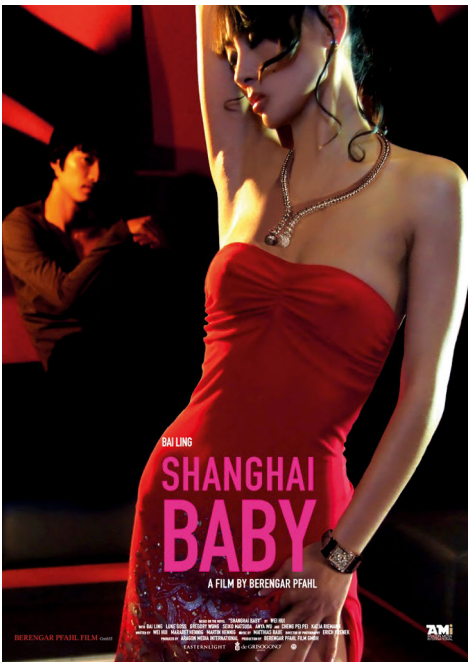
Shanghai Baby (2007)

Sandra Folie

dir. Berengar Pfahl; prod. Pino Curcio; screenplay Wei Hui Zhou, Martin Henning, Margaret Henning; photography Stephanie Cornfield; music Matthias Raue. 35 mm, color, 120 mins. Aragon Media International, Berengar Pfahl Film, distrib. Delta Pictures.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Shanghai Baby is based on the 1999 novel by Wei Hui, who, like other Chinese women writers of the post-1970s generation, was labeled a *meinü zuojia* (»beautiful woman writer«). This label has also been translated internationally as »chick-lit«—an Anglo-American subgenre of romance that combines conventional genre tropes with more emancipated heroines. Its cinematic renditions are typically called chick-flicks. These »commercial films that appeal to a female audience« (Ferriss and Young 2) span several genres from romantic comedy to melodrama. While the highly successful chick-lit formula of young metropolitan women—white, heterosexual, and affluent—looking for Mr. Right and a fulfilling career has spread globally, the *meinü zuojia* and their fictional heroines were perceived as too sexually assertive in China. Wei Hui's novel was banned (even burned) for both its »pornographic« content and its »decadent« Western-ness (Chen 56).

The film rights for the controversial international bestseller were acquired by Berengar Pfahl Film, a German independent production company. According to Wei Hui, they won out against international studios because they were »the one firm that already had a footing in China […] and thus an expertise that other competitors did not have« (*shanghai-baby.com*). Moreover, their entrepreneurial philosophy of focusing more on »a plausible, compelling emotional universe« rather than on »high-speed action plots« fits the genre of the novel (*shanghai-baby.com*). The film adaptation can be classified as a contemporary woman's film, or chick-flick, and thus aligns nicely with

Berengar Pfahl's numerous productions focused on women's search for identity and self-determination (e.g. *Britta*, 1977; *Neues von Britta*, 1985; *Brücke am Schwarzen Fluss*, 1987; *Tanja*, 1997-2000).

The title *Shanghai Baby* refers to the main character, Ni Ke (played by Bai Ling), who is also called Coco, after Coco Chanel. She finds herself in a love triangle with the impotent artist Tian Tian (Gregory Wong) and the hypermasculine English-German businessman Mark (Luke Goss) while writing her first novel and searching for her own identity. This search can be understood using Raymond Williams' concept of »structure of feeling,« since Coco's individual feelings also embody and make tangible the interplay of social and political forces in 1990s Shanghai—both persistent structures of the past (colonialism, communism) and resistant emerging formations (capitalism, feminism). The juxtaposition of these structures is visible in the film poster, showing Coco posing erotically on the rooftop of the Peace Hotel on the Bund: a symbol of old, cosmopolitan Shanghai. Behind her shines a symbol of a new and global Shanghai: the Oriental Pearl TV Tower in Pudong. Coco's necklace mirrors the two »pearls« of the phallic tower, thus creating an image of castration. She literally wears »the balls« of Pudong's capitalist phallus like a trophy around her neck. This image exhibits the very mixture of femininity and feminism that led Chinese critics to label the *meinü zuojia* as dangerous to prevailing cultural norms. Post-Cultural Revolutionary China may envision its ideal female citizens as moderately feminine (as opposed to the androgynous »iron girls« of the past), but certainly not in a sexually assertive, nor even feminist, manner.

