

**Chinese Female Gaze:  
The Evolution of Gender Cognition in China through  
Ancient Mythology and Contemporary Films**

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## **Abstract**

The Chinese woman has seen various decades of depiction. The empowerment of the Chinese woman can be traced through the ancient goddesses, who were seen as powerful, just and reverent. The same can be seen through female characters in contemporary films, who are seen as able and an equal figure to the masculine gender. However, due to centuries of patriarchal oppression in China, the power of women remains suppressed. This study was conducted to explore the connection between the empowerment of women represented by ancient goddesses like Nü Wa and Chang'e, and contemporary female characters depicted in today's cinema, particularly in the films, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. The juxtaposition of ancient goddesses with contemporary female characters in films fosters a compelling atmosphere and conclusion, underscoring the significance of Chinese women across different eras. The conclusion forms a rather strong case for the fact that the Chinese woman has been a very crucial part of the community; the inputs they have in the society are very critical in shaping how the entire world perceives the Chinese woman.

Keywords: Chinese Female Gaze, Ancient Goddesses, Nü Wa, Chang'e, Gender roles, Contemporary Chinese Cinema, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Rouge*

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## 1. Introduction

The transformation of gender norms in Chinese society is intricately interwoven with the evolution of contemporary art forms, notably film. This study explores the profound impact of ancient mythology and its convergence with modern cinematic narratives, catalyzing a significant shift in traditional gender paradigms.

In feudal China, being a good wife and mother became the primary means for ancient women to realize their self-worth. The establishment of male superiority and female inferiority further stigmatized women as feeble and lowly (Lin, 2023). However, turning to ancient Chinese mythology reveals that Chinese women originally possessed entirely different spiritual and character traits. Female deities in ancient Chinese mythology embody richness in creative spirit, courage in resistance, loyalty to themselves, and independence (Lin, 2023). The deity, Nu Wa, who was first introduced in *Chu Ci* (Qu, 2012) which is a collection of ancient Chinese poetry attributed to the poet Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BC) and his followers, is revered as the creator of humankind and a mender of the heavens (Zhang, 2008). While Chang'e, first recorded in the now-lost ancient text *Guizang*, believed to have been written around the early years of the Warring States period as an ancient divination book, she later became celebrated for symbolizing the moon and embodying a spirit of rebellion (Liu, 2020).

The driving impetus behind this research project is to unearth the correlation between revered goddesses spanning eras, from the Shang dynasty (16th to 11th centuries BCE) to the Qin and Han dynasties (3rd century BCE to 3rd century CE), and their role in reshaping gender norms in contemporary cinematic landscapes.

The surge of women assuming central roles in acting, exemplified by films like *Rouge*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, is a great show of how women are born leaders and take significant roles in the society (Vanderstaay, 2008). I have selected these two films because they stand out as significant examples of showcasing women in central roles, effectively employing the concept of the female gaze. The roles played by women in such movies have acted as the stepping stones for female recognition in the Chinese film world as well as the entire globe. Both films offer captivating narratives that delve deep into the complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations, providing rich material for exploring the position of women in different historical contexts.

The films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* have been used as the reference points for showing the power and reverence of the woman character, by highlighting major characters Songlian and Ru Hua, respectively. The films play a significant role in shedding light on the female gaze and the depiction of Chinese femininity in the contemporary world. Here, the term "female gaze" denotes a direct challenge to the entrenched privilege of the male gaze. The female protagonist explores alternative modes of observation, aiming to dismantle the voyeuristic pleasures of male desire and cultivate a self-reflective, critical, and empathetic female perspective (Xiao, 2021). The female gaze is effectively portrayed in the film industry through the depiction of diverse female characters. By harnessing the power of silver screens, cultural analogies and perceptions concerning women are revitalized, paving the way for comprehensive analysis (Munshi, 2013).

This study's holistic exploration of the ongoing impact of Chinese mythology serves as a lens to analyze the Chinese female gaze through media and its implications for fostering gender equality in contemporary Chinese society. The analysis of the insights from the fictional world of the films and the non-fictional world in which the

creators of the films live will illuminate shifts and continuities within gender ideologies, fostering a foundation for more equitable representations of women in the entertainment realm. The study delves into the confluence of ancient goddesses and female characters in contemporary films, highlighting the interplay between traditional beliefs and modern Chinese society's perceptions of gender. As contemporary portrayals of women in films encapsulate the culmination of diverse goddess attributes while weaving in elements of rebellion, a distinctive contemporary goddess image emerges, bridging past and present narratives.

The “Chinese Female Gaze” is examined in the context of the evolution of gender roles in China, delving into the influence of ancient goddesses such as Nü Wa and Chang'e on the portrayal of female characters in contemporary films. Towards elucidating the interconnections within these dimensions, the identification of guiding research questions emerges as a critical step:

- A. How were goddesses like Nü Wa, and Chang'e depicted within the realms of ancient Chinese mythology? What sociocultural roles did they assume in different periods of Chinese history, and how did this affect their processes of evolution?
- B. How are these archetypal goddesses connected to the portrayal of women in the cinematic world, as depicted in films like *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*?
- C. How do the films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* depict the female gaze?

The study compares two historic timelines, the first being the ancient mythology of Chinese goddesses and the latter being current Chinese movies with

valuation of female characters. For understanding ancient Chinese mythology, information was sourced from ancient texts and narratives. Ancient texts were crucial in providing the needed information on the origin and works of early goddesses. This knowledge is critical in getting a clearer picture of how ancient Chinese culture has perceived the female gender and the importance of such beings in society. Information on female characters in contemporary films was obtained from analyzing *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* as well as drawing upon the analyses of other film critics and scholars. It is my contention that the two films effectively convey the influence of female figures in the film through the lens of the female gaze. The two periods have been crucial in showing how Chinese society has portrayed women in their entirety.

This major research paper is broken down into the following chapters. In Chapter Two, the literature review provides an overview of the evolutionary history of the myths of Nü Wa and Chang'e. In Chapter Three, the theoretical foundation is presented for the consequent analysis of gender roles and in articulating the concept of the female gaze in *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. In Chapter Four, in the "Presentation of Women in Contemporary Cinema: *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Rouge*", the analysis focuses on the portrayal of the female protagonists, Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern* and Ru Hua in *Rouge*. In this chapter, depictions of the female gaze in these films are presented, and the connections between the female characters in modern cinema and ancient goddesses are explored. In Chapter Five, the discussion examines whether the directors of *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou, and *Rouge*, Stanley Kwan, can be considered feminists. Furthermore, critical reflections are presented regarding whether the conceptual approaches mentioned in the theoretical framework are suitable for analyzing *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. Finally, the conclusion, while

summarizing the entire paper, delves into my perspective as a filmmaker on the future of feminist Chinese cinema.

Exploring the interconnection between deified goddesses and cinema provides us with further knowledge about cultural transformation, giving us hints about societal patterns of evolution. The symbiosis between cinematic narratives and ancient goddesses, rarely examined before, enables us to reexamine the role of gender norms. The recent trend of women occupying significant positions in casting and directing, exemplified by films such as *Rouge* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, symbolizes the profound shift going on. These characters change society's mindset toward the endorsement of gender equity.

Building upon the foundational insights provided in the introduction, in the next chapter, the literature review will further explore the existing historical literature concerning the evolution of Nü Wa and Chang'e.

## 2. Literature Review

In the following discussion, a thorough examination of the evolution of ancient goddesses Nü Wa and Chang'e as depicted in existing texts will be presented.

Chinese culture is full of mythological goddesses, each being of importance in their own way. The ancient Chinese goddesses collectively form the mythological era of Chinese women, and the spiritual essence of Chinese goddesses has become an important source and valuable resource for constructing the cultural spirit of the Chinese nation (Sheng, 2012). In the Tang dynasty (AD 624–705), we can also see the actions of the only female empress in China, Wu Zhao. She was intelligent, skilled throughout her life. Taizong, then emperor was pleased and employed Wu as his personal secretary for ten years. During this period, she gained experience working with official documents and learned the necessary useful skills for conducting state affairs (Lee, 2015). Through quick learning, Wu would gather the necessary skills in administration and rule after Taizong for a great period of time. This is a clear indication of how in this period of Chinese society, here referred to as the Tang Dynasty, during which the status of women was relatively high with an elevation of societal respect and status for women (Lee, 2003), valued women and included them as a crucial part of their society. Unfortunately, things would turn for the worse in the coming decades.

The strength and significance of traditional Chinese women within society persisted for generations, until the emergence of the Han Empire and the onset of Confucian philosophies and principles (Wang, 2013). Confucianism, including classical and Han Confucianism, provided a view of the cosmos and social order that legitimated the Chinese patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal family system (Ebrey, 2002). Confucian emphasis on obligations to patrilineal ancestors and Confucian

exaltation of filial piety contributed to a moral order in which families were central to human identity and to a family system organized hierarchically so that men and older generations had considerable power over women and younger generations (Ebrey, 2002). It was during the rise of Confucianism that Chinese woman lost value and began to be seen as a puppet for the masculine gender. In this context, women were presented as a category of people to whom men had an obligation (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2023). It did not give women opportunities to create relationships or decide about themselves. Attitudes of male supremacy and female subordination were reinforced (legitimized) by Confucian scholars' interpretation of the concept of the unity of yin-yang opposites, where perfection is recognized as the result of harmony and balance between them (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2023).

The status of women began to decline in the Song period, just when Neo-Confucianism was gaining sway. The two signs of this decline most frequently mentioned are the pressure on widows not to remarry and the practice of binding young girls' feet to prevent them from growing more than a few inches long (Ebrey, 2023). The respect that was given and the value that was seen in women began to decline. This was because the Han dynasty supported the ideology that Chinese culture was patriarchal where men ruled women. During this period, the fierceness and value of women declined significantly in Chinese culture, and this decline persisted for a prolonged duration.

Delving into the narratives surrounding ancient goddesses, the exploration begins with an introduction to Nü Wa and her mythological significance.

## 2.1 Nü Wa

One of the greatest figures that have upheld the magnitude of the women value is the goddess Nü Wa (Zhou, 2022). In her early versions, Nü Wa played various roles, symbolizing creation, power and reverence (Zhang, 2008). The ancient Chinese perceived Nü Wa as the creator of both heaven and earth. All human beings and animals were created by her, and she controlled all of nature. She is the goddess of giving and taking, with the balances of justice being credited to her (Zhang, 2008). Ancient mythology shows how Nü Wa would change her status from a goddess to human being for the sake of marriage (Zhao, 2014). Her sacrifice is portrayed as a vital status to the feminine gender in terms of honor and love (Zhang, 2008). As the creator of heaven and earth, she symbolizes immense power and resilience. However, her self-sacrificial actions and adherence to societal conventions of marriage also illustrate the constraints placed on women in traditional Chinese society (Liang, 2014). Despite her strength, Nü Wa is still subject to the expectations and limitations imposed by patriarchal norms.

Nü Wa, the creator of mankind, is known as a goddess with paranormal abilities and supernatural physicality who possesses the different abilities as seen in ancient mythology (Zhang, 2008). “In art, she’s usually depicted as a supernatural creature with a human face and a long serpentine body but is also sometimes simply drawn as a woman dressed in traditional Chinese hanfu” (Hamilton, 2022). One fact portrayed about Nü Wa, the creator of humankind and the repairer of the pillar of heaven, is her ability to transform into forms that are preferable to her appearance (Ma, 2010). She is the strength of the society and she holds the key to creation and procreation (Liu, 2010). In her image, she also portrays herself as a woman. The reason she has a woman’s face is to show the power the feminine gender holds in

creation and procreation (Zhang, 2008). This demonstrates how prior to Confucianism, Chinese culture valued the feminine gender and adored them in the society by showing how important they were (Liu, 2010).

The myth of Nü Wa originated in matriarchal society, representing one of the first deities in Chinese mythology (Zhang, 2008). Dynamic and mutable, Nü Wa played multiple kinds of roles in the early texts, functioning as a symbol of the ancestors, the embodiment of nature, and the initiation of generating life. Also in that period, *the Classic of Mountains and Rivers* (《山海经》) (Yuan, 1980) describes ten gods born from the guts of Nü Wa, living in the fields of Liangguang, indicating that though lacking a consistent appearance, Nü Wa was referred to as the goddess of fostering life.

