

## Images of Women in Chinese Films—Through the Confucian Lens

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### Introduction

One memorable scene in recent Chinese films comes toward the end of Feng Xiaogang's *A World without Thieves* (2004), when the police detective tracks down a very pregnant Wang Li at a local restaurant, gobbling platefuls of shredded Peking duck, pancakes, green onions, and sauce. Alluding to her missing lover Wang Bo, the detective greets her sardonically: "No point in waiting. He's gone." Wang Li stops him short with "Let me finish eating first" and continues devouring the food.

For sure, in the few seconds when she sees the detective and hears what he announces, Wang Li comprehends her new situation—that her lover and father of her baby is dead, and she is about to be apprehended. But her spontaneous reaction that everything else should be second to her eating—to ensure the welfare of her unborn baby—depicts a typical Confucian mother, whose whole-hearted devotion for her child surpasses all other concerns at critical moments. While contemporary Chinese films display an array of images of women, Confucian womanhood is often at the foundation of most, if not all, of women's roles. Most of these roles tend to be familial ones—grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives—and the plot usually evolves around how these women fulfill or deviate from their expected roles. Even in their non-familial roles, women are often defined or understood in relation to traditional



The police detective says to Wang Li, "No point in waiting. He's gone." *A World without Thieves* (2004)

Chinese family structure.<sup>1</sup> Since family is at the foundation of Confucianism,<sup>2</sup> placing women at the center of the family is to acknowledge that women have a fundamental position in Confucian society. When we consider that the Chinese word for nation-state is composed etymologically of two characters 國家 (*guo-jia*, literally "country-family"), we see how fundamental women's position is in relation to the nation. Namely, a country is built on the basis of families—a very Confucian concept. Therefore, in addition to the discussions of film presentation (directing, camera angles, editing, etc.), it is also important to point out to our students how women's screen images reflect aspects of the dominant social ideology—Confucianism.

### Presentation and Representation

Over the last fifteen years, Chinese movies have broken ground not only in the Western film industry and American movie theaters<sup>3</sup> but also in American academia. Books and articles on Chinese films continue churning out, and discussions of women are almost a must in them. Applying psychoanalysis, feminist theories, post-modernism, and post-colonialism, scholars discuss how women are cast on screen as spectacles, as male desires and fantasies, as victims of feudal practices, and as the epitome of modern China's colonial experiences. From an "autonomous ecstasy"<sup>4</sup> to "a narrative site for the projection of national

trauma and collective memory,"<sup>5</sup> these inquiries are often fruitful, and they bridge a Chinese subject and other current disciplines. The positions over the past three decades of three film and cultural critics can be very instrumental in our study of how the film images of women—through the familial and non-familial roles—explicate Confucian ideas. Let us briefly examine each before we look at the Confucian images of Chinese women on screen.

In the mid-1970s, British film critic Laura Mulvey applied Freud's theory of scopophilia<sup>6</sup> to her interpretation of traditional (Hollywood) narrative films and coined the notion of "male gaze," namely a "male" position that viewers—regardless of their genders—adopted in watching the sensual and arousing "traditional exhibitionist" images women play and display on screen. Mulvey has since revised this controversial position; however, her methodology still has value. For example, one interesting and fruitful application is Cui Shuqin's reading of Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* (1990), about Ju Dou, the young aunt whose liaison with her husband's nephew produces an illegitimate child<sup>7</sup> Cui points out the subversion of a Mulveyian reading in a scene where Ju Dou turns her bruised body to face both the eyes of the camera and the nephew, who is peeping through a hole at her undressing for a bath. Ju Dou's semi-naked back is seen through the hole; then, all of a sudden, as if she has made up her mind about something, Ju Dou peels off her Chinese brassiere and turns sharply toward the hole (and the camera) and exposes her front. The difference between this scene and the traditional narrative film is that the audience never gets to see Ju Dou's naked body. Ju Dou's exposure of her bruised yet attractive body thus becomes both an

invitation and a taunt to the nephew—an invitation to enter an erotic relation and a challenge to deliver her from the physical abuses inflicted upon her by the uncle. Thus, instead of taking the “male position” to “enjoy” an erotic image on screen, the audience is presented with a moral decision. In essence, Ju Dou has altered the passive position of the screen woman as an object to be looked at, into an active agent who allows a man to look at and act upon thereafter, rendering him (and the audience) in effect into a passive voyeur.