While Wei Hui emphasized that her novel *Shanghai Baby* has no political intention (*cinema.de*), the film gives a different impression—by, for instance, casting Bai Ling, who was banned from working in China for ten years after starring in the critical-of-China American thriller *Red Corner* (1997). However, on the narrative level, *Shanghai Baby*'s political subtext becomes clear when in the opening sequence Coco names → *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) as her favorite film. Philip Kaufman's adaptation of Milan Kundera's novel explores the social atmosphere before and after the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia through the emotional and moral registers of a romantic relationship. For the female lead, Tereza, who describes herself as »weak« (like her country), »life is very heavy«—while it seems to be »so light« for her insensitive and promiscuous husband, Tomas. Similarly, *Shanghai Baby* portrays the »culture clash« and gender roles in modern Post-Mao China by personalizing the social context and by contrasting national and gender stereotypes. By explicitly affirming the statement in Kundera's novel that »making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two almost opposite passions,« Coco identifies herself with Tomas' (unbearably) »light« philosophy of life, which she applies to her men: Mark (»the foreign lover«) and Tian Tian (»the local sleeper«).

Shanghai Baby therefore does not simply adopt Western melodramatic tropes and clichéd characters but plays with them. »Feminine« qualities such as virtue and passive suffering are acknowledged—not, however, in the figure of the nonconformist heroine but in that of the male protagonist, Tian Tian, whom Coco describes as »soft, delicate, almost poetic.« The impotent artist loves Coco selflessly and embodies a kind of higher ground of morality. There is a powerful gender and racial component to this characterization. While Coco is portrayed as a strong-willed and free-spirited woman, Tian Tian, while admirably virtuous, is heavily feminized and confined to intro-

spective and self-destructive forms of action (e.g. creating art for art's sake, getting drunk or high on heroin) and thus affirms Western stereotypes about Asian masculinity. Meanwhile, his competitor, the successful international businessman Mark, is portrayed as hypermasculine and thoroughly active (an omnipotent lover, caring father, and captain of the football team), if shallow and hypocritical. Torn between the two men and »the familiar libidinal dynamics between China and the West« (Lu 171), several scenes show Coco's suffering. During an erotic striptease on the rooftop of the Peace Hotel, she threatens her impotent boyfriend with suicide unless he sleeps with her. A quickie with Mark, pushing the boundaries of sexual consent, in the restroom of a discotheque leaves her feeling »cheaper than a prostitute«; she bursts into wild and uncontrolled screaming after realizing that Mark will never leave his wife for her; and she collapses upon finding that Tian Tian used heroin right after he had been released from rehab. The film's melodramatic »mode of excess« reaches its climax when Coco wakes up one morning, seemingly happy and in love, only to find herself lying next to the corpse of her boyfriend who has died of an overdose.

This scene marks the clearest shift in the film's »dialectic of pathos and action,« which Williams describes as »a give and take of ›too late‹ and ›in the nick of time‹« (69). While Coco's tears can be attributed to a kind of »false consciousness, released […] when it is already too late,« they do at least acknowledge that »something important has been lost« (70). In the end, Coco's suffering is also the source of her future empowerment. Her tears give her the strength to rewrite the initial ending of her novel. In the second and final ending, she travels to Berlin, not to resume her toxic relationship with Mark but to end it once and for all. »I'm not a cold-blooded woman, but I didn't go mad,« Coco says to justify herself. This ending represents personal liberation and a commitment to Shanghai—not, however, to either the melancholic »feminine« city of Tian Tian or Mark's »masculinist« capitalist showpiece but instead to a cosmopolitan space that flexibly combines and interchanges »the female« and »the male,« »the old« and »the new,« »the East« and »the West.« In the last shot, which serves as a kind of epilogue, we see Coco riding her bicycle through the Shanghai night and learn that she has not yet found a publisher for her novel but is reading from her manuscript at universities. While male students ask her if she—like the protagonist of her own novel—would strip in real life, she discusses with their female colleagues the question of »Who are we, or rather who am I?« Coco and her female audience thus represent an emerging »structure of feeling,« namely an individualist brand of feminism that is less concerned with »the nationalist burden to cure or build a national spirit« or with »the glorious restoration of male sexuality« than with searching »for the purposes of their own lives« (Zhu 158). Although the »we« that Coco explores through her semi-autobiographical writing is situated in »a specific Chinese history of sexual repression, a neutering of women during the Cultural Revolution, and the overwhelming desires to experiment with ›modern‹ lifestyles and excessive consumption in the postsocialist environment« (Schaffer and Song 84), the sentimental politics of the film are directed at everyone. »Basically, we can all find ourselves in her,« as Bai Ling asserted in an interview at the premiere at the 60th Cannes Film Festival in 2007. The film, she says, is »cross-cultural, East and West. It's not about culture anymore, it's not about female or male anymore, it's about the universe, a story about love, about the mystery of life, about emotions, about the meaning of life.«

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