In the Han Dynasty, considered the golden age for the survival and dissemination of myths and legends, China enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and stability, which served as the ideal environment for the development and spread of myths (Zhou, 2022). At the end of the Western Han Dynasty<sup>1</sup>, the turbulent society accelerated the rapid growth of folk religious beliefs, and the people placed their good vision on praying for God, further hastening the secularization of myths and religious superstitions (Zhou, 2022). All of these contributed to the evolution of Nü Wa's mythological image.

In *Huinanzi* (《淮南子》) (Liu, 2006) a text written during the Western Han Dynasty, Nü Wa is said to be the heroine who was smelting the five-colored stones to

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<sup>1</sup> The Western Han Dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 9 CE. Social unrest and rebellions were significant factors contributing to the instability of the Western Han Dynasty (Ebrey, 2013). Natural disasters, such as floods and droughts, posed significant challenges to the Western Han Dynasty. These disasters often led to famine, economic hardship, and social unrest among the populace (Schipper, 1993).

fill the holes in heaven, breaking the legs of a turtle to support the four corners of the earth (Liu, 2006). Not only was she recognized for restoring the equilibrium of a world out of kilter, but she was also known for taming the flood, staunching the inundating waters with ash and burned reeds.

Nü Wa was an inventor, who constructed people from yellow dirt, according to Ying Shao's Eastern Han classic *Annotated Edition of Comprehensive Commentary on Popular Customs* (《风俗通义校注》) (Ying, 1981). It is said that when the heavens and the earth were first opened up, there were no people. Nü Wa molded people from yellow earth, but her tasks were too numerous, and she was unable to attend to all of them. Therefore, she led a rope into the mud, raising it up as humans (Zhang, 2008).

Through these myths, it's evident that by the end of the Han dynasty, Nü Wa was clearly worshipped as the goddess of creation and reproduction as well as the mother of the earth, representing the spirit of giving life, sustenance, and dedication to humans. However, the autonomy and power Nü Wa had possessed as a primeval goddess was diminished by the rise of the Confucian state (Rothschild, 2015). Once yoked to male figures, powerful female divinities like Nü Wa were forced to fit into a yin-yang schema during the Han and thereby were domesticated, diminished by emergent patriarchal mores, which can be verified in Han mortuary iconography. This primeval goddess is often paired with a male divinity, her brother-husband Fuxi, their serpentine tails intertwined, representing the harmony of Yin and Yang through the way of conjugal union (Liang, 2014).

In this section, the evolution of Nü Wa has been discussed. In the next few pages, the goddess Chang'e's evolution is similarly presented.

## 2.2 Chang'e

Another goddess to hold up the virtue of the Chinese woman is Chang'e. Longstanding moon worship in China led to the creation of a particular moon goddess, Chang'e, during the Warring States period (Liu, 2010). Just like Nü Wa, Chang'e is a reference point of power and reverence in the ancient Chinese. She is the goddess of the moon, characterised by immortal abilities and grace for the wellbeing of humankind (Zhang, 2009). She is a depiction of a strong woman and an idol to be reckoned with. She symbolises the strength and love of all women in executing power and justice to those they care about (Zhao, 2010).

The earliest record of Chang'e is said to have been found in the now lost book *Guizang* (《归藏》), a necromancer's tome about divination, which was written around the beginning of the Warring States period (Liu, 2010). The earliest existing collection of poems in China, *Wenxuan* (《文选》) (Xiao, 1986) – co-edited by Xiao Tong, the eldest son of Emperor Liang Wu in the Southern Dynasty – has preserved the original text's appearance regarding the tale of Chang'e flying to the moon (Yan, 2005).

As stated in *Guizang*, Chang'e consumed the Queen Mother of the West's elixir, however, the manner in which the elixir comes to be in Chang'e's hands is not mentioned, making it impossible to determine whether Chang'e was penalized for making mistakes with her rushes (Zhao, 2010). As opposed to being punished, Gao You from the Eastern Han dynasty noted in *Huinanzi* (《淮南子》) (Liu, 2006) that Chang'e swallowed the elixir, flying to the moon to become the essence of the moon.

The story of Chang'e flying to the moon was recorded in more detail in the literary works of the Han Dynasty, and the storyline underwent changes, forming the

myth of Chang'e flying to the moon that we are familiar with today (Liu, 2010).

According to *Huinanzi* (《淮南子》) (Liu, 2006), Chang'e's husband, Hou Yi had been gifted an elixir of immortality from the Queen Mother of the West. Chang'e stole the elixir and flew to the moon. Sadly, she mourned her inability to return to earth, trapped to live eternally in solitude on the moon.

Additionally, during the Han dynasty, when Chang'e flew to the moon, she "became a toad" as mentioned in *Book of the Later Han* (《后汉书》) (Fan, 1965), the Song dynasty's *Taipingyulan* (《太平御览》) (Li, 1960) and *Chu Xue Ji* (Xu, 1962) all contain similar content. As can be seen from the foregoing, Chang'e's transformation into a toad, which was introduced in the Han period, has remained the authoritative version across subsequent dynasties (Zhao, 2010).

In his work "Reconsidering the Broad Sense of Mythology," Mr. Yuan Ke, a renowned Chinese folklorist and cultural scholar, argues that all Chinese mythologies originated in primitive society and did not disappear with the advent of classed society. In classed society, it continues to be transmitted orally by the masses, to circulate, to develop, and to evolve (Yuan, 1991). People incorporate these myths and legends into real life, connecting them with individuals and the human spiritual realm, revealing the spiritual needs of ordinary people. The image of Chang'e has also transformed from a goddess into a wife.

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Chang'e's power is reduced to serve societal expectations. As a wife, Chang'e no longer opposes her husband's virtue in Pu Songlin's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Pu, 2006), but instead embodies every trait of a woman who uses her intelligence and bravery to protect the safety of a

family. Chang'e's selection to epitomise the good wife demonstrates Pu Songling's deliberate rejection of feudal customary feminine conventions (Yan, 2005).

Pu Songling's path to passing the imperial examination was not smooth, and he did not achieve the title of "scholar" until the age of 71. He was born into a declining gentry family in Qing Dynasty China. The limited resources and declining status of his family may have hindered his access to formal education and the resources necessary to prepare for the imperial examinations (Yu, 2018). The long-term failure to achieve success in the imperial examinations led to Pu Songling being subjected to disdain by his contemporaries. This experience led him to have a deeper understanding of and insight into social reality, especially regarding the perception of women, who were often marginalized in society (Xu, 2018). Living in a deeply Confucian cultural environment, Pu Songling's basic attitude towards women was still influenced by traditional Confucian ideology, which emphasized their roles in the family and their duty to adhere to the virtues of a wife, assist their husbands, and educate their children (Xu, 2018). However, in his works, Pu Songling also transcends traditional gender roles.

The female characters that Pu Songling portrays are brave, intelligent, and have a strong sense of autonomy and justice. Such characterization demonstrates the author's recognition of the capabilities and worth of women, reflecting his new expectations for women's roles (Xu, 2018). In *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Pu, 2006), Pu Songling has crafted a series of female characters like Chang'e who are wise, courageous, and independent. They are no longer symbols of weakness and dependence in the traditional sense but represent individuals who dare to pursue true love and resist oppression.

These female characters, whether facing the constraints of feudal family or societal pressure, exhibit firm stances and unwavering determination. They not only subvert traditional gender roles in society but also promote feminist consciousness, serving as powerful weapons against feudal ethics and advocating for freedom and equality (Xu, 2018). These female characters also reflect Pu Songling's profound understanding and appreciation of women's status and roles, showcasing his unique perspective on women and his humanitarian spirit.

During the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China period (1894-1949), Chinese traditional opera portrayals of Chang'e typically centred on her romance with Hou Yi, two people who share a profound love but are separated by great distances (Man, 2009). In Peking, the opera classic *Si Fan* (《思凡》), Mei Lanfang, one of the most outstanding Peking opera artists of the 20th century in China depicted Chang'e, the fairy on the moon who was graceful and charming nevertheless shrouded in an endless loneliness (Man, 2009).

Chang'e began as a goddess of the moon, and over time transformed into a human. In the enduring feudal society of China, women were relegated to mere ornaments within a patriarchal framework. They assumed roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, symbols of prosperity in times of national glory, for satisfying desires in the imperial harem, machines for bearing children in ordinary households, and scapegoats or lowly servants in times of national crisis, but they were never recognized as individuals in their own right (Zhao, 2010). Despite their multifaceted contributions, they were rarely recognized as individuals in their own right. Within this context, Chang'e's departure to the moon is seen as a violation of the ethical and moral norms of feudal society, challenging the established authority of men (Zhao, 2010).

Consequently, Chang'e is frequently portrayed as a symbol of rebellion against patriarchal norms.

The literature review lays the groundwork for comprehending the historical context of the transformation of ancient goddesses' images. In the next chapter, the theoretical framework will provide a conceptual lens for analyzing the films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. Furthermore, it facilitates the connection of the data gathered from the literature about goddesses to identify solid connections between ancient goddesses and contemporary female characters.

### 3. Theoretical framework

In this section the theoretical framework and methodologies are elucidated, essential for the film analysis and comparisons to the goddesses, who were introduced in the previous chapter.

In the dynamic context of Chinese Cinema and mythological narratives, the representation of gender roles appears to be the most promising avenue for understanding social change and the transformation of power relations. The study of gender representation in this field needs a complex theoretical and methodological approach, as presented in the works *Feminist Struggles in a Changing China* by Wang Zheng and *Screen Feminisms with Hong Kong Characteristics* by Gina Marchetti. These studies utilize a variety of approaches to analyze the representation of female characters, discussing their multifaceted significance for gender, politics, and cinema.

The work of feminist sociologist Wang Zheng provides a deep insight into the feminist movement in China, specifying the political and historical background that has formed gender roles and representations. Using historical analysis and feminist theory in particular, archival research, including the examination of historical documents, interviews, and feminist literature analysis, Zheng critically examines the intricate web of China's political history and its influence on gender equality and women's rights (Zheng, 2018). This methodological approach plays a crucial role in comprehending the evolution of gender roles in Chinese cinema, highlighting the significant impact of social changes on character development. Zheng's established historical framework offers a crucial context for scrutinizing the portrayal of female characters in films, thereby situating the research within a complex socio-political narrative (Zheng, 2018).

On the contrary, the research of feminist film scholar Gina Marchetti integrates cultural studies, film theory, and feminist critique, in particular gender performativity, post-colonialism, and gaze theory to investigate the particular features of the presentation of gender in Hong Kong cinema (Marchetti, 2021). Marchetti's method is based on the analysis of narrative texts in films and visual analysis of the film techniques, which helps to understand the way Hong Kong cinema discusses gender, identity, and power. This approach underscores the importance of comprehending the specific cultural and societal contexts that shape the creation and consumption of films, offering crucial insights into the formation and portrayal of gender roles in these settings.

Zheng and Marchetti's approaches can be considered multi-perspective, and they foster comprehensive analysis of gender roles in Chinese cinema. Through the integration of textual, visual, narrative, ideological, and cultural/sociological analysis, gender representation coverage is made holistic (Marchetti, 2021; Zheng, 2018). For example, text analysis will be used to parse dialogue and language in movies such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*, disclosing the hidden power and gender roles. Likewise, a visual analysis will examine cinematographic techniques used to communicate gender-related messages, while a narrative analysis will evaluate how the storytelling structures and pacing work to convey the portrayal of gender transformations.

Through methodological approaches adopted in *Raise the Red Lantern*, one will find out how rights and autonomy of Chinese women become deteriorated under the patriarchal system, being a part of larger social controversies. On the contrary, *Rouge* will be considered a case study in the analysis of the rebellious nature of Chinese women, and it will provide them with a realization of their power and ability.

By ideological analysis, these films will be studied in terms of their hidden messages about gender and power, whereas culturological and sociological analysis will put them within their particular historical and social contexts.

The analytical approaches set out by Zheng and Marchetti give an excellent theoretical basis for studying gender roles in Chinese cinema and mythological stories. These methodologies allow the researcher to not only analyze the representations of female characters on screen but also to investigate the more general societal and cultural contexts of these presentations. By using these analytical lenses in studying films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*, this research will contribute to a more subtle perception of gender dynamics in Chinese cinema, considering these stories and how they both mirror and transcend dominant gender roles.

