* and feminist film-making in the PRC. In this case, Qu's directing neither asks for state support nor solidifies women in an oppressed position. I will finish by considering the filmmaker's own vulnerability in the Chinese cinematic industry, especially for an art-house and socially engaged director like Qu.

First, there is no proper art-house network in the PRC that would be able to support this kind of production. Even with a censorship visa, art-house and low budget movies must compete with domestic and foreign blockbusters and therefore usually get limited screening.

Regarding the gender of Chinese directors, according to official statistics, 59 women directors produced 182 feature films between 1980 and 1989 (Huang 1995, 71). It is well known that there was state support for women in the industry until the 1990s before it gradually disappeared, leading to the end of many women directors' careers. More recent statistics from 2017 to 2021 show that the proportion of women directors never go over 10% of the total of domestic directors (The One International Women's Film Festival 2021). While there is no data available before 2017, we have very little or no reason to believe that the proportion was higher before then. In addition, many women filmmakers direct one movie, two if they are lucky, and then more than often disappear (Chan 2016). Qu herself, after one first feature in 2013 and *Angels Wear White* in 2017, has not produced or

announced the preparation of a new film since then.

The combination of the lack of an art-house cinema network, gender bias in the industry when it comes to production, political censorship, and market pressure put women filmmakers like Qu in a very delicate position. If *Angels Wear White* was relatively successful when it came out, the result of a desire to see the issues of sexual violence addressed, the film did not raise a public debate on these very issues. This is easily explained by the tight control the Chinese government exerts on public discussions. Nevertheless, Qu was able to show her film to a larger audience than most art-house films from the PRC. To conclude, I return to Butler's vulnerability and performativity that constitutes in my eyes useful concepts to discuss Chinese cinema or even feminist movements in China. Implemented properly, I believe they allow a locally situated perspective taking into account issues of gender as well as age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on, without falling into a dichotomy state-people or paternalism-victimisation.

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