A CRIMINALLY VIOLENT TURN - CHANGING PATTERNS OF FEMALE TRANSGRESSION AND DEVIANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE-LANGUAGE CINEMAS

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of

Philosophy by

Haihan ZHU

Department of Arts & Humanities, Brunel

University London

Abstract

This thesis delves into the evolving patterns and representation of female transgression and deviance in contemporary Chinese-language cinema, specifically productions from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong. By analysing case studies from big heroine dramas, horror and new magic films, and crime narratives, it explores how depictions of imperial women, female ghosts and spirits, and criminal characters challenge traditional norms, offering evolving insights into gender dynamics and societal shifts.

The study principally draws on the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade', which has its origins in feminist film studies. This concept suggests that although powerful, independent female protagonists appear to oppose patriarchal structures, they paradoxically reinforce traditional gender roles through their agency and autonomy. Moreover, it regards femininity as a reactionary construct, complicating the portrayal of women's empowerment in Chinese cinema. The concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' subtly manifests in emerging film genres, delving deeper into the intricate connections among female portrayals, gender norms, and social transformation within Chinese-language movies.

List of Figures

Table of Contents

Introduction

The representation of transgressive and deviant women in films has long been a focal point of academic and cultural scrutiny, eliciting multifaceted discourses that traverse the boundaries of gender studies, cultural analysis, and film theory. Since the mid-20th century, the film noir genre, particularly in English-speaking countries, France, and Japan,[1] has been pivotal in exploring the complex identities of these non-conforming female characters. Works such as those analysed by Ouazzani (2023) have illuminated how these portrayals serve as a prism through which broader social anxieties, power dynamics, and gender ideologies are refracted. However, while international cinema has extensively examined such representations, this dissertation breaks new ground by centring on the evolving manifestations of female transgression and deviance within the corpus of contemporary Chinese-language films.

Contemporary Chinese-language cinema, as circumscribed within the purview of this thesis, encompasses films produced from the latter part of the 20th century to the present, with Chinese as the primary medium of communication. This capacious category incorporates works from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong. Films from these regions are not merely repositories of cultural and social idiosyncrasies but are also active agents in the construction and dissemination of Chinese-language narratives. Spanning an eclectic range of genres, from historical epics to contemporary thrillers, they function as a dynamic mirror, reflecting the ever-shifting social, cultural, and political terrains of Chinese-speaking societies.

The divergence between PRC and Hong Kong films, especially in the representation of transgressive and deviant female characters, is a locus of critical importance. These disparities are manifest in multiple dimensions, including the semiotic construction of transgressive and deviant female characters, the underlying cultural logic and social values they embody, and the narrative strategies deployed to present them. Understanding these differences is tantamount to unlocking a deeper comprehension

of the unique political, social, and cultural landscapes of the PRC and Hong Kong. It also offers insights into how filmmakers in these regions engage with and respond to the complex issue of gender deviance, which is inevitably intertwined with local histories, political systems, and cultural traditions.

To comprehensively chart the historical development and the shifting cultural valence of deviant Chinese female characters, this research adopts a case-study approach, which is well-suited for in-depth, context-specific analysis. Through the careful selection of a diverse set of film genres that span different historical epochs, from ancient times to the modern era, this study aims to compile a multifaceted dataset for analysis. This includes historical-based adaptations, contemporary fictional works, and films inspired by real events. The case-study approach enables a comprehensive examination of how these transgressive and deviant female characters challenge and redefine traditional gender norms within different cinematic contexts.

Specifically, the study undertakes a painstaking examination of three distinct film genres: powerful political women in imperial-themed Chinese big heroine dramas, a sub-genre within the pantheon of Chinese costume dramas; female ghosts and spirits in classic horror and new magic films; and killers, criminals, or avengers in contemporary crime films. The overarching objective is to unearth the intricate mechanisms through which these characters disrupt and reconstruct traditional gender norms. These female characters, whether they assume the guise of powerful political figures, otherworldly apparitions, or criminal protagonists, are not merely fictional contrivances. Instead, they function as potent cultural signifiers that, to a certain degree, challenge the deeply entrenched conventional norms. They stand in stark contrast to the traditional representation of Chinese women as subjugated entities, often marginalised or effaced within the dominant narrative frameworks.

The overarching aim of this thesis is to embark on a systematic analysis of the

representation of non-conforming Chinese female characters across a wide spectrum of genres. This analysis is not merely a surface-level exploration but a deep dive into the intricate mechanisms through which these deviant female characters challenge and reconfigure traditional gender norms within the unique context of Chinese cinema. Keys among these mechanisms are the subversion of gender-based power hierarchies and the renegotiation of femininity.