In addition to gender roles, this MRP focuses on exploring the concept of the Chinese female gaze. The Chinese female gaze deliberately diverges from predominantly patriarchal orthodoxy, allowing for the synchronization of women's needs, wishes, and desires to a significant extent (Liang, 2022). The gaze, as expressed in *Chinese female desire, gaze, and identity construction: A case study of "Boys Love"* (Liang, 2022) and *'Why am I still imprisoned in your eyes?': Re-visioning 'leftover women' and the female gaze in Send Me to the Clouds* (Xiao, 2021), is more complex than Western theory may account for; it entails a broad range of theories and cultural nuances that influence women's visual interaction. In this section the two papers regarding the Chinese female gaze, as presented by Liang and Xiao are discussed.

Traditional values, gender-differentiated roles, and family structure shape the female gaze in the context of Chinese culture. Ancestral Confucianism, along with the subsequent ideologies of filial piety and patrilinealism, situate women as inferior in

status compared to men. Therefore, Chinese patriarchal culture imposes significant restrictions on the female gaze, primarily insisting on its passivity.

However, the subversive potential of the female gaze is present in the Chinese cultural context. The articles by Liang and Xiao concentrate on how Chinese women divert the female gaze, empowering them to challenge the patriarchal order and express their humanity.

Feminist Asian literature and cultural studies scholar Hui Faye Xiao introduces several theoretical frameworks to analyze the Chinese female gaze and women's visual representation and agency in Chinese society, two of which are presented here (Xiao, 2021):

1. **Oppositional Female Gaze:** This article makes use of bell hooks' theory of oppositional gaze as a form of resistance against male dominance about race and gender. This is a framework that highlights the political aspect of appearance and how women wield power by refusing subordinate roles through their vision.
2. **Gender as a Critical Lens:** Gender has become an influential critical perspective through which different types of individual or collective sufferings, alienations, and injustices. This framework, in turn, allows for sociopolitical inequalities and emotional displacements regarding the gender-class-age-generation matrix within the dominant regime.

These theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into the visual representation and social agency of Chinese women. However, Xiao incorporates Western scholarly theories to analyze the Chinese context, which may lead to some

inaccuracies due to cultural differences. The appropriateness of this approach will be discussed in Chapter 4's film analysis.

Feminist sociologist Shuying Liang, on the other hand, employs Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Deleuze's notion of desire as methodologies for investigating the Chinese female gaze and identity construction through consumption processes in Boys Love (BL) media (Liang, 2022). The paper proposes that Chinese female spectators' expressions and transformations of sexual desire are exhibited in their imaginary projections and consumption of BL media as a way of building themselves. This counters the gender power differentials in patriarchal ideology while aiming to subvert the traditional, patriarchal and derogatory views of women's bodies as objects of male voyeurism. It also shows the importance of female autonomy, proactivity, and creativity in forming personal identities, as well as empowering the female gaze and female identity to resist patriarchal dominion.

I analyze the images of the Chinese female gaze using the theoretical frameworks presented in the two articles discussed above. Specifically, I utilize my knowledge of the Chinese female gaze to interpret the visual narratives, character perspectives, and thematic considerations in the films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. More specifically, based on bell hooks' concept of the oppositional female gaze, I show how the female characters in the two films have agency through their gazes. In *Raise the Red Lantern* I explain how the protagonist resists feudal oppression through the gaze, in particular the power relations in the protagonist's household. In *Rouge*, I interpret how the gaze reflects the female character's resistance to societal norms.

Second, by focusing on visual storytelling methods and narrative patterns, I investigate how the films challenge conventional film practices to offer different perspectives on gendered subjectivity and patterns of authority. Third, using gender as a critical lens discussed by Xiao, I explore the sociopolitical antagonisms and emotional shifts that female characters undergo. By paying much attention to the interaction between gender, social class, and cultural norms, I investigate female subjectivities within notions of a male-controlled society as a patriarchal institution.

In Chapter 4, I apply the methods and theories mentioned above to analyze *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*.

#### 4. Presentation of Women in Contemporary Cinema: *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Rouge*

In this section, the examination of the presentation of women through the lens of the female gaze in contemporary cinema is conducted via the analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*.

Mythology, as a cultural form, represents the ancient human imagination of nature during a period of low social productivity. Initially, human society emerged from a matrilineal clan, where the mother traced lineage and women occupied a significant role in society. Therefore, as a reflection of this social structure, mythology abounds with women's worship. Contemporary films, serving as a cultural medium, allow modern society to document history, with women taking on increasingly significant roles. Movies frequently portray women in diverse roles, from powerful leaders to concubines affiliated with influential male figures. They showcase their diversity and complexity across various historical periods and social contexts, mirroring shifts in societal perceptions of gender roles. In Chinese culture's millennia-old heritage, the film *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* find their counterparts in mythology.

In analyzing the film through narrative and visual lenses, parallels emerge with mythology, a cultural form deeply rooted in ancient human imaginations. Ancient Chinese mythology vividly depicts the lifestyle of early people as one characterized by matrilineal clan tribes, wherein women occupied prominent roles in social life and commanded great respect (Liu, 2006). Similarly, contemporary film serve as a cultural medium to document history, showcasing the evolving roles of women. Just as mythology abounds with stories of women's worship, movies like *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* depict women in diverse and complex roles, echoing shifts in

societal perceptions of gender. Through this lens, further exploration of the goddess archetype portrayed within the film's narrative and visual elements is warranted.

#### **4.1 *Raise the Red Lantern*: How Chinese Women Gradually Lose Power**

*Raise the Red Lantern*, directed by Zhang Yimou, depicting the polygamous practices in 1920s Chinese society. The story revolves around Songlian, a young woman compelled to wed a wealthy man in 1920s China as his fourth wife, delving into themes of power, jealousy, and desire among the mistresses vying for their husband's affection. It offers a critical commentary on gender roles and the oppression of women in traditional Chinese society, vividly illustrating their subservient status. Male characters wield control and dominance over the females, treating them as objects of desire valued solely for their ability to please the master. The film sheds light on the restrictions on women's freedom and agency, delving into the ramifications of patriarchal power dynamics.

Zhang Yimou is one of the prominent figures representing the "Fifth Generation" of Chinese film directors. One of the most distinctive features of his cinematic works is the portrayal of folk cultural elements. Throughout his films, there is a consistent presence of folk atmosphere, with a focus on exploring various folk cultural elements (Wang, 2015). The subsequent visual analysis will concentrate on symbolism and the use of color.

In the film, the most influential visual language is color, which conveys the grand estate's binding atmosphere to women through the symbolic use of death-associated red, profound and heartless black, and tranquility-terrifying white. Red, traditionally associated with passion and sexuality, takes on a darker significance as it becomes a representation of death, echoing the limitations and sacrifices faced by women in the film. The use of color in *Raise the Red Lantern* enhances the visual

experience and is a powerful tool for exploring the complexities of gender and the limited range of opportunities available to women within the narrative. The color red distinctly conveys the vertical power relationship. At the same time, blue symbolizes merciless punishment for women resisting authority, imbuing the film with profound artistic value and highlighting the power dynamics of feudalism (Park, 2020). The film particularly exposes the complexities and radical tendencies of polygamy, resulting in the deaths and psychological anguish of multiple wives. Lanterns hang, symbolizing Mr. Chen's patriarchal authority and improper competition (Standridge, 2021).

In the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, the director's most remarkable aspect lies in his use of the symbolism of the red lantern and the color red. The red lantern serves as the core of the Chen household's rules and rituals, symbolizing the traditional customs and male authority, thus becoming the lifeline of the film and a mirror reflecting the intertwined desires of the wives. Lighting the lantern symbolizes favor, joy, and status, serving as a carrier of happiness; extinguishing it symbolizes falling out of favor, loneliness, and solitary nights, conveying a sense of desolation; sealing it signifies irreparable loss, relegation to oblivion, representing destruction.

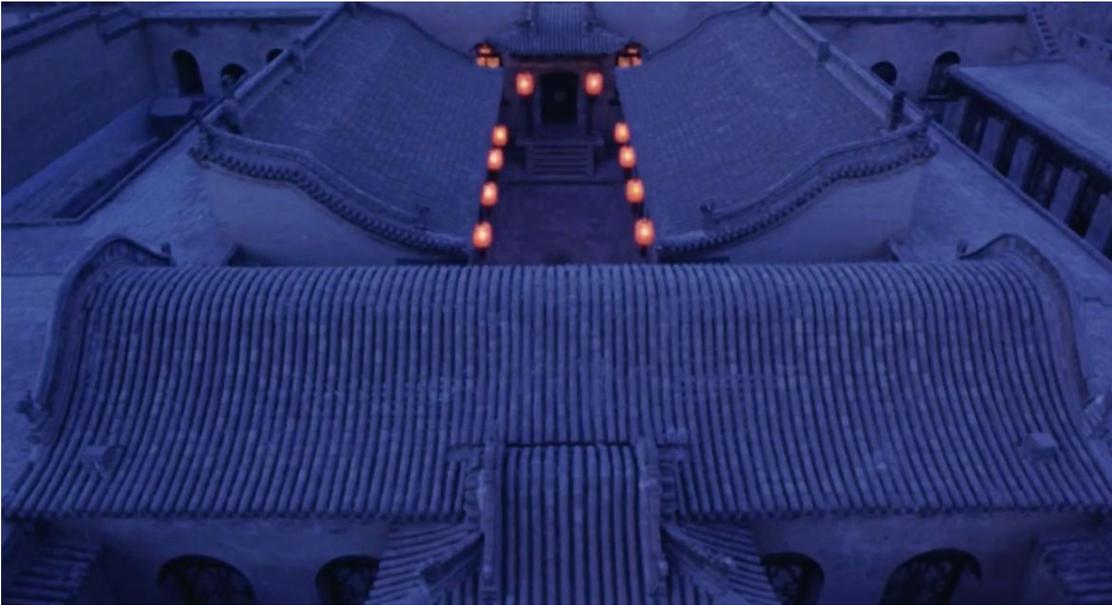


Figure 1: Video still of The Chen Family Residence in *Raise the Red Lantern* (00:10:55)

The introduction of this patriarchal perspective more explicitly portrays the harm of the feudal polygamous system to women and the complexities and ugliness of human nature within large families (Fang, 2008). The symbolism of the red lantern carries a dual meaning: on the one hand, it represents the oppressive force of feudalism, and on the other, for women, it symbolizes the desire for love within a power dynamic (Hu, 2012). It takes on a more worrying tone following the demise of the Third Mistress. After the demise of the Third Mistress, Songlian lights all the red lanterns in her room as an act of revenge, a questioning of humanity, and simultaneously, an inner self-reproach.

*Raise the Red Lantern* initially explores the continuity and transformation of female archetypes from mythology to film, offering a better understanding of how the film presents and interprets female images of traditional Chinese cultural norms.



Figure 2: Video still of Songlian holding the red lantern in *Raise the Red Lantern* (00:12:06)

While preserving and advancing the original themes and style, the movie incorporates Zhang Yimou's distinctive visual effects and delves into a profound historical and cultural background. It vividly portrays the intrigue and power struggles within a feudal family practicing polygamy, depicting life scenes and the corresponding survival principles. Set in 1920s China, *Raise the Red Lantern* delves into the intricacies of a polygamous household, spotlighting Songlian, an educated woman whose personality distorts amid the sinister survival environment of the Chen family.

In the subsequent analysis of the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, the narrative and visual analyses are combined to explore the core of gender power relations and patriarchal oppression of women during the Republic of China era. First, attention is given to narrative analysis. The Chen Family Residence, a castle-like mansion that graces a town in the Republic of China era, serves as the focal point of the film's narrative. Wealthy Mr. Chen Zuoqian had a wife named Yuruh, a second wife named Zhuoyun, and a third wife named Meishan. Songlian, a 19-year-old college student, had to discontinue her schooling and marry into the Chen family because her family

circumstances changed. Hence, she became Mr. Chen's fourth wife. According to feminist Asian literature and cultural studies scholar, Hui Faye Xiao:

Rather than being an essentialist signifier determined by biological autonomic differences, gender has become a powerful critical lens through which various forms of individual and collective sufferings, alienations and injustices could be seen and examined by an oppositional female gaze at the multiple manifestations of sociopolitical inequalities and emotional displacements along the divisions of gender, class, age and generation within the dominant order of multi-layered postsocialist patriarchy in contemporary China and beyond.

