

A Feminist Film Analysis of the Representation of Woman in Chinese Film Noir: Based on the Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful

Zixiang Xi

Abstract—The cinema industry has always presented female figures from a patriarchal perspective, propagandizing the men's authority over women. The typical character “female fatale” with fatal sexual attraction in the genre film noir has already been the focus of many feminist scholars. The essay focuses on the issue of the representation of women in Chinese film noir through examining the female figures in *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* (2017) by close textual analysis. Three heroines, the mom Madame Tang, the daughters Tang Ning and Tang Zhen, as the embodiment of “female fatale” drive the film’s plot and articulate their agency of resisting the masculine power. However, the study will prove that the Chinese female fatale conventionally cannot escape from the fatal tragedy and pessimism in their unsolvable dilemma.

Index Terms—Film noir, female fatale, patriarchy, male gaze, myth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Female figures can hardly escape from being depicted as passive sexual objects with their bodily pronounced femininities, to be looked at by the male gaze of the cameraman, characters and spectators. In film noir, the erotic and threatening “female fatale” has led to a heated discussion among feminists. Some believe that women hold the oppositional gaze challenging the male dominance in film [1], while others still regard female fatale as a subordinate object to be looked at and controlled.

With the efforts of a new generation of directors such as Yazhe Yang, the new type “Chinese film noir” with local characteristics has been well developed. The essay focuses on the Chinese film noir *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* (2017) which is female-led. The film tells the story of a family of three women, Madame Tang, with her two daughters Tang Ning and Tang Zhen who struggle in complex political and business relations, and finally involve in an unsolved murder.

Among them, the elder daughter Tang Ning is a typical femme fatale according to the conventions of noir. Tang Ning is portrayed as an alluring and erotic woman, seducing the male characters into decadence for her own interests and further leading to the fear among the male.

The existing research of noir overwhelmingly concerns for those male-dominant movies which is full of the male

protagonist’s gaze towards the female. There is a gap in research on the film noir lack of male characters. Therefore, it is worthy studying with a female-leading cast, to investigate the existing male gaze involving in it.

In this study, below questions will be explored: Does the male gaze exist in this Chinese noir mainly depicting female characters, and exert control and oppression on women? Whether the women in the film have a female gaze that resists the male gaze and whether the gaze is a rebellion against the male gaze and male power. If so, does the resistance succeed in the end?

The method of close textual analysis will be applied under the framework of “myth” to reflect the political power relations between the men and women on screen. The study will argue that the movie is produced in accordance to the patriarchal perspective to project the male gaze on to the “female fatale” and maintain the existing male supremacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Film Noir as a Genre

As Neale defines, film noir is a genre with “an atmosphere of disillusion and a sense of foreboding, a dark quality that derived as much from the characters depicted as from the cinematographer’s art” [2]. Naremore adds that noir is normally presented as essentially pessimistic [3]. In addition to pessimism, dangerous women and crime are two major components in the film noir. Chartier suggests that noir is associate with fatal sexual attraction [4].

According to film noir’s conventions, the Chinese movie *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* (2017) with the basic elements pessimism, crime and dangerous women belongs to the genre of noir. In the part of analysis, the pessimistic story that the Chinese movie tells and the particular way that the threatening women involve in the crime will be concentrated on.

B. Film Noir’s Gendered Depictions and Femme Fatale

Gender and sexuality are generally applied by scholars to define the genre film noir. Neale summarizes the main features of noir as “a distinctive treatment of sexual desire and sexual relationships, a distinctive array of male and female character types, and a distinctive repertoire of male and female traits, ideals, characteristics and forms of behavior.” [2] From the perspective of Cowie, the mode of noir’s narrative is male-dominant [5].

Moreover, Vernet suggests that the story of noir is structured around the “men’s triumph over threatening and

Manuscript received October 10, 2020; revised December 22, 2020.

Zixiang Xi is with University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK; Now she is with London School of Economics and Political Science under the Department of Anthropology, London, UK (e-mail: Claudiaksi0428@outlook.com).

dangerous feminine elements.”[6] Nevertheless, numerous noir scholars point out the potential of female roles to articulate their desire and to disrupt the patriarchal structure. Kaplan in his work Women in Film Noir emphasizes on the sexuality and power play embedded in the representation of women in the film noir, in addition, on the centrality of women for this genre of movie [7].