In the 1980s, Mulvey’s focus on film presentation was countered by David Bordwell’s proposition of a more active viewer participation. Bordwell explains that our prior knowledge and experience form clusters of knowledge which then direct our hypotheses about the world around us; when we watch a movie, our comprehension and enjoyment of it depend upon our pre-existent knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Mulvey’s concern lies more with the film (how subjects are presented on screen), and Bordwell’s more with the audience (their understanding of what the subjects on screen represent).

In the early 1990s, cultural critic Rey Chow remapped the dynamics between a film and its viewers to a transnational level. Relating how her Hong Kongese mother approved of Bernardo Bertolucci’s presentation of China in *The Last Emperor* (“It is remarkable that a foreign devil should be able to make a film like this about China. I’d say, he did a good job!”<sup>9</sup>), Rey Chow pointed out how gender and power are both subjected to cultural interpretation. The ethnic female audience is examining the authenticity of a “foreign” production—among other feelings and concerns, there is also national pride and historical truthfulness in the consideration, not at least Chinese people’s fascination with history and their own imperial past.

Rey Chow’s example incorporates both Mulvey’s and Bordwell’s ideas and brings the relationship between film presentation and the audience to a new level. Imagine this scenario: our students—non-Chinese with little to no prior knowledge and experience with China—are the audience watching

Chinese films and trying to make sense of the images of Chinese women on screen. To what extent is the “gaze” still gendered, and to what extent does the audience’s “prior knowledge and experience” (of China and of their own cultures) interfere with their enjoyment and comprehension of a Chinese film? The answers are necessarily complicated, but more relevant to our discussion is the following question: what “prior knowledge” about Chinese culture should we prepare for our students so they can watch and decode images of women on screen? It will be fruitful to look at how women represent Confucian spirits and the formation of the nation-state from its foundation—namely the family.

### The Spokeswoman of Confucianism

Watching a Chinese film can be a very sophisticated process of decoding and constructing meanings, since many cultural codes are embedded in the cinematic presentation of Chinese society, sometimes without the director’s awareness. Two Confucian characteristics are particularly akin to this discussion: this-worldly philosophical orientation and the focus on families. The two are in fact related, for an interest in families necessitates a focus on practical and mundane issues that sustain family life. If we examine the familial roles women play on screen, it is not difficult to see that women are often the ones who try at all costs to maintain stability at home and to ensure the continuation of the ancestral line of a clan—sometime their fathers’ but more often their husbands’. We can thus infer at least two features. First, men hold on to theories and ideals both in actions and in convictions, while women are more ready to deviate in action from what they truly believe at heart. Second, women are often more independent, tough, and practical than men.

Clips from three films illustrate how women in recent Chinese films are faithful followers of Confucianism in their practical and conformist approaches to life: *The Soong Sisters* (1996), *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996), and *A World without Thieves* (2004). My choices are deliberate in that each film

depicts women from a different social spectrum and literary genre. *The Soong Sisters*, a biographical drama, is based on the lives of the three Soong sisters, who respectively married to H.H. Kong (a rich financier and China’s finance minister in early twentieth century), Dr. Sun Yat-sen (China’s national father), and Chiang Kai-shek (Generalissimo and President of the Republic of China). As such, the film delineates women from modern China’s ruling class whose personal choices affect national affairs in recognizable ways. Against the looming shadow of a historical event (Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997) *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* portrays two Chinese immigrants—a man (Li Xiaojun) and a woman (Li Qiao) who are strangers to each other—coming to Hong Kong in the mid-1980s in search for new lives and ending up together in New York years later. Through their many unexpected life-altering incidents and experiences, the film shows how ordinary people struggle to achieve their life goals and how their aspirations and determinations are cruelly engulfed by waves of social changes that pay no attention to individuals. Finally, *A World without Thieves* is a story of Chinese Bonnie and Clyde wrapped in an Oriental Express. Wang Li (the Chinese Bonnie) and Leaf (a female thief in a gang)—the two leading women in the movie—are both lovers of criminals; yet the movie shows that even women living outside of family structure and on the edge of the laws behave according to Confucian codes in spirit, if not always in action. In all three movies, we see women move on to new situations much faster than men, who are often held back by their old ideals and principles.

### Men Are from Venus and Women Are from Mars”: Examples

Although John Gray’s famous title *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* implies that men are more practical and women are more romantic, Chinese women in recent Chinese films are much more practical and daring than men. In these film presentations, men tend to be more idealistic, holding on to principles and ideals, oblivious of changing circumstances. On the other hand, women constantly re-evaluate the

changing conditions, adjust their expectations, and adapt to reality much faster.