A further crucial objective is to uncover the latent social, cultural, and political subtexts intricately woven into these portrayals. By doing so, this study aims to elucidate how these subtexts function as a microcosm that reflects the fluid and ever-evolving nature of gender relations in China. In this context, the disparity between filmic representations in PRC and Hong Kong necessitates a comprehensive and nuanced examination. Such an inquiry can provide significant insights into the region-specific factors that influence both the construction and deconstruction of gender-related themes in films.

Moreover, this thesis sets out to explore the multi-faceted role of cinema as a preeminent cultural institution. It analyses how cinema negotiates, mediates or engages in dialogues with contemporary gender discourses, potentially shaping and evolving gender relations in Chinese society. This inquiry holds significant importance not only within film studies but also possesses far-reaching implications for extensive socio-cultural research. It enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between culture, media, and gender in contemporary Chinese society, thereby playing a vital role in advancing knowledge across these interconnected domains.

To attain a more profound comprehension of the intricate relationships among gender, power, and cultural values as depicted in these film portrayals, a multidisciplinary approach is adopted. Feminist theory, with its long-standing critique of patriarchal

structures, is utilised to analyse how these characters resist and challenge the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that have historically circumscribed the roles of women in society and films. Post-feminist theory, which engages with the more complex and ambivalent representations of female characters in contemporary culture, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how female agency is both asserted and negotiated in a post-second-wave feminist world. Criminological theory, conversely, facilitates the analysis of criminal and deviant behaviours exhibited by female characters. It delves into the social, psychological, and systemic elements that contribute to shaping their actions. By triangulating these theoretical perspectives, this research seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of transgressive and deviant female characters in contemporary Chinese-language films. It intends to explore how the application of feminist, post-feminist, and criminological theoretical frameworks can enhance the comprehension of the complex interplay between gender, power, and cultural values within these filmic portrayals, and what novel insights can be gleaned from the intersection of these theoretical perspectives, thus approaching the study of these female characters from multiple, complementary angles

This research contributes to multiple academic fields. Through gender studies, it provides a fresh perspective on how Chinese cinema has been a vehicle for challenging traditional gender hierarchies. By examining transgressive and deviant female characters as cultural symbols, it enriches the understanding of how cultural norms can be disrupted and renegotiated. From a film studies perspective, it offers an innovative approach to genre analysis, highlighting the role of characters in shaping the meaning and significance of different film genres. Moreover, within the broader framework of cultural studies, this analysis reveals the significant role of cinema in both reflecting and shaping the cultural values inherent in Chinese society.

Chapter One seeks to identify key academic works pertinent to the representation of female images, particularly those depicting transgressive and deviant female characters, in contemporary Chinese-language cinema. It employs theoretical frameworks from gender studies, feminism, cultural criticism, criminology, and post-feminism to offer a nuanced understanding.

Central to this review is the concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade'. This notion, which originates from feminist film studies, specifically Joan Riviere's idea of 'womanliness as a masquerade' (2018) within psychoanalytic feminist thought, posits that women employ traditional feminine behaviours as a façade. The concept has evolved within the framework of post-feminism, a socio-cultural phenomenon. As articulated by Angela McRobbie in her work, the 'post-feminist masquerade' manifests when female characters in media appear to subvert conventional gender roles on the surface while simultaneously upholding underlying power structures (2007; 2015). In the Chinese context, Tingting Hu's exploration of crime cinema reveals instances of the 'post-feminist masquerade' in portrayals of female criminals (2019; 2021). At times, their transgressive actions are depicted in ways that challenge viewers' perceptions of female docility; however, these representations also reinforce traditional notions that women who deviate from societal norms are considered 'deviant'. This analysis enriches academic discourse surrounding gender representation in Chinese media and establishes a theoretical foundation for future research while contributing to global discussions on gender representation.

Chapter Two examines the ambitious female characters featured in historical big heroine dramas. In contemporary cultural discourse, Chinese big heroine dramas have emerged as a significant and influential genre, garnering attention from both domestic and international audiences. These dramas often feature strong, resilient female protagonists who navigate complex historical settings, facing and overcoming numerous challenges. By focusing on the experiences of these female characters, the

genre provides a unique perspective on the female condition, challenging traditional gender norms and offering alternative narratives of female empowerment. These dramas serve not only as entertainment but also as vital cultural texts that provide insights into gender dynamics, historical narratives, and societal structures in modern China. Consequently, they represent a crucial area of inquiry within the fields of gender, media, and cultural studies.