The seductive femme fatale is the typical image of film noir, transforming their sexuality into female power [8]. As defined by Place, femme fatale is a “dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction.”[9] As Neale states, these female figures in noir who are erotic, transgressive, dangerous and threatening deconstruct the patriarchal authority and hegemony [2]. Nevertheless, Place and other scholars like Johnston have realized the limited power of the femme fatale and agree with Mulvey’s theory of male gaze, claiming that these women are still connoted by to-be-looked-at-ness and still cannot escape from the subordinate position [10], [11].

C. Mulvey’s Male Gaze Theory and “Othering” Female Characters

Much feminist researchers utilize the method of psychoanalysis to study the sexualized female characters in noir that naturalize the male’s hegemony [12]. Mulvey’s theory of male gaze, which greatly impacted by psychoanalysts Freud and Lacan plays the crucial role in psychoanalysis.

As Mulvey states, the attractive women on screen are always presented for the male gaze and to offer male spectators pleasurable visual and mental experience [11]. According to Mulvey, the pleasure offered to the audience is brought out through two different psychological mechanisms, one is to objectify, dehumanize, and look at the passive women, and another is to identify with the active, authoritative and powerful male characters.

The first mode is scopophilia, subjecting the objective “Other” to the male spectators’ controlling and curious gaze. This pleasure, as Freud defines, is the enjoyment of looking at women’s bodies as erotic objects of sexual stimulation [13]. In other words, the sexualized female figures on screen are displayed for the male looking and male desire.

As for the mode of identification, it is about inviting the male audience to identify with the active, powerful and perfect male hero in the narrative story [14]. This process is associate with the Freudian ego ideal that children enjoy watching their own idealized image in the mirror [15]. The male viewers strengthens their pleasure by fully immersing and imaging they are the ideal male protagonists in the story.

Not only the pleasure, but also the castration anxiety is provoked by the women without a penis. Mulvey summarizes two ways of escaping from fear: punishing or saving the guilty women, and treating them as fetish objects [11]. That is the reason why the femme fatale is always killed or punished in film noir [16].

III. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK “MYTH” AND SYMBOL SYSTEM

Below, the close textual analysis will be conducted by combining Mulvey’s male gaze with the framework of “myth” to analyze how the representation of women in the movie satisfies males’ fantasy and reinforce males’ power. The “myth” belonging to the symbol system can be understood as an ideology or naturalized truth containing specific meanings [17].

According to Roland Barthes, “myth is a type of speech”, and this speech is not only restricted to verbal, but also, it can be seen as communication and a message that incorporates various areas. For instances, writing, photography, cinema, cultural practices, etc., all of which can be turned into a mythical speech. In addition, in order to analyse myths, Barthes conducts Saussure’s semiology system into use. Saussure claims that language should be divided into signifier and signified, and the two creates the sign.

Anything that conveys meaning is a sign. Barthes points out that in semiology, verbal messages only illustrate a denotative relationship; it is myth, who conveys connotative meanings. Hence, for analysing different kinds of speech, Barthes introduces a second level of signification to the statement of Saussure.

In this second-order semiology system, the sign in the first system becomes the second system’s signifier, and myths are produced in this second level. Added, connotative meanings are contained in myths, they are meanings that implied and comes from a broader cultural background. Therefore, depending on the audiences’ interpretation, it is possible for a sign to have various connotations.

In this study, the whole film is a symbol system which is open to interpret and analyze. The myth is encoded in the film to construct the signifier so as to lead the audience to evoke the signified meanings in their mind. In the section of discussion, the symbolic signs in the movie giving an historical intention will be focused on to find out the power struggle involves.

IV. DISCUSSION

Compared to the depiction of female protagonists, there is lack of portrayal of male roles in The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful (2017), nevertheless, the male gaze still embedded in the film controlling and repressing the women. The film begins with a prolonged scene shooting Tang Ning making love with two men.

Although Tang Zhen, Tang Ning’s sister, seems to control the gaze because this scene shots from her peeping perspective, the power of this female gaze is totally controlled by the male director (Fig. 1). “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to be looked-at-ness” [11]. Tang Ning’s nudity is placed in the center of the camera and a large number of shots display Tang Ning’s body curve sexually.