(2021, p. 184).

In its elegant portrayal of the feminine look, *Raise the Red Lantern* gives an in-depth understanding of women's lives in patriarchal societies. Songlian's inner world is highly detailed. The movie offers a profound window into her psychological processes by showing what she wants and her difficulties through subtle gestures and close-ups. The film challenges the traditional male gaze by highlighting female characters' agency and subjectivity rather than just objectifying them for male viewing pleasure. With the help of various dimensions of female characters, the film stirs pity and sympathy, changing society and eradicating gender bias and patriarchy. The movie highlights the repressive nature of patriarchy and women's ability to navigate through and resist oppressive powers, thereby leading to empowerment where women reassert their agency and freedom. Through its strong representation of Songlian and other female characters, the movie challenges stereotypical gender norms, going deeper into female subjectivity and power.



Figure 3: Video still of lighting up Songlian's lantern in *Raise the Red Lantern* (00:29:35)

In the film, Mr. Chen sleeps in one of the wives' rooms, and it is customary in the Chen household to decorate the wife's door with a large red lantern. On the other hand, when a wife commits misconduct or an offense, the black cloth covers the red lantern, symbolizing her loss of favor. Every night, Mr. Chen hangs his giant red lantern in front of his wife's door, highlighting the patriarchal nature of polygamous relationships in traditional Chinese culture.

Polygamy has been favored by Chinese men since the Qin and Han dynasties. As a collective, ancient Chinese men never entertained the idea of relinquishing the right to have multiple wives (Chen, 1999). In the long evolution of China's marriage system over thousands of years, patriarchal dominance has gradually strengthened its central position and leading role in marital relationships. Polygamy is a common practice that emphasizes the authority and control of men over multiple wives. The husband often views his wives as property or extensions of his status. The red lantern symbolizes both the visibility of the wife's status and her role as a symbol of the family's honor and prestige. The family asserts its wealth and power by prominently

displaying the red lantern, demonstrating the husband's ability to maintain multiple wives.

The young and beautiful Songlian becomes entangled in the power struggles among the various wives soon after entering the Chen family. The maid, Yan'er, who harbors dreams of becoming a concubine, is also hostile towards her. Songlian pretends to be pregnant to regain favor, hanging a "never-extinguishing lamp" in front of her door. However, Yan'er discovers the truth while washing Songlian's clothes and secretly reports it to their second wife, Zhuoyun. Consequently, Songlian finds herself "sealed off."

Before Yan'er can report her discovery, Songlian already finds that Yan'er has hidden an old lantern. Initially intending to keep it a secret, Songlian later exposes the truth after realizing that Yan'er has betrayed her. Yan'er kneels in the snow but refuses to admit her mistake, ultimately meeting her demise. Songlian's relationship with her maid demonstrates the enforcement of traditional gender roles, which expect women to conform to their assigned positions within the social hierarchy with minimal room for deviation or resistance.



Figure 4: Video still of sealing off Songlian's lantern in *Raise the Red Lantern* (02:00:59)

Yan'er's death leaves Songlian mentally disturbed and increasingly despondent, often drowning her sorrows in alcohol. After getting drunk one time, she unintentionally reveals the secret affair between the third wife, Meishan, and Dr. Gao. The Chen Family Residence's corner tower subsequently finds Meishan hanging in a small room. Songlian's mental state collapses, and she becomes insane. The following year, the Chen family welcomes a fifth wife, while the already-mad Songlian wanders through the Chen family residence dressed in her college student attire.

The portrayal of Meishan's extramarital affair illustrates how sexual desire serves as a catalyst for negotiating female identity. This challenges the gender power imbalances entrenched in patriarchal ideology and seeks to subvert the traditional, patriarchal, and demeaning perceptions of women's bodies as mere objects for the male voyeuristic gaze (Liang, 2022). It also shows the importance of female autonomy, proactivity, and creativity in forming personal identities, as well as empowering the female gaze and female identity to resist patriarchal dominion. However, ultimately, Meishan faces severe punishment for her sexual desires, even losing her life. This reflects the comprehensive oppression of women in patriarchal societies and underscores the notion that only men are granted the power to possess sexual desire. Conversely, any expression of sexual desire by women is cruelly rejected by society.



Figure 5: Video still of the haunted scene in *Raise the Red Lantern* (01:56:38)

Following Meishan's death, Songlian descends into madness. Under the cover of darkness, she infiltrates Meishan's room, illuminating all the lanterns within before repeating the action in her own courtyard. Songlian's fixation on lighting lanterns underscores the deep impact of male-dominated oppression, serving as a poignant reflection of her deteriorating mental state (Cheng, 2009). In reality, Songlian's madness is inevitable; even without Meishan's death, she would have gone mad. Her insanity is closely linked to her education.

As a university student, Songlian is exposed to modern civilization and holds progressive ideas, challenging feudal customs and serving as a warrior against feudalism. Despite not fully embodying the role of a progressive intellectual, her education shapes her mindset, making her different from the other wives in the Chen household. Only she dares to show displeasure to Mr. Chen and pursues a life with dignity, unlike other wives who conform to societal norms. However, environmental pressures gradually suppress her rebellious nature, forcing her to align with the status quo and become complicit in the oppression around her. This internal conflict leads to a severe fragmentation of her thoughts, emotions, daily life, and even her personality.

While this fragmentation exists to varying degrees in the other wives, Songlian can't endure for long. Despite her education, her awareness is largely theoretical rather than experiential. Lacking the ability to handle intense mental conflicts, her sense of self-worth clashes with the dehumanizing environment she lives in, exacerbating her emotional anguish (Huang, 2014). The tension resulting from the fragmentation of her mind and personality reaches a breaking point when she witnesses Meishan's death, driving her into insanity.



Figure 6: Video still of Songlian wandering in madness in *Raise the Red Lantern* (02:01:15)

At the end of the film, the camera follows Songlian as she walks back and forth in bewilderment, then slowly zooms out to once again fully reveal her pure white college student attire, as if symbolizing Songlian's return to her original student identity, achieving a return and liberation of the self. Meanwhile, as Fifth Mistress is married into the Chen household, the film ends with an overhead panoramic view of the Chen family courtyard, implying that the tragedy continues to unfold in this seemingly desolate prison-like estate. Songlian's student uniform becomes the confinement that traps her, indicating that within the Chen household, countless women will continue to be tormented into becoming ghosts of their former selves.

Despite the predominantly confined setting of the Chen family estate, the film successfully avoids overshadowing the nuanced emotions and profound ideas it aims to convey. The singular environment enhances rather than limits the exploration of the character's struggles and the broader societal issues depicted in the narrative. *Raise the Red Lantern* indeed delves deeply into the entrapment of women within patriarchal systems as one of its central themes. The film vividly portrays the oppressive nature of traditional gender roles and the power dynamics within a feudal household. Through the character of Songlian and the other concubines, it explores the loss of agency, autonomy, and identity experienced by women who are subjugated within such systems.

The film heavily employs symbolism, particularly in the absence of the spring season. The director might be conveying that these women never experience spring; they perpetually live in a season of desolation. Devoid of sunlight, they only hope for the red lanterns, and there is no glimpse of a brighter future. From the outset, it foreshadows a tragic conclusion. The large estate, which resembles a colossal cage where every wife and the maid Yan'er can only express their emotions within its walls, serves as the setting for every scene. The director intends to emphasize that these women can never escape this confinement and break free from the cruelty of the feudal societal system.



Figure 7: Video still of the servants carrying Meishan towards the dead room in *Raise the Red Lantern* (01:50:04)

The use of symbols is evident throughout the film. For instance, the film does not show the Third Mistress's scenes beyond the courtyard, even though she ventures outside. Even those who attempt to escape face a tragic end as her fate returns to haunt her. Hovering on the rooftop, the fourth mistress symbolizes a desire for freedom, yet she loses her sanity. The rooftop, the closest to the sky and heaven, becomes the closest to a dismal fate. For everyone in the estate, freedom is an elusive pursuit, a stumbling block in their lives.

The film's ending is both impactful and thought-provoking. Red lanterns illuminate the ancient quadrangle courtyard at night, making it appear like a cage. The deranged Songlian continually wanders within this cage, becoming increasingly diminutive until she is barely visible. This suggests that there is not just one cage or confined individual under the vast sky. Rather, there exist multiple cages from which women can never escape. These cages allude to various forms of confinement and oppression, symbolizing not only the physical enclosure of the courtyards but also the societal constraints and gender roles that confine women within the patriarchal system. Notably, the film never portrays the master in a positive light, potentially symbolizing

the depiction of royal authority, strict hierarchies, and oppression originating not from an individual but from an intangible force. The loss of freedom becomes a tragic aspect of their lives. Upon completing the film, many viewers may find themselves lamenting and struggling with the fate of the characters. The practice of "hanging lanterns," "footbinding," "meals," and the oppressive atmosphere of the Chen family's grand estate are overwhelming.

The deep courtyard where the film was shot appears exceptionally serene after years of historical sedimentation. Its towering, thick grey walls and symmetrical structure create an atmosphere of solidity and tranquility. The film extensively utilizes these architectural features, employing symmetrical composition with a strong sense of form to evoke a psychological experience of balance, depth, solemnity, calmness, and indifference for the audience. This "meaningful form" enhances the film's intrinsic qualities (Song, 2013). The Chen family's grand courtyard follows the traditional quadrangle courtyard form, and the film's composition utilizes an axial symmetrical approach, representing the strict and untouchable rules of the Chen family. Songlian strolls by herself in the courtyard at the end of the film, while the walls of the Chen family estate limit her freedom, implying a symbolic "prison" where she finds herself.

#### **4.1.1 Songlian and Nü Wa**

Songlian's experience in *Raise the Red Lantern* is a contemporary reflection of the evolving Nü Wa mythology. Initially, she was a college student, possessing an education that set her apart from most women in terms of value. But like Nü Wa's example of the fall she had to take by relying on her husband Fuxi, Songlian also follows the same path of patriarchal oppression. Chinese mythology typically portrays Nü Wa as the sister and wife of Fuxi, the creator of humans. She maintains harmony and order, though her dependence on her husband symbolizes a lack of independence

and authority. Likewise, Songlian has to sacrifice her dignity in order to survive and please the Chen family's master. The latter situation mirrors the social constraints and challenges Nü Wa faces in the decision-making process, making her forego her freedom and dignity for achievement and the status quo.

Originally depicted as the sacred and inviolable creator goddess in ancient myths, Nü Wa underwent a transformative journey from revered "goddess" to diminished "saint" as male dominance grew. Forced into subservience alongside the powerful male god Fuxi, Nü Wa sacrificed dignity and engaged in an incestuous marriage to ensure the continuation of humanity, losing her once-unwavering independence in the process.

Nü Wa, revered as the goddess of humanity and the early object of human worship, is not only the creator of humanity but also its protector. As the female ancestor of human origin and the natural leader of matrilineal tribes, she holds a revered position in ancient beliefs (Liu, 2006). With the rise of patriarchy, women gradually lost their original functions, prestige, abilities, and skills in practical life. Men came to dominate over women, and the evolution of mythological stories also reflected the idea of male superiority over females (Liu, 2006). Later, under the influence of Confucian orthodoxy, the association of Nü Wa with Fuxi in worship clearly favored Fuxi over Nü Wa, thereby neglecting the intrinsic value of Nü Wa as a representation of female worth (Zhang, 2008). This evolutionary trend highlights the vulnerability of even revered goddesses to patriarchal influence.

Nü Wa's myth serves as a metaphor for broader socio-cultural evolution, illustrating the erosion of female autonomy in the face of patriarchal norms. The transition from independent creator goddess to a figure defined by connection to a male counterpart reflects larger societal shifts. The transformation underscores the

pervasive nature of patriarchal influence, shaping the roles and identities of even the most powerful female entities in human history's ever-evolving tapestry.

The connection between the female protagonist, Songlian, and the goddess Nü Wa in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* is intriguingly explored. In the movie, Songlian's character embodies a transition from a goddess-like figure to a human, mirroring the mythological evolution of Nü Wa from revered deity to a figure predominantly defined by her gender. Songlian experiences repression within a harsh patriarchal system, where women are dependent on their masters for almost everything. Despite possessing intelligence and strength, both women ultimately succumb to patriarchal constraints, underscoring the subjugation faced by women in such societies.