In Mabel Cheung's *The Soong Sisters*, Charlie Soong insists that his daughters be educated to become China's new women and take on great responsibilities and more important roles in the new China he and his fellow revolutionary (among them Dr. Sun Yat-sen) were striving to build. The irony is that when his daughters become China's new women with minds of their own, he cannot tolerate their independence. His insistence that Qingling, his second daughter, renounce her romantic interest with Sun Yat-sen is the best example. Although he is proud that his daughters are well educated, independent, and capable of assisting his co-revolutionary, he cannot accept the fact that Qingling is in love with Sun and wants to marry him. Charlie dismisses her love as mere "hero worship." The open-minded father who advocated his daughters' Western education turns out to be the same Confucian father who demands their absolute obedience when it comes to marriage. On the other hand, his wife Ni Guizhen, who is hesitant to let her young daughters go abroad for school at the beginning, turns out to be much more adept in accepting the changes that result from their Western education. Charlie's opposition to Qingling's marriage is grounded mainly on several moral issues. Sun is a national hero and a revolutionary partner. Having his daughter marry Sun would be a breach of both personal and public moral codes: a hero is to be "worshipped not to be loved," and being a personal friend puts Sun a generation above his daughter and, therefore, forms a generational taboo. There is also a separation of labor along gender lines, where men stay with nation-building while women constantly focus on building and perfecting the family.<sup>10</sup>

According to Charlie, the personal offense makes him



Charlie Soong throws his arms and says to Qingling: "We've become laughing stocks." *The Soong Sisters* (1996)

and his wife a laughingstock among their friends, and the public offense endangers Sun's credibility as a national leader. In comparison, Ni Guizhen's approach is realistic and down to earth: she first tries to reason with Qingling, asking her to consider the great difference in their ages; then, after seeing how determined Qingling is, she relents. The mother and daughter reconcile in silence in one of the film's most touching scenes, when the runaway Qingling turns back to face her mother, and Ni looks at Qingling with all the blessing a mother can muster and convey through her expressive eyes.

Because women are concerned more with "here and now," they also tend to make decisions that address the current situation. A scene from *A World without Thieves* shows how Wang Li and Wang Bo (the Chinese Bonnie and Clyde) hold

very different views about their salvation. For Wang Bo, the Clyde, their fate is sealed: with all the crimes they have committed thus far, salvation is not possible, not in this life, not in a next life, nor in any other lives beyond that. Therefore, there is no point of return and no necessity even to reflect upon return. On the other hand, Wang Li, the Bonnie, acts exactly according to the common Buddhist belief that "the moment you put down your knife is the moment you step on the path to Buddhahood" (*fangxia tudao, lidi chengfo* 放下屠刀,立地成佛). For her, *karma* is accumulative from now on. It is almost as if religion has no effect on Wang Bo but is created for exactly the mindset of Wang Li.

No less practical is Leaf, the female gangster who betrays her boss Uncle Li, the ringleader, at the pivotal moment and

turns him in to the police. The scene comes toward the end of the hide-and-seek played among the authorities, the gangsters, and Wang Bo and Wang Li. Knowing that his confrontation with public security is imminent and trying to outsmart the police, Uncle Li has himself handcuffed by Leaf, his amour-in-crime, who disguises herself as a female police officer. They are hoping to escape from the train in the imminent confusion when the train enters the next station and the local police force will make an arrest with the public security people already on the train. The two exchange their thoughts as they wait for the train to stop. When Leaf comments on the lack of loyalty shown by Number Two and others when

they betray Uncle Li, he dismisses loyalty as something that exists only in fiction and advises her that "to survive in the



Uncle Li advises Leaf: "Greatness is ruthless." *A World without Thieves* (2004)

underworld," she should "remember just three words: Greatness is ruthless"<sup>11</sup> The advice obviously strikes a chord with Leaf about her own future, for in the next scene she does exactly what he suggested—ruthlessly turns him in to the police after apologizing for taking his advice. What Uncle Li theorizes, Leaf carries out in action.