Fig. 1. Tang Zhen's gaze.

In comparison with the female role, the director simplifies the male image to the totem on their body instead of shooting the nudity of them directly. The totem in this movie is not merely a kind of tattoo (Fig. 2), in the meantime, it relates to the violence suggesting their identities as thugs employed by Tang.

Furthermore, Mulvey [11] points out that male spectators refuse to see the nudity of same sex because of the heavy burden of sexual objectification. The simplification of these male naked bodies reflects that the gaze of the female role Tang Zhen is still dominated by the men. The female characters still have no capability to possess the subjectivity of their own gaze and female gaze is utilized by male director and male spectators to satisfy their voyeurism and gain visual pleasure.



Fig. 2. Tattoos on thug's back.

Additionally, Tang Ning's costumes are emphatically delineated to shape the role, while the portrayal of her clothes further maintains the male fantasy of the female body and enhances the power of the male gaze. There are various costumes emphasizing the feminine curve of Tang Ning and these are designed for being in accordance with female fatal's intelligence and seductiveness. Tang Ning trades with government officials and merchants and attracts them by wearing sexy and tight dresses. For the sake of seducing the police officer Liao, madam Tang prepares a sexy lace pajama for her.

As Barthes [17] states, the objects loaded with specific significance involving a series of practices. The nightgown here is not merely a signifier attached to a particular kind of clothes, it simultaneously communicates its lure in the context of Madam Tang and Tang Ning's desire to prevent

the male protagonist Liao from discovering the truth. Moreover, Tang ultimately succeeded in seducing Officer Liao, and the pajama suggested that it was a social rule for women to gain benefits by exchanging their bodies, and that they were oppressed by male power.

Therefore, although there is lack of description of Liao's image and it seems that Liao's masculinity is overwhelmed by the female because he gives up exposing Tang's crimes to make compromises, the portrayal of the pajama suggests the oppression from male gaze and male dominant society is still embedded in this film.

Meanwhile, Tang's struggle for her own desire by wearing lace pajama to appropriate the male authority, which not merely fails to deconstruct but further reinforces the power of the male gaze. It can be proved in many movies that women are depicted in close-ups of their curvy figures and sexy clothes in order to attract the male gaze [18].

Most of the time in the movies, Tang Ning appears wearing sexy costumes and there a series of shots portraying the feminine curve of Tang Ning. These costumes contribute to construct Tang Ning as the object which actively accepts the gaze of male spectators and protagonists and sustain the power of male gaze. In addition to the alluring costumes, Tang Ning wears conservative pink dress trying to get Liao's attention at the beginning (Fig. 3).

The costume shapes Tang Ning as a safe female role which is in accordance with the dualism of gender under the patriarchal ideology. "Women are deprived of owning "the feminine," and even of discovering what the feminine might be, outside of male constructs" [7]. Tang Ning seems to have used clothing to gain her individual authority from police and madam Tang, who represent the patriarchal society nevertheless, the costumes which present her femininity caters to male gaze and consolidate the patriarchy.



Fig. 3. Tang Ning in pink dress.

In terms of Tang Ning in the film, she plays a role as female fatale, who is sexually and fatally attractive to men and simultaneously reflects castration anxiety and their fears brought by her aggressiveness. The ambition and desire she possesses are shown through the shots of her smoking.

In this movie, Tang Ning is smoking when she attempts to bribe the official by persuading him to purchasing the land. The cigarette here is a symbol of temptation to gain wealth from the land (Fig. 4). According to Place [9], the cigarette is considered as an object of "unnatural" phallic power, suggesting the violence and masculinity.

After the exposure of the crime, when the official comes to beg Tang Ning, she is still smoking, showing a very arrogant and refusing posture. Combined with her line “Our county speaker, are extremely upset about this”, the cigarette here symbolizes the male and capital forces behind Tang Ning.



Fig. 4. Tang Ning is negotiating with the government official Xiao Qingliu.

The cigarette held by Tang Ning embodies the male desire and their death and fears, but it also implies that the Tang Ning is empowered by the men. Tang Ning leads to the death of male officer Xiao Qingliu, also hinders the investigation of police officer Liao. She resists the male authority both on sexuality and morality and it seems to be a breakthrough of male oppression and domination.