In the film, the objectification of women is evident as they exist as objects for male desire and power. Songlian's forced marriage exemplifies this, symbolizing her transition from one man to another and her loss of independent existence. While she longs for freedom, she remains bound by societal rules and the master's control.

As *Raise the Red Lantern* unfolds, Songlian, initially depicted as a poised and educated woman, gradually loses her sense of agency and descends into a state of mental instability. The oppressive patriarchal system strips away Songlian's power and autonomy, reducing her from a potential authority to a state of emotional vulnerability and despair. Her decline mirrors a fall from grace, akin to the journey from goddess-like stature to the limitations and vulnerabilities of human existence. Ultimately, Songlian's deterioration starkly portrays the destructive impact of patriarchal oppression on individual autonomy and mental well-being.

The experiences of Songlian and Nü Wa mirror the evolution of Chinese history, illustrating the enduring struggle faced by women within patriarchal

frameworks. Whether as revered goddesses or contemporary women, both are compelled to yield and make concessions within male-dominated societies.

The forthcoming section will demonstrate the power of rebellion against patriarchy through the analysis of the film *Rouge*.

#### **4.2 *Rouge*: the rebellious spirit of Chinese women and how they gradually reclaim their power**

Analyzing the film *Rouge* offers insight into the patriarchal constraints imposed on women's lives in 1930s China through a combination of visual and narrative analyses. However, this analysis will argue against the notion that women can be wholly contained by these social expectations and duties. Instead, it will explore how the characters in the film navigate and challenge these constraints, asserting their agency and striving for autonomy within a patriarchal society. The narrative analysis will delve into the significance of the opera image, examining how it serves as a powerful metaphor for the struggles and aspirations of the female characters. Through an examination of both visual and narrative elements, a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender dynamics and the resilience of women in the face of societal oppression can be gained.

*Rouge* was a major hit in 1988; theaters were full to the brim because people were eager to see this movie. The storyline unfolds as newspaperman, Yuan Yongding, and his girlfriend, Chu Juan, embark on a quest to find the lost lover Chen Zhenbang, also known as Shi Er Shao, prompted by an advertisement by a woman named Ru Hua. An accident reveals to her that the beautiful Ru Hua is a ghost who has been waiting for Shi Er Shao for 53 years. Ru Hua develops strong feelings for the energetic youth, and their love leads them to a discussion about marriage. Nevertheless, thanks to the difference in their social statuses, they encounter much resistance from the Chen

family. In the end, they sprinkle *Rouge* on each other as a symbol of their love then kill themselves by eating opium together. Unfortunately, Ru Hua cannot meet her lover in the Reign of Death, so she returns to the world as the ghost to look for him. However, she ultimately discovers that Shi Er Shao, who miraculously survives, has been left with nothing. Facing Shi Er Shao's vulnerability, Ru Hua is so sad that her heart misses a beat. Ru Hua returns the symbolic token of love, the *Rouge*, and ultimately makes the tragic decision to undergo a rebirth.

The film *Rouge*, set in the era of the Nationalist Government in 1930s China, depicts the female protagonist, Ru Hua, extending the contemporary reinterpretation of Chang'e's rebellious spirit. As a courtesan, Ru Hua's profession confines her to a certain social status, restricting her opportunities for personal and professional advancement due to the prevailing feudal beliefs and patriarchal structures of the time. The societal expectations and constraints faced by Ru Hua, including limitations on her marital and romantic prospects, serve as examples of the broader theme of gender roles and the suppression of women's power prevalent in Chinese society during that era. However, by portraying Ru Hua's defiance of these constraints through her unwavering pursuit of love and agency, the film challenges the obfuscation of women's power in ever-evolving mythological narratives, instead recognizing and celebrating the intergenerational manifestations of women's resilience and autonomy.

In traditional patriarchal gender roles, women were considered romantic, seeking love from men and always depending on them because they were often family-oriented and emotionally connected. The romantic relationship between the two couples in *Rouge* shows that both face external obstacles that threaten their love, but the nature of these obstacles differs. For Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao, the impediment is external and formidable, leading them to choose death to preserve their love. On the

other hand, Chu and Yuan experience no external challenges to their love. However, their love seems more fragile, lacking the determination to endure, characterized by a lack of communication and possibly from mere convenience. Irrespective of this, the two women live to satisfy the male gaze and are subject to traditional Chinese norms, where a woman must love a man for fulfillment.

As a male director, Stanley Kwan portrays women as the narrative focal point in his series of films. Engaged in a struggle against fate, these women shed the patriarchal consciousness ingrained in both their bodies and minds, demonstrating a powerful sense of character (Zhen, 2008). The director believes that if women from impure backgrounds dare to give their true hearts and persist in their love, everyone should take a moment for self-reflection. The film, despite the director's incorporation of popular supernatural elements from Hong Kong, defies classification as a love story between a human and a ghost. Instead, it examines the complexities of love across time and space, juxtaposing the stereotype of traditional romantic love with modern valuations of intimate relationships.



Figure 8: Video still of the female ghost Ru Hua on the bus in *Rouge* (00:30:05)

Female ghosts in ancient Chinese literature often embody power and mystery, possessing supernatural abilities and often associated with themes of vengeance, justice, or unresolved emotions. Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Pu, 2006), a renowned collection of ghost stories from the Qing Dynasty, delves into the lives of female protagonists, offering insights into the status, destiny, and psyche of women in ancient China. These tales explore women's desires for love, family, power, and freedom, while also shedding light on the numerous challenges and injustices they faced in feudal society. The narratives serve as mirrors of the societal roles and constraints placed upon women, as well as the adversities and traumas they endured. Furthermore, female ghosts may symbolize marginalized voices or suppressed aspirations, embodying the unspoken or repressed facets of women's lives. They often carry narratives of oppression, trauma, or injustice, serving as symbols of resistance against societal norms and patriarchal dominance. Ru Hua's manifestation as a female ghost in the mortal world illustrates the inherent inner strength and resilience of women, transcending gender and social barriers. It highlights their ability to challenge societal norms and assert their rights, showcasing their adaptability and determination in the face of adversity.

The film delicately handles a tumultuous 1930s romance and a modern couple's quest for truth, dealing with the topics of time, love, and the repetitive nature of women's roles. Despite societal restrictions, the courtesan represents vulnerability. Her character signifies all the troubles and sacrifices made by women in a male-dominated society where women are treated as property and their autonomy is taken away. Using the character's story, the movie highlights topics like love, loss, and strength. This prompts the audience to address the issue of gender dynamics in the film.

The courtesan character of Ru Hua in *Rouge*, which is set in 1930s Shanghai, epitomizes women's obstacles in a rapidly evolving society. Ru Hua's position as a courtesan, where she receives honors for her beauty and company, is indeed precious, but ultimately, she remains a subordinate person. As in mainstream Chinese culture, courtesans, often equated with prostitutes, are believed to pose a threat to social ethics and morality, tarnishing societal values and leading people astray, being regarded as the lowest echelon of society. Even among them, some may be educated and demonstrate loyalty in love and a sense of duty towards their country in times of crisis. Nevertheless, traditional society still considers the status of courtesans to be very low, unfit for respectable society, often labeling them as "femme fatales" (Li, 2006).

In the picture of Ru Hua, the film verbalizes the reality of the female gaze by assigning her an arbitrary position in the narrative, along with agency and autonomy. Ru Hua, through her viewpoints, aspirations, and unwavering love, shapes the narrative, resisting objectification or becoming a passive participant. This means that women go beyond the traditional gender norms, in which they are confined only to being useful for men.

The relationship between Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao in the movie *Rouge* exemplifies the female gaze. The female gaze, "is centred on female subjectivities as expressed in film" (French, 2021, p. 53). "The key marker of the 'female gaze' is the communication or expression of female subjectivity—a gaze where female agency is privileged and which is shaped by a female 'look', voice and perspective—in effect, the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body" (2021, p. 54). This notion involves women as sources of stories and the first person in most stories. It is beyond the limitations of traditional gender portrayals, with a focus on characters' complexity alongside their emotional depth and the women's power that

prevails in a plot. The opposing role of Ru Hua, the movie heroine, continuously attempts to outdo traditional gender roles. In the emotional bond between Shi Er Shao and her, it comes to light that she generally has a leadership position by proactively consolidating their relationship.

Director and cinematographer Joan Churchill offers the observation that the “male” gaze seeks to devour and control, and the “female” gaze is more a frame of mind, where approach to subject and material is more emotional and respectful’ (French, 2021, p. 60). “Men were bearers of the look, women were spectacle, and the look of the spectator was aligned with the non-eroticised male character” (2021, p. 53). The embodiment of the "female gaze" diverges from the "male gaze," which often emphasizes traditional gender roles and objectifies women for male aesthetic appreciation. Instead, Ru Hua's perspective accentuates female agency and independence, emphasizing emotions, relationships, and inner beauty more while highlighting the depth and complexity of the characters.



Figure 9: Video still of Shi Er Shao sitting on the windowsill in *Rouge* (00:13:16)

Director Stanley Kwan employs the staircase imagery to convey this idea. In *Rouge*, as Shi Er Shao ascends the stairs, two women approach him from the opposite

direction, instantly captivated by his charm and sophistication. Shi Er Shao smiles down at the two women standing below him on the staircase, assuming a triumphant posture that asserts his superiority over them. At this juncture, the staircase serves as a clear reference point for the male gaze. However, within this same scene, the arrival of Ru Hua disrupts Shi Er Shao's dominant perspective, transforming the staircase into a symbol of the female gaze. Ru Hua's presence draws attention to herself, becoming the focal point of the scene and challenging the visual order previously dictated by men. As Ru Hua ascends the staircase while singing Cantonese opera, her enchanting voice exudes strength and charm, capturing Shi Er Shao's gaze and guiding the audience's attention. In this moment, the staircase transitions from a symbol of male dominance to one that embodies the power and allure of women. Ru Hua's presence alters the scene's atmosphere, emphasizing the importance and influence of women in the narrative. “The female gaze central to this scene acts as a key mechanism of establishing empathetic bonds and affective resonance, which works as an oppositional force to rupture the conventional cinematic practice of privileging the patriarchal gaze that seeks to objectify, subordinate and discipline the gendered and classed other” (Xiao, 2021, p.182). This scene not only illustrates the shift in perspective but also underscores the pivotal role of women, enriching the film's visual and thematic depth.

As the renowned Western feminist critic Hélène Cixous once remarked, women are either passive or nonexistent (Yan, 2007). Women like Ru Hua, who endure adversity without surrender and dare to resist, pose a challenge to the supreme authority of patriarchy. By embodying the female gaze and actively shaping her narrative, Ru Hua defies the traditional expectation of women as passive objects, existing solely for instrumental value to men.

The depiction emphasizes women's agency and reverses traditional gender roles, presenting Ru Hua as a determined and assertive figure in stark contrast to the passive Shi Er Shao, who is depicted as Ru Hua's lover. Her return to the mortal world in search of love turns out to be a testament of love. In this process, the director introduces a modern urban couple as her assistants, serving as both objective observers to assess the authenticity of this love and active participants who undergo profound reflection on their perspectives on love.

The verbal and non-verbal communication between Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao appears understated. Yet, their choice to resort to death underscores the intensity of their love and Ru Hua's unwavering commitment to defy expectations. The director, through the words of those who surround Ru Hua, consistently reflects the traditional societal views, cautioning Ru Hua about the inevitable outcome of being abandoned even if she invests in genuine emotions. However, Ru Hua's actions, including her initial hesitation and growing determination, illustrate her internal struggle to assert her agency and follow her heart, ultimately defying these societal norms. This can be viewed as the woman's a gesture of gendered resistance against the sociocultural matrix of postsocialist patriarchy (Xiao, 2021).

To be specific, in her first subtle exchanges with Shi Er Shao, despite being aware of his affection, Ru Hua does not frivolously reciprocate. Instead, after Shi Er Shao's gestures of setting off fireworks, writing romantic couplets, and offering the gift of an expensive copper bed, she gradually develops feelings for him. When Ru Hua is humiliated in Shi Er Shao's family, she resolves to send him to an opera troupe to become an actor, aiming to achieve parity in societal values between courtesans and actors in the hope of spending their lives together (Zhen, 2008). However, even after this path proves untenable, Ru Hua does not give up entirely, placing all her hopes in

the afterlife. All these choices are made by Ru Hua herself, demonstrating an awakening of female self-awareness through proactive decision-making, where she does not pin her hopes on others but instead sets her own future.