To drive this male-theory/female-practice dichotomy further, let us compare the two women with Li Xiaojun, the leading man, in *Comrade, Almost a Love Story*. Xiaojun is devoted to his Chinese fiancée Xiao-ting and works hard to save money in order to bring her to Hong Kong. However, various circumstances—most having to do with survival—lead Xiaojun to have an affair with Li Qiao, who is determined to succeed at any cost in this new environment full of possibilities. To achieve her goal of success, Li Qiao refuses to be involved emotionally and thus treats her affair with Xiaojun simply as physical needs of two lonely people. However, this is not something Xiaojun can handle. Shortly after he brings Xiao-

ting to Hong Kong, marries her, and starts a new life, he realizes that his love for Li Qiao is too great to be ignored. He confesses the affair to Xiao-ting and begs for her forgiveness. In a rage, Xiao-ting asks why he would bother to get her out of China when he was having an affair with Li Qiao. Xiaojun answers sheepishly that getting her out “was his ideal.” Ultimately, it is Xiao-ting who insists on a divorce and who first steps into a new life of her own. What comes down is the man’s holding on to personal goals almost blindly, incapable of reassessing changed circumstances.

Since women in Confucian society are charged with personal responsibility for the welfare of the family, they are faced with practical and realistic matters day in and day out, the so-called “seven items as soon as one opens the door (to a house)” (*kaimen qijianshi* 開門七件事): firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea, the basic necessities, according to Chinese. As a result, women appear to be more utilitarian and focus primarily on the here and now. In comparison, men can often afford to ignore the more practical and mundane aspects of life and to indulge in the abstract and the ideal, at least in movies. Again, some scenes from the three movies will help to illustrate this point.

In an early scene from *The Soong Sisters*, Charlie Soong tries to educate his three daughters at a very young age and takes them out in a maze on a snowy day, teaching them the “penguin dance.” When Ni Guizhen and her servants find them in the snow and complains that the cold weather will make them sick, Charlie retorts; “The cold won’t make them sick; only poverty makes people sick.” Charlie’s metaphorical language contrasts sharply with Ni Guizhen’s practical concern.

Continuing the scene from *A World without Thieves* with Wang Li gobbling down Peking duck, we get another contrasting example of the dichotomy of a theoretical man versus a practical woman. Regardless of Wang Li’s request not to tell her any details about her lover until after she finishes eating, the detective goes ahead and unfolds in flashback a detailed account of Wang Bo’s final hours. After he is done, he

comments on how his pregnant wife eats just like Wang Li does, because she, too, “worried about the baby’s nutrition.” Then, just before he leaves, he says curtly to Wang Li “When he grows up, don’t hide the truth from him. Tell him exactly who his father was. There is nothing to be ashamed of.” Whether it is the mention of the baby or the detective’s leaving, Wang Li stops eating and sits still for a few seconds. Then she resumes eating, mechanically doing the Peking duck routine—placing pieces of duck slices into a pancake, dipping green onion pieces into the sauce, wrapping the pancake into a roll, and then biting and stuffing the



Xiaojun looks at the pictures from his aunt’s treasure trunk. *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996)

roll into her mouth. Soon, her eyes well and tears start trickling down her cheeks; nonetheless, she does not stop chewing, however mechanical it has become. The poignant scene marks how determined Wang Li is to focus on the present and near future instead of withdrawing into the past. Her lover is dead, but her baby is on its way. She is forcing herself to focus on the baby through nourishing herself. The scene is reminiscent of a Confucian paradigm glorified throughout Chinese history: a widowed mother doing her very best to bring up her offspring to continue the family lines.

This does not mean that women do not have romantic sentiments or that they forget about their ideals. They make room for their romantic past and ideals, but they do not let the past hinder what has to be done in the present. Li Xiaojun’s Hong Kong aunt in *Comrade, Almost a Love Story* illustrates this point the best. In her youth back in the 1950s, she had dinner with William Holden at the Peninsula, the island’s famed luxury hotel, frequented by movie stars and other dignitaries. She stole a dinner knife, fork, and napkin while William was not paying attention. These memorabilia are placed in a trunk with other valuable things in her life. She takes them out and

looks at them often and is quite content with that. For her, William is a milestone and a sweet memory that she can never forget, but she does not let this memorable incident paralyze her; she lives a busy life regardless of her fond memory. She knows the improbability of ever having anything to do with Holden and will not let herself believe otherwise.

Similarly, Li Qiao separates romance and reality in words and action. Early in the film, she has her first tryst with Xiaojun in his tiny basement lodging—unexpectedly, after they celebrate Chinese New Year’s Eve together. The following day, Xiaojun goes to see her at McDonald’s, where she works. Li

Qiao acts as if nothing has passed between the two good friends, offering him “half a dozen” promotional Teddy bears, so he can “send them home to [his] folks.” Xiaojun cannot handle the new relationship between them the same way and feels that he should be responsible for her more than he would were she a mere friend. When Li Qiao learns what is in his mind, she tells the awkward and guilt-driven Xiaojun that what happened was simply “two lonely people keep[ing] each other warm” on a New Year’s Eve that “was rainy cold,” nothing more.