However, the manifestation of her threat to men always requires the use of cigarettes, which represent the power of men. Meanwhile, Tang Ning's capability to cause the fear is given by her male leader. Moreover, with her death, her attempt at the destruction of the phallic gaze failed.

As Place [9] states, sexual woman can be seen as no threat to the man in film noir only when they are under control and without power. Before Tang Ning is killed on the boat, there is a scene of her smoking again. The anxiety and fears brought by the smoking Tang Ning to the men ultimately disappeared in the sea together with her death. Her death and the punishment she endured eliminate the anxiety of male spectators in front of screen and further assert their authority of male gaze.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article discusses female fatale's struggle for possessing their subjective of their own gaze and the repression and punishment from the male gaze in the Chinese film noir *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful* (2017). Although the male director shoots the film from a female perspective, the extreme erotic portrayal of the female protagonist Tang Ning and the simplification of the male nudity illustrates that the male gaze still exists in disguise in this film.

Moreover, the female fatale seeks to assert her subjectivity to control the male characters by wearing different clothes, while her clothes caters to looking pleasure of men and represents that her subordination to the male gaze, which further consolidates the female's otherness. Cigarette can be also seen as a strong evidence to

demonstrate the lack of female gaze and female power in this film.

It displays the transformation of Tang Ning from an aggressive and ambitious women to a looked object and a woman in despair. Thus, there are numerous barriers for women to articulate their own desire for their subjectivity in Chinese film noir though there is absence of male roles and their voice is still oppressed by men.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares the submitted work was carried out with no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

In the whole process, the author herself collects, organizes, thinks, revises and finally completes this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank to Professor Linzhen Wang in Brown University for her valuable and constructive commentary on the initial manuscript. I am also gratefully acknowledge the teaching assistant Ling Wang for her thoughtful comments on drafts of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

- [1] B. Hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators. The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, New York: Routledge, pp. 94-105, 2003.
- [2] S. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 151-160.
- [3] J. Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.
- [4] J. P. Chartier, “Les Américains aussi font des films ‘noirs’,” *La Revue du Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 67-70, 1946.
- [5] E. Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
- [6] M. Vernet, “Film noir on the edge of doom,” in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, J. Copjec, Ed. London, Verso, p. 130, 1993.
- [7] E. A. Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, London, British Film Institute, 1998, p. 73.
- [8] J. Place, “Women in film noir,” in *Women in Film Noir*, E. A. Kaplan, Ed. London, BFI, 1978.
- [9] J. Place, “Women in film noir” in *Women in Film Noir*, E. A. Kaplan, Ed. London, BFI, pp. 47-54, 1998.
- [10] C. Johnston, *Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema*, Glasgow, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973.
- [11] L. Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp.6-18, 1975.
- [12] Y. Tasker, “Women in film noir,” in *A Companion to film noir*, A. Spicer and H. Hanson, Eds. West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- [13] S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, New York, Basic Books, 1975.
- [14] T. Bennett and J. Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, London, Macmillan, 1987.
- [15] J. Lacan and Mulvey, Laura ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,’ in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Eds. New York: Oxford UP, pp.833-844, 1999.
- [16] M. A. Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge, 1991.
- [17] R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1977.
- [18] K. Ross and C. Byerly, *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.



Zixiang Xi was born on 1999/04/28. Zixiang Xi did her undergraduate course in University of Nottingham-Bachelor of arts in film & television studies, and graduate with first class honours, Nottingham, UK (June, 2020); now she is making her master study in London School of Economics and Political Science under the Department of Anthropology in London.

She is interning in Director Department from June 2, 2020, until now in Beijing Arrow Factory,

Shanghai United Media Group. From April 2020 to June 2020, she did her internship in propaganda department in Powerlong Museum in Shanghai. She interned in Chinese Characters documentary director group from April 2019 to July 2019, in Caisha Culture Communication Studio-China Central Television in Beijing and Shanghai. From December 2018 to January 2019, she interned in Fantastic China Documentary Director Group in Caisha culture Communication Studio -- China Daily in Beijing and Shanghai. From July 2018 to September 2018, she interned in Director Group of Impossible Challenge TV Show in China Central Television in Beijing.