Chu and Yuan are the modern versions of Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao. The purpose of including Chu and Yuan in the narrative is to help them uncover the flaws in Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao's love story. They've been watching themselves throughout the process. Chu and Yuan may find themselves stirred by Ru Hua's unwavering devotion in love, leading them to reassess their own romantic relationships. However, they lack the same courage and fervor for love as Ru Hua, and they would never go to the lengths she does, sacrificing everything for love, even at the risk of their own lives.

Chu is a typical representative of Hong Kong women in the 1980s, diligent, ambitious, economically independent, and has her own personality (Zhang, 2013). Before Ru Hua entered her life, Chu was busy making ends meet every day, without a deep understanding of love. Love was just like a seasoning for her busy life, which is never to be the main dish. The different views between her and Ru Hua on love and female values make Chu extremely disdainful of Ru Hua. In the first half of the film, Chu always aggressively questions Ru Hua, exuding full confidence in her own state of love and fulfillment. However, when it remains uncertain whether Ru Hua, a female ghost who lives and dies for love, will meet the aging Shi Er Shao, it triggers Chu's reflection on her own love toward Yuan. During a discussion with Yuan, Chu asks, "Would you commit suicide for me?" But the answer she receives is negative, as Yuan says the relationship between himself and Chu is not romantic at all. Such a rational attitude reflects the modern view of love. Chu and Yuan both do not understand or even believe in love. Their relationship is more based on convenience and suitability

rather than on deep affection. It is driven by practical considerations, about conquest rather than profound love.

Simultaneously, this serves as a process of self-correction. In the past, even the courtesans were willing to sacrifice their lives for true love. Yet, in today's era of freedom and democracy, people have become spiritually empty and numb. When it comes to love, the absence of passion and desire is accentuated. Modern individuals like Chu and Yuan naturally place love in a non-priority position due to the fast pace of life and work. While they may be touched by the fervent devotion and steadfastness of individuals like Ru Hua, prompting them to reassess their own love lives, they will never go to the lengths Ru Hua did, sacrificing everything for love, even at the cost of their own lives (Hui, 2013). While Chu exhibits moments of assertiveness, her relationship with Yuan ultimately lacks the same level of dedication and trust as Ru Hua's love, reflecting the enduring societal constraints on women's autonomy.

Among the two couples, the female characters consistently symbolize firmness. Ru Hua demonstrates her commitment through her actions: After waiting alone in the underworld for fifty years for a reunion, Ru Hua takes the initiative to seek out Shi Er Shao in the mortal realm. Upon seeing Shi Er Shao alive, she disregards his aged and frail appearance, leaning her head against him and telling him that she waited for him for fifty years because of their vow. She then returns the token of their vow, the *Rouge*, to him. Resolutely, she departs, knowing she will wait no longer. Meanwhile, Chu, despite her sharp words, cares deeply about Yuan's love. Both of them struggle to honestly trust each other, and their love lacks the dedication to love that Ru Hua embodies.

In *Rouge*, a plethora of details propel narrative development, and these details often serve as primary echoes, threading through the entire process of love. Here, the

director's use of tone stands out prominently. Tone, in cinematography, refers to the brightness and darkness of objects depicted in the image (Zhen, 2008). It encompasses the relationships between colors and the shades of black, white, and gray, creating a visual perception and an overall effect. It is a fundamental element in shaping visual images in film. On the surface, it governs the overall brightness and darkness of a film, ultimately reflecting the visual style and mood of the film. It serves as a crucial tool for shaping forms, compositions, and enhancing atmosphere to convey emotions (Zhen, 2008).



Figure 10: Video still of Ru Hua applying makeup in *Rouge* (00:01:27)

The analysis will focus on specific colors in the film *Rouge*, conducted in conjunction with a narrative analysis.

In *Rouge*, three different shots capture Ru Hua's process of applying makeup, including drawing her eyebrows and applying lipstick. In the close-up shot, Ru Hua, dressed in a black qipao, looks up while drawing her eyebrows, with subdued lip color. The background features blurred pink flowers and green leaves wallpaper. In the close-up shot, Ru Hua picks up a piece of red paper, turns her head, and puckers her lips to apply lipstick, resulting in a red lip color. Finally, in the medium shot, Ru Hua is

positioned in the lower right corner of the frame, with neat makeup featuring black eyebrows and red lips against the backdrop of pink flowers and green leaves wallpaper. Ru Hua puckers her red lips and looks up. In these scenes depicting Ru Hua putting on makeup, her pale face gains color. The black and red color tones introduced by Ru Hua's makeup become integrated into the story. Black represents loneliness and sorrow, while red symbolizes passion and temptation. The era in which Ru Hua lived is depicted with intense and vibrant colors, contrasting sharply with the bleak emptiness of her return as a female ghost in modern times after her death. Memories from 53 years ago are far more colorful and lively than the present, with the interplay of black and red also representing Ru Hua's fervent tragic love story.



Figure 11: Video still of Shi Er Shao and Ru Hua meeting for the first time in *Rouge* (00:04:52)

During their first encounter, Ru Hua disguises herself as a man and sings Cantonese opera. Both Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao are dressed in black, with red pillars and carpets, and the lighting is extremely saturated. When Ru Hua changes back to female attire, she wears a black qipao with a red flower on her head, matching her red lips. The windows of the brothel are also saturated in red, yellow, and blue colors.

When Ru Hua tests Shi Er Shao, her unadorned face is outlined by the sunlight from outside the window. Whether in heavy makeup, without makeup, or in male makeup, Ru Hua is characterized by black and red colors. Black represents loneliness and sorrow, while red symbolizes passion and allure. The saturated colors of the past contrast with the dullness of the present, making the memories from 53 years ago appear more colorful and vibrant than the present.

Singing opera emerges as a pivotal element, with the film initiating Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao's acquaintance through an opera performance. Shi Er Shao intentionally joins in her singing, leading to Ru Hua's mockery: "Why so many sorrows?" (*Rouge*, 1988, 00:05:49). This line not only delineates the personalities of the two protagonists but also establishes a melancholy tone for the entire film. Thus, Ru Hua's nonchalant attitude coincides with the courtesan standard, a trifle trait that she emphasizes by flirting with Shi Er Shao. For Shi Er Shao, the lyrics unveil a personification of his psychological infirmity and point to his weak character, demonstrating a lack of ability to maintain love. The opera sequences in this movie symbolize the restricted roles that women might play in society, confined only to entertain and provide companionship to men. Furthermore, her contribution to the opera is taking back control in this generally masculine place, claiming her sovereignty, and rejecting the limitations imposed on women.

The presence of Ru Hua as a courtesan in the opera shows that there were only a limited number of social positions left for women, especially those who would become entertainers and companions of men. The world of opera as a place of entertainment is absolutely the domain of women, as they are able to entertain heterosexual men. It serves as a traditional role that is more feminine than masculine.



Figure 12: Video still of Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao meeting the parents of Shi Er Shao who come to watch the opera in *Rouge* (00:53:55)

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, actors had a generally low social status and were often discriminated against by society. They were classified as "lower class" and derogatorily referred to as "performers" (Zhang, 2005). The performing arts industry they engaged in was also considered a "disreputable profession" or "menial job" (2005). The film illustrates Shi Er Shao's shift from an affluent youth to an impoverished actor, diminishing his social status. At the same time, Ru Hua's characterization as a courtesan highlights the constrained opportunities for women. This contrast shows that love, which encounters these two obstacles is impossible without a man voluntarily lowering his privileges and position in society.

Furthermore, throughout the movie, the director manages to create a feeling of destiny and love, creating an atmosphere of societal opinion. In *Rouge*, there are multiple occurrences of opera singing and performance segments, which serve as a form of "play within a play". These segments imply a hidden narrative perspective that runs through the entire film: the doomed relationship between Ru Hua and Shi Er

Shao. There are a total of four opera singing segments that coincide perfectly with the development of Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao's love story.

For example, Ru Hua sings "Ke Tu Hen Qiu" (《客途恨秋》) when she first appears, which is heard three times throughout the film. This singing segment originates from a Cantonese folk song widely circulated in Guangdong. This opera segment depicts the story of Miao Lianxian, a handsome gentleman, lamenting his unrequited love for the famous courtesan Mai Qiujuan, echoing the experiences of Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao. In another segment, Shi Er Shao, the male protagonist, sings "Hu Bu Gui" (《胡不归》) during his apprenticeship, depicting the love between Ping Sheng and Pin Niang, who are separated when Pin Niang is driven out by her stepmother, echoing the plot where Ru Hua is not accepted by Chen's mother.

Likewise, in a segment from "Xue Dingshan Qi Fan Lihua," (《薛丁山三气樊梨花》) Shi Er Shao's master, playing the role of Xue Dingshan, openly expresses his disgust for Fan Lihua, reflecting the disapproval of Shi Er Shao's parents towards his relationship with Ru Hua. In the latter part of the film, Ru Hua watches a Cantonese opera called "The Tragic Love Story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" (《梁祝恨史》) from below the stage. Liang Shanbo laments that he and Zhu Yingtai are destined to be star-crossed lovers, unable to be together despite their love for each other. They can only choose to die for love in order to be together forever. Ru Hua confuses the onstage character Liang Shanbo with Shi Er Shao. Despite spending fifty years in the underworld unwilling to leave, Ru Hua still hopes that Shi Er Shao will eventually follow his beloved, just like Liang Shanbo would do.



Figure 13: Video still of Shi Er Shao and Ru Hua lying together in *Rouge* (01:11:49)

However, as the author of *Rouge* Li Bihua says, most people's love stories cannot achieve the great transformation like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, and the love story of Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao ultimately cannot be fulfilled (Wang, 2019). These opera scenes, serving as the hidden narrative running throughout the film, repeatedly hint at the doomed love tragedy between Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao.

Whether it is the assessment of the courtesan's life in the brothel, Shi Er Shao's mother's rejection of Ru Hua, or the mentor of the opera talking about the dreams and reality of opera, the movie tries to put down the feeling of love for Ru Hua. When she is in the most hopeless state of the breakdown of love, Ru Hua's preservation of love by death is the defiant act of claiming her agency and rejecting social constraints.

#### 4.2.1 Ru Hua and Chang'e

In this section, Ru Hua's rebellious spirit mirroring that of the legendary goddess Chang'e is discussed. Like Chang'e, who defied the constraints by consuming the elixir of immortality and fleeing to the moon, Ru Hua boldly challenges the confines of destiny. Like Chang'e's legendary flight to the moon, Ru Hua's journey

symbolizes her rebellion against societal norms and her refusal to be bound by the constraints of fate, marking her as a courageous and independent protagonist.

In *Rouge*, Ru Hua's sacrifice for love intertwines with the theme of death, resonating with ancient Chinese mythology such as the myth of Chang'e flying to the moon (Guo, 2019). Ru Hua shares many similarities compared to the moon goddess Chang'e. Firstly, the film *Rouge* and the myth of Chang'e flying to the moon delve into the themes of death and the moon, exploring their profound connections.

In the film, Ru Hua's body has already perished, but she returns to the mortal world as a ghost. This forms an intriguing contrast with Chang'e. Ru Hua remains as a ghost on Earth, while Chang'e reincarnates in a new form on the moon, illustrating the variety of life that endures beyond death. Diverging from the traditional notion of death, it collectively highlights that death shouldn't be considered the ultimate end but rather the beginning of a new life. Enriching contemplation on the mysteries of death and life enables the audience to discover shared ground between mythology and film, encouraging a deeper delve into reflections on the enigma of life and death.

In various Chinese literary and cultural contexts, the moon is often symbolically associated with femininity, mystery, and cyclical renewal (Kuang, 2008; Liu, 2010; Zhang, 2009). When used as a metaphor for choosing death as an act of female agency and power, it suggests that women have the ability to control their destinies, even in the face of adversity. Just as the moon waxes and wanes in a cyclical pattern, representing life, death, and rebirth, so too can women exercise agency over their own lives by choosing to end them on their own terms. This metaphor implies that death, often seen as the ultimate surrender or loss of control, can also be a form of empowerment and liberation for women who assert their autonomy and refuse to submit to oppressive forces. It reframes death not as a passive surrender to fate, but as

a deliberate choice made by women to reclaim their agency and assert their power in a patriarchal society.