In all these episodes, women curb their ideals and romantic inclinations to focus more on the matters in hand and the situations at present. They try to change what they can; when they cannot, they conform with and adapt to the situation. Their spirits are very much in line with the pragmatic and this-worldly inclination of Confucianism. The practical and tenacious images of women in recent Chinese films speak volumes for the essence of Confucian womanhood: practicality, daringness, perseverance, and selflessness.

## Conclusion

In recent Chinese films, women are much more practical and independent



Li Qiao explains to Xiaojun what happened between them: "Last night. . . it was rainy cold. . ." *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1996)

than men in their familial or non-familial roles. Furthermore, through their relations with the family, Chinese women often turn themselves into the focus and subvert the importance of their male relatives, for they are often the active ones advancing (and ending) the films, unlike Mulvey's dynamics of traditional Western narrative film, where the man's role is "the active one of advancing the story" (20). Indeed, Confucianism's emphasis on family allocates a specific place to women in society; whereas society outside the family becomes the battleground for men and their careers, family is turned into a stage by women upon which they exercise their ability, talent, and power and perform their own drama.

Growing up with images on television and movie screens, our students are savvy viewers. Furthermore, their comprehension of the connotations and expressions of film images are sharpened even more with the remarkable use of DVDs. Commentaries, such as those in the Criterion Collection, allow viewers to listen to film critics, directors, or producer alongside the images. Trailers on DVDs de-mystify technical intricacies by showing how fantastical elements were produced and how actors and actresses prepared for their roles. In addition to the more crystallization and accessibility of film production, film studies also incorporate and make salient use of many schools of thoughts and contemporary theories. In effect, film has become another language through which we can communicate to students complicated ideas through images. All these are universal aspects about films, especially mainstream Western films.

However, in watching an ethnic film, the process of decoding becomes more complicated because viewers bring with them less (or different) prior knowledge and experience about the subject, as noted by Bordwell and Chow. And here is where we, as Chinese teachers, can contribute much to the discipline to

ensure that our students are equipped with reasonable "prior knowledge" about Chinese culture—not to bond them to the tradition but to use as a yardstick to evaluate how the film images capture, support, reproduce, deviate from, or recreate that culture. In short, films can be a very effective medium in teaching culture—not least in defusing misunderstandings and stereotypes.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For example, one common non-familial role is prostitution, whose importance is often evaluated against relation to a family—whether a woman threatens a family's normalcy or tries to become a part of it. Rarely does a career woman become the protagonist without her familial roles. Wei Minzhi, the thirteen-year-old substitute teacher in Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* (1999), is a rare exception.

<sup>2</sup>Even students with some Asian background are often surprised to learn that the smallest units in a Confucian society are families, not individuals, although on reflection they see the reasoning.

<sup>3</sup>Following the box office record setting of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* in 2000, Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) opened in mainstream American theatre shortly after their debuts in China and Hong Kong, where the films were produced.

<sup>4</sup>See Yuejin Wang's "Red Sorghum Mixing Memory and Desire," in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI, 1993): 93.

<sup>5</sup>Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i

P, 2003): xi.

<sup>6</sup>In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud discussed scopophilia—pleasure derived by observation. With "observation" at its root, scopophilia is then aligned with voyeurism. Mulvey took this Freudian notion one step forward to align the audience with the male/active/looking position and the women on screen the female/passive/looked-at position. See "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Visual and Other Pleasure* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989): 16-17.

<sup>7</sup>See Shuqin Cui, "Gendered Perspective: The Construction and Representation of Subjectivity and Sexuality in *Ju Dou*," in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu's *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nativism, Gender* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1997): 310-313.

<sup>8</sup>David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985): 33.

<sup>9</sup>Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1991): 24.

<sup>10</sup>Although Sun marries Qingling in the end, he is seen only passively in the scene when Charlie confronts the couple in their wedding, unlike his active, commanding role in earlier scenes.

<sup>11</sup>The original Chinese has five characters 無毒不丈夫 (*wu du bu zhangfu*, literally "without poison not a great man"), which means "without applying extreme measures, one can not accomplish a great career."