Gender studies offer an essential framework for interpreting how female characters are depicted in big heroine dramas. Judith Butler's performativity theory (2017), which asserts that gender is not an intrinsic biological characteristic but rather a socially constructed performance, is particularly pertinent in this context. In the context of these dramas, the actions, behaviours, and identities of female characters can be analysed as performative acts that either conform to or subvert traditional gender expectations. For example, the 'general attack' concept, which, as posited by Feng (2009) and Madill and Zhao (2021), has emerged within certain sub-cultures and gained popularity among female viewers, refers to a form of self-presentation and behaviour where women adopt characteristics and behaviours typically associated with assertiveness, dominance, and a proactive approach. These are traits that are often more commonly ascribed to men in traditional gender-role frameworks. This concept has its roots in online communities and fan cultures, particularly within the realm of Chinese-language media and fandoms. It can be interpreted as a form of gender-bending performance that interrogates and challenges the binary conception of gender roles. By embodying this 'general attack' persona, women are subverting the established norms of femininity as being passive and submissive, and instead, they are actively claiming space and agency in ways that disrupt the traditional male-female dichotomy. In big heroine dramas, female protagonists often exhibit 'general attack' traits. They take charge of their own destinies, make bold decisions, and stand up against adversities with unwavering determination. This not only provides a new and empowering narrative for female characters but also reflects the changing perceptions

of female capabilities in society.

Historical analysis is essential for understanding the genre's relationship with the past. The works of scholars like Ebrey (1993), who have studied the historical construction of gender in Chinese society, offer valuable insights. Traditional Chinese historical texts, deeply influenced by Confucian patriarchy, have often marginalised or misrepresented women. Big heroine dramas, however, are re-evaluating historical female figures such as Wu Zetian, Empress Lü, and others. By re-imagining their stories, these dramas are not only rewriting history from a female-centred perspective but also highlighting the long-standing struggle for female agency in historical contexts.

Feminist theories, both Western and Chinese, play a pivotal role in analysing the genre. Western feminist theories, such as neo-liberal feminism and post-feminism, provide lenses through which to examine the representation of female empowerment in big heroine dramas. Neo-liberal feminism, with its emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, can be seen in the narratives of female characters achieving success through their efforts in these dramas. However, the concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade', as developed by scholars like Angela McRobbie (2007; 2015), also exposes the potential pitfalls. In Chinese big heroine dramas, the 'post-feminist masquerade' may manifest as an illusion of female empowerment, where female characters seem strong and independent but are still constrained by patriarchal structures. In the Chinese context, scholars like Dai Jinhua (2002) and Wang Zheng (2017) have explored the unique characteristics of Chinese feminism, taking into account the country's historical, cultural, and sociopolitical background. Their research on women's representation in Chinese media and literature contextualises the unconventional portrayal of female characters in big heroine dramas within the specificities of Chinese society.

Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to explore several critical questions. How do Chinese big heroine dramas portray female empowerment, and to what extent do these portrayals reinforce or challenge conventional gender norms? What is the role of historical re-imagining in these dramas, and how does it contribute to the construction of female identity? How do the theoretical concepts of neo-liberal feminism and post-feminism apply to the analysis of big heroine dramas in the Chinese context? The objectives of this research are two-fold. Firstly, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the genre by examining the narrative structures, character development, and cultural meanings embedded within big heroine dramas. Secondly, it seeks to contribute to the existing academic analysis on gender, history, and feminism by providing a nuanced understanding of the genre's significance in contemporary Chinese society. To achieve these research objectives, a multi-method approach will be employed. This will include a close textual analysis of selected historical big heroine dramas, with an emphasis on their plotlines, character portrayals, and visual elements. Additionally, a review of relevant academic literature, including works pertaining to gender studies, history, and media studies, will be conducted to situate the analysis within established theoretical frameworks.

Chapter Three undertakes a thorough examination of transgressive female ghosts and spirits within Chinese literature and its adaptations in film, with a particular focus on works from Hong Kong cinema. By situating these figures within the Chinese cultural context, it reveals a complex and rich array of cultural, social, and psychological insights. These transgressive female ghosts and spirits serve as multi-dimensional signifiers that transcend traditional norms, providing a framework for examining the historical evolution of gender roles, power structures, and cultural values in China. Through a systematic analysis of the nuanced portrayals of these female entities, this chapter seeks to uncover underlying ideological tensions and dynamic shifts in cultural identity. It employs various theoretical frameworks from feminist theory, film theory, and cultural studies to cultivate a more sophisticated understanding of the

significance and implications associated with these spectral figures.

Feminist theory provides a compelling framework for analysing the phenomenon of transgressive female ghosts within Chinese culture. In the context of traditional Chinese patriarchal society, women were constrained by a set of rigid and confining norms. Female ghosts that defy these boundaries emerge as subversive entities, directly challenging the established patriarchal