In ancient matrilineal societies, people observed numerous similarities between the moon and women, prompting the development of primitive worship for both entities. Consequently, they unanimously considered the moon as a symbol of femininity (Kuang, 2008), making it a significant emblem of matrilineal societies.

During the Xia Dynasty, societal norms shifted towards a patrilineal civilization, amplifying men's status and relegating women to roles primarily focused on childbearing and serving men. Chang'e's journey to the moon, against this backdrop, symbolizes a return to the matrilineal heritage linked with lunar symbolism. Thus, her flight can be viewed as a triumphant defiance of patrilineal norms, accomplished through myth-making. It also embodies a wish for aesthetic liberation movement that defies paternal authority and refuses to be suppressed.

In the various versions of the legend of Chang'e flying to the moon, the most prominent demonstrations of female wisdom are twofold: firstly, because her husband, Hou Yi, had become a tyrannical ruler, Chang'e sought to end the cruel rule of Xia and save the common people from disaster by secretly taking the elixir of immortality and flying to the moon (Man, 2009); secondly, in the more widely circulated version, when assailants come to her home to seize the elixir, Chang'e, forced into a corner, cleverly swallows the elixir and flies to the moon (Man, 2009). These two legends emphasize Chang'e's wisdom and courage, establishing her as a role model for the vast majority of laboring women. These women, who are deeply dissatisfied with their low social status, seek to break free from the constraints of family and the abuse of husbands and striving for an independent and happy life.

Just like Chang'e, who embodies a rebellious spirit, Ru Hua, despite her status as a courtesan, courageously pursues her own love and defies societal conventions. She engages in various degrees of struggle against her fate, fearlessly facing the vast power disparity, never retreating, and willingly sacrificing her own life. This spirit of defiance against destiny is intricately connected to her deep devotion. In the pursuit of love, she marches forward courageously, even in the face of an irreversible and perilous fate, refusing to back down. “This introspective look is oppositional because it refuses to be complicit in perpetuating the myth of male sexual dominance and of enhancing the man’s pleasures of self-gazing and self-fantasizing” (Xiao, 2021, p.183). Both Chang'e and Ru Hua actively embrace the concept of 'death,' advancing their resistance against patriarchal society.

Whether fleeing from the fate of becoming a political tool, being punished for stealing the elixir and transforming into a toad, or enduring loneliness and isolation in the Guanghan Palace after stealing the elixir and residing there alone, these labels imposed on Chang'e by the rise of patriarchy vividly illustrate the consequences of deviating from the ethical norms set by male-dominated society. Chang'e's decision to depart from Earth and journey to the moon, even at the cost of her physical existence on Earth, signifies her endeavor to transcend familial restrictions and pursue a life of autonomy and fulfillment in another realm. This act symbolizes the nascent stages of women's liberation<sup>2</sup>, highlighting Chang'e's courageous step towards breaking free from societal constraints.

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese history, there hasn't been any formal feminist movement. The birth of Chinese feminism was an event of global proportion that is yet to be properly grasped and analyzed as such (Liu, 2013, p.4). However, with the passage of time, more and more women are awakening. Feminism in China has striven against the patriarchal power structure and male domination for over a century and has made unprecedented achievements in gender equality (Yin, 2021, p.1179). Feminist movements arose along with the New Cultural Movement and May Fourth Movement at the turn of the 20th century, when radical intellectuals sought to undermine the hierarchical society underpinned by Confucianism and Feudalism (Yin, 2021, p. 1179). In recent years, digital feminism has gained prominence in China, marking an increasing trend over the past decades. It is characterized by feminist protest

Similarly, Ru Hua's choice to drown herself instead of submitting to societal expectations of marriage reflects her rejection of patriarchal control and her assertion of autonomy over her own fate. Chang'e and Ru Hua's respective choices not only reflect control over their own lives but also constitute a rebellion against societal norms and expectations. Unwilling to be confined by fate, they opt to find freedom in death and become masters of their destinies. By questioning established norms and provoking thoughtful discussions on freedom and the right to make one's own decisions, their proactive approach demonstrates inner resilience and commitment to individual rights. Death is portrayed in these tales as both a means of emancipation and a way to resist.

Certainly, my examination of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* represents merely a preliminary investigation, as there remains a wealth of material awaiting scholarly scrutiny. In the following discussion section, I aim to probe the potential characterization of the directors Zhang Yimou and Stanley Kwan as proponents of feminism. Furthermore, I will critically assess the suitability and constraints of the theoretical frameworks employed in the cinematic analysis section.

## 5. Discussion

Films play an essential role in portraying the nature of society. While this role is critical, many films have a primary shortcoming in that they do not portray the female gaze, which refers to narrating a story from the perspective of the female

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and activism facilitated by digital media, often manifesting as networked and/or collective actions aimed at effecting transformative changes in unequal power structures (Yin, 2021).

spectator (Xiao, 2014). Notably, this leads to many missed opportunities for women to use their unique abilities to positively impact the world. Part of the reason for this shortcoming is that many producers lack knowledge of how to utilize the female gaze. The visual and narrative analyses of the films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* can help generate valuable insights that will help Chinese film directors better manifest the Chinese female gaze in their films.

Feminist cinema and the portrayal of women in films are entirely different matters. In many cases, feminist cinema conflicts with the portrayal of women from a male perspective. No matter how captivating the female characters crafted by male cinematic masters may be, their works cannot be considered feminist cinema. According to film scholar, Qu Yajun, Chinese feminist cinema must be created by female directors who intimately understand the societal status and roles of women, often reflecting the pain of women's social status and roles. Notably, not all female directors are consciously imbued with this feminist consciousness (Qu, 1994).

In the contemporary Chinese film industry, two male directors renowned for creating female screen images — Zhang Yimou and Stanley Kwan — are keen on directing their lenses towards women. They either praise women's purity, kindness, and loyalty, admire their myriad personalities and qualities, explore their graceful, moving, delicate, and intelligent charm, or express their melancholy, confusion, loss, and perplexity. Audiences familiar with their works can feel that their artistic souls are deeply moved by the beloved women they focus on.

Zhang Yimou, whose films depict numerous distinctly characterized female figures, is regarded as a warrior against feudal traditions through his cinematic works. Some even argue that his films, with their portrayal of "female mythology," promote female consciousness and contribute to the feminist discourse trend (Xue, 2014).

Similarly, Stanley Kwan, as a male, directed numerous films with female-centric themes. With his unique female narrative approach, sensitive temporal and spatial perspectives, and attention to the female world, he has expanded the gender poetics of cinema. This also echoes the feminist wave in world film theory (Ling, 2015). These two directors are perceived by the public as the most attentive, sympathetic, understanding, and representative filmmakers of women's interests. However, if we shift our perspective to examine these films from a feminist standpoint, dissecting them within the societal and cultural context centered around men, it becomes readily apparent that these seemingly female-centered works fail to transcend the male-centric framework (Qu, 1994).

Yimou Zhang's female characters serve as symbols of instinct and desire, catering to the physical pleasures of men. For instance, in *Raise the Red Lantern*, Songlian engages in flirtation with the wealthy young master, even amidst intense rivalry with the other concubines. Here, her objects of affection are neither intellectuals nor genuine life partners. In such relationships, it's difficult to discern any meaningful spiritual connection beyond mere physical needs. What they crave is a satisfaction of primal instincts, long suppressed and now distorted.

Under the complex psychological influence of desire and ambivalence, Chinese male directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Stanley Kwan, find it challenging to remain detached from these female images. At times, they may praise the courtesan for her unwavering devotion and profound understanding, while at other times, they may depict her as a seductive temptress or a malevolent spirit. Thus, they express their desires, fears, aversions, and affections in a circuitous manner (Qu, 1994). Songlian embodies this complexity, as does Ru Hua.

While lacking the space to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Zhang's entire body of work, it's worth noting that in nearly 20 films directed by Zhang Yimou, 17 of them depict stories centered around women. At first glance, female characters hold significant roles in Zhang's films, while male characters may be marginalized or even symbolized. For instance, in *Raise the Red Lantern*, amidst the jealousy and rivalry among the five women, the only male character, Mr. Chen, is represented solely by his silhouette and voice. However, assessing a director's attitude towards women does not solely rely on the quantity of female roles, but rather on how women are portrayed, whether they possess self-awareness and agency in the narrative. The stories in Zhang's films often unfold in closed and secluded environments, such as the secluded Chen Family Courtyard. The enclosed spaces share a common characteristic: they are ruled or managed by men. This is a unique symbol in Zhang's films—the world ruled by patriarchy.

In the world of Zhang Yimou's movies, it is my contention that patriarchy is reinforced to the extreme. Whether male characters are present or absent, even if they are symbolically represented as a voice or a highly idealized memory, they serve as a generalization of all men, wielding supreme authority over life and death, forcefully controlling the destinies of women (Xue, 2014). In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the visual absence of Mr. Chen, who never shows his face throughout the film, is a typical example of symbolization. He is only represented by his voice, which is authoritarian, cold, omnipresent, and in control of everything.

"Male identification" refers to the core cultural beliefs about what is good, worth aspiring to, worth pursuing, or normal, which are always associated with masculinity and ideals of masculinity (Xue, 2014). This tendency towards male identification is evident in Zhang Yimou's films. Women are repeatedly portrayed as

instrumental. The fate of women is always tied to procreation and continuation of the family line. When Songlian pretends to be pregnant to gain the privilege of having a red lantern lit for her, her deception is exposed, and she is immediately "deprived of the lantern," facing a future of bleak despair.

The tendency towards male chauvinism is a distinct imprint left by China's millennia-old traditional culture and national character in films, not only evident in Zhang Yimou's works but also across the entire spectrum of Fifth and Sixth Generation directors (Xue, 2014). Analyzing male chauvinism in Zhang Yimou's films is not meant for criticism but for examination and correction, aiming for more and better cinematic productions. As Zhang Yimou hopes, it is about "returning art to the world, returning the world to people, and returning people to themselves" (2014, p. 53).

*Rouge* director, Stanley Kwan subverts the traditional male-centric narrative mode by placing women in roles of being observed or looked down upon and utilizes specific narrative perspectives, structures, and techniques to convey care for women's lives, values, and dignity. He portrays women's pursuit of self-worth in their struggle against society and men, leaving deep traces of feminism in his films (Ling, 2015). In the movie, the narrative perspective often revolves around women, where they are no longer objects of storytelling but take on both the role of narrator and actor, dismantling the male-centric discourse that obscures or distorts women's experiences. They narrate their own emotional journeys or depict their life situations and inner worlds from a female standpoint. Through female storytelling, the protagonist's steadfastness and dedication to love are revealed, expressing the awakening of female self-awareness from waiting, hoping, and disappointment. Ru Hua is the narrative subject throughout the film. She is at the center of the narrative perspective, driving the plot forward by telling the story of her acquaintance, love, and pact to die with the

Chen family's twelfth young master, Shi Er Shao, demonstrating her unwavering trust in her lover and her persistent infatuation.

However, it can be argued that Stanley Kwan's films on women's themes, as exemplified in *Rouge*, still face feminist dilemmas that cannot be overcome. Firstly, as shown in *Rouge*, Kwan's films tend to present a pessimistic feminist outlook, failing to actively explore women's deeper sense of self-redemption, lingering only in the melancholy and pity for women's tragic fate. Secondly, by weakening male characters to showcase female virtues, the films evolve into a rigid binary opposition between men and women (Ling, 2015). Whether portraying the daring and resolute nature of old-fashioned women in their approach to love or depicting the emotional confusion and loss of modern women, Stanley Kwan's films, while delicately examining women's lives and expressing sympathy and compassion for women, also reveal sentiments of sadness and pity. This pity and sympathy make it difficult to provide women with greater space for growth and fail to delve deeper into women's sense of self-redemption.

Social culture is a complex system, and the enforcers of patriarchy are not solely men; women can also become complicit in this ideological framework (Ling, 2015). For example, the mother of Shi Er Shao in *Rouge* takes the stance of the Chen family's males without showing any empathy for Ru Hua as a woman. At the same time, not all men are perpetrators of harm; there are men who hold feminist positions. Therefore, the binary opposition between men and women, which elevates one side by denigrating the other, affects the audience's perception of social reality. This dualistic structure that pits the sexes against each other can lead to narrative rigidity, oversimplifying the complex relationship between women and society and limiting the development of feminist cinema.

The selection of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* was deliberate and multifaceted. One significant factor behind this choice is the portrayal of female characters reminiscent of ancient Chinese goddess figures, in contrast to many other films that neglect the female perspective and instead perpetuate a narrative steeped in patriarchal norms (Xiao, 2021). Furthermore, my personal convictions guided this selection process. I firmly believe in the inherent power of women, akin to that of goddesses. However, societal patriarchy acts as a hindrance, impeding women from fully realizing and expressing these innate abilities. Failing to tap into these capabilities represents a missed opportunity for women to contribute positively to society. Hence, it is imperative to explore avenues for unlocking and leveraging women's innate abilities for societal advancement.

In my analysis of the two films, I integrate the oppositional female gaze theory discussed by Xiao in her article, "Why am I still imprisoned in your eyes?" (Xiao, 2021). Xiao presents the oppositional female gaze by building on bell hooks' theory of oppositional gaze as a form of resistance against male dominance about race and gender (Xiao, 2021). This is a framework that highlights the political aspect of appearance and how women wield power by refusing subordinate roles through their vision (Xiao, 2021). The theory is appropriately used to analyze *Raise the Red Lantern* by showcasing the story from the perspective of Songlian and other female characters. Doing so challenges the directors' male gaze by highlighting the agency and subjectivity of female characters instead of objectifying them for male viewing pleasure (Zhang, 1991). This use is appropriate as the oppositional theory focuses on challenging existing norms in society. While the theory is applied effectively, it faces a minor shortcoming as the original oppositional theory developed by hooks in that it is the women who have chosen what to see. In the case of *Raise the Red Lantern*, it can

be argued that the female characters have no choice on what to see, and they are just viewers of the film like the rest of the audience.

As a member of a Chinese female audience, I often find limited opportunities to choose the films I watch. This is particularly true as a student majoring in screenwriting, as we are frequently directed towards viewing acclaimed works such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and other films by Zhang Yimou, renowned globally as classics of Chinese cinema. Additionally, government censorship, ideological control, and restrictions on media content shape the range of representations accessible to audiences. The current censorship standards for film content in China primarily revolve around three aspects: politics, pornography, and violence. In the practice of film censorship, challenges to political hegemonies are a significant factor leading to films being deemed unfit for screening and subsequently banned by the regulatory authorities. Even if the film does not involve serious political errors, merely presenting sensitive events or important historical periods with a specific subjective bias can also pose a risk of being prohibited from screening (Hu, 2017). As a result, the scope for oppositional gaze may be constrained within the Chinese media landscape. Consequently, Chinese audiences may not always engage with the concept of the oppositional gaze theory, as they lack the freedom to select their viewing materials.

On the surface, whether it's the ancient goddesses Nü Wa and Chang'e, or the female characters Songlian in the modern film *Raise the Red Lantern* and Ru Hua in *Rouge*, these women are all seen as victims of patriarchal society, where their female power is restricted and their autonomy suppressed by gender roles. However, in reality the power of goddesses exists within every woman and has not been lost despite the gradual intensification of patriarchal suppression. On a deeper level, as female viewers, we recognize the process in classical mythology where goddesses gradually

lose their rights due to the rise of patriarchy, as well as the oppression faced by female characters in modern films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*. This recognition is actually a manifestation of female power, indicating that as women, we have not been completely eroded of gender consciousness by patriarchal society. We continue to actively examine the limitations faced by gender roles and have a clear understanding of the oppression we experience as women. This is the first step in gradually strengthening female empowerment. It challenges hooks' oppositional gaze theory, which requires women to be in a subordinated position to resist dominant narratives. Instead, it suggests the possibility of a gaze that exists beyond patriarchal control, one that empowers women to reclaim agency and assert their own narratives.

In *Rouge*, Ru Hua challenges the existing hierarchy by pursuing love and agency (Kwan, 1987). By so doing, she embodies but also exceeds the oppositional gaze theory. In the context of the film, Ru Hua's actions and decisions go against societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Instead of conforming to the roles assigned to her by society, such as conforming to societal norms regarding relationships, Ru Hua asserts her own desires and agency.

In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist (hooks, 1992, p. 116). bell hooks' oppositional theory advocates for underprivileged groups—like women—to oppose and reject prevailing ideologies and hierarchies of power. Ru Hua's actions can be seen as a form of resistance against the patriarchal norms and social expectations that constrain her. By asserting her right to love and make choices for herself, Ru Hua embodies the spirit of oppositional theory, which advocates for autonomy, agency, and self-determination for marginalized individuals.

While the examples provide a satisfactory analysis of the oppositional theory, it fails to consider the role of other women in films, such as Chu in film *Rouge* in choosing what to see and engage with. In the film, Chu has no room for choice; Ru Hua suddenly intrudes into her life, forcing Chu to become entangled in her story. The director employs numerous shots to illustrate the significant differences between Ru Hua and Chu. However, for Chu's character, she lacks the privilege of choice; her role serves more as a contrast to Ru Hua. Therefore, the oppositional gaze theory is entirely inapplicable in analyzing Chu's context. According to the oppositional theory, a critical element of its use is choosing what to see, and not what is portrayed. Therefore, the use of the theory in this case faces a considerable limitation in that it focuses on what the directors portray.

If I were the director of *Rouge*, I would provide Chu with the opportunity to decide whether she wants to become involved in Ru Hua's story. Chu should not merely serve as a foil to Ru Hua; she should have the right to make autonomous choices. This approach aligns with oppositional theory, which underscores the importance of women having agency and autonomy in choosing what they wish to engage with or participate in.

As a female audience member, the limitations of oppositional gaze theory in the film lie in the fact that viewers adopt a goddess-eye view, while the oppositional gaze theory fixes women in a subordinated position. In oppositional gaze theory, the limitation arises from the fact that actors' perspectives and gazes are often constrained to oppose within an unequal power dynamic predominantly controlled by directors. Whereas, the audience, including female viewers, possesses an oppositional gaze that operates outside the intentions of actors, directors, and narratives. This gaze grants them a vantage point beyond the confines of the patriarchal structuring of the gaze.

By adopting a goddess-eye view perspective, female viewers can witness women in the film beyond their subordinated positions fixed by oppositional gaze theory. This perspective allows them to gain insight into the destinies and experiences of female characters from a position of empowerment and understanding.

Therefore, the oppositional gaze theory cannot be applied from the perspective of female viewers. Female characters in the film can be seen as occupying a subordinated position controlled by the director. However, as viewers, we transcend this subordinated position, enabling us to examine and interpret the female characters in the film from a more objective perspective, exploring their inner worlds and motivations beyond the scope of the oppositional gaze theory.

In developing an epistemology for gender studies using Bourdieu's theoretical concept of habitus, McNay highlights the fluidity of the construct of feminine corporeal identity, by challenging inconsistencies between the corporeal exterior and the psychological interior (Liang, 2022, p. 322). The theory is evident in the film *Raise the Red Lantern* as Meishan's extramarital affairs explain her sexual desire, and since women are not allowed to express their desires, she is punished severely, leading to her death (Zhang, 1991). Similarly, *Rouge* showcases women as romantics who seek fulfillment through men (Kwan, 1987). The use of sexual desire theory is appropriate as the main characters, such as Ru Hua and Shi Er Shao, actively seek love, and in so doing, challenge traditional norms. While the theory is appropriately used, it is limited in terms of accommodating crucial aspects of Chinese culture, such as explaining things that influence women's sexuality. Doing so hampers the readers' understanding of the basics of women's sexuality and sexual preferences.

The presentation of the female body on contemporary Chinese cinema screens has undergone three stages: revolutionary representation based on the replication of

traditional models, modern representation, and contemporary popular culture representation (Chu, 2010). Traditional culture's conception of women is rooted in a binary tendency of moral flattening and demonization. In revolutionary discourse, the female body embodies the ideology of class struggle, where sensual desensitization is confined to the portrayal of class enemies' bodies, and within the category of progressive classes, men and women stand shoulder to shoulder in battle, gender differences are flattened, and sensuality is absent (Chu, 2010).

In the 1980s, during a wave of reflection, the female body manifested sensuality, no longer intertwined with politics, and unrelated to class. Freedom of sexual expression and political rights of free speech, assembly, and public access cannot be separated from one another. Human rights, women's rights, and sexual citizenship needed to be fought for and maintained as fundamental to any progress toward gender equity (Marchetti, 2017, p. 4). However, currently, Chinese society still oppresses women's sexual desire, as both ideology and film censorship deliberately avoid any content related to sexuality. This suppression stems from deeply ingrained cultural norms and conservative attitudes towards sexuality, perpetuated by societal expectations and reinforced by governmental regulations. This limitation highlights the complexity and challenges in addressing gender equity issues, particularly regarding the freedom of sexual expression for Chinese women. As a result, discussions or representations of sexual desire are often considered taboo or inappropriate, leading to a lack of acknowledgement and understanding of women's sexual agency and needs in Chinese society.

In the context of China, women's relationship with patriarchal society is akin to that of fish and water. Just as fish cannot escape the control of water, how can women break free from the grip of patriarchy? If water wants the fish to die, how can the fish

survive? Since women are like fish, how can they not rely on the needs of water and conform to its desires? Fish may rebel and resist, but aside from creating a few ripples in the water or throwing themselves onto dry land, what else can fish do (Yan, 2007)? However, from this narrative emerges a distinctive contemporary goddess image: Only through genuine independent resistance, by completely liberating themselves from the tangible and intangible shackles imposed by patriarchal society, can women truly claim their own space and autonomy. To truly overturn the oppressive structures, women must fully escape the fate of being submissive entities. Without possessing a mature, modern, independent personality and without fundamentally challenging patriarchal norms, women cannot rely solely on resistance and personal will to break free from oppressive forces (Yan, 2007). It is only through growth and empowerment that women can shed themselves of patriarchal enslavement and transcend gender expectations.

In summary, analyzing strong female characters that have a high resemblance to ancient Chinese female deity figures in the films *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge* will provide insights that will help enhance the female gaze in Chinese films. Doing so is critical as Chinese women rarely have a chance to express themselves in patriarchal Chinese society. By portraying women as capable creatures, the film industry will play an essential role in helping women become their natural selves.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through the examination of goddess representations in the realm of mythology and the personalities of Nü Wa and Chang'e, as well as the effects of this on modern films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Rouge*, this research reveals the lasting significance of conventional sexual roles and gender stereotypes. This lit world is a

crucial source of information that is significant for filmmakers, scholars, and policymakers to create more progressive and equitable depictions of women.

This study focuses on the role of Chinese mythology in the depiction of women in modern media, as well as how it impacts gender equality in today's society. The results provide a glimpse into fluctuations and gender attitudes, which include shifts in societal norms, cultural values, and representations of women in modern media influenced by Chinese mythology. Furthermore, the study delves into the interconnected relationship between ancient goddesses and modern female characters' perceptions of gender within the framework of the female gaze.

People often portray the Chinese woman's gaze as a representation of weakness. This has happened over time, influenced by the Han dynasty and Confucian ideology. In traditional Chinese society, however, the female figure was viewed as a superior gender associated with creation and honor. The mythologies of Chang'e and Nü Wa are great examples of how traditional Chinese culture views the strength of a woman. All conventional myths and folktales never suggest that the feminine gender is a weaker one, but instead instill the dominance and power of the female figure. Female figures who have dominated the contemporary film industry bridge the gap. This indicates the transition from the old superior woman figure to the firm and capable contemporary woman in the modern world. The presentation of a capable woman gives a clear indication of how Chinese culture has held the superiority of a woman and how ideologies like Confucius have been overpowered to display the power of women. The discussion gives a positive glimpse of a Chinese woman capable of controlling situations and providing the best of her abilities with love and care. This should be the correct display of the Chinese female gaze, not the weak and fragile one seen in the last few decades.

The study goes beyond academic discourse, as it provides future filmmakers with insights into how to shape female characters, allowing them to perceive the roles, challenges, and struggles of women in Chinese culture, spanning from mythology to film. Consequently, they can create works that more accurately reflect the image of women in that era.

As a filmmaker, I am thrilled with this MRP and eager to explore the intricate process of crafting female characters. My focus will be on understanding the roles, challenges, and struggles faced by women in Chinese culture, spanning from mythology to film. By doing so, I aim to create works that authentically depict the diverse experiences and representations of women in the contemporary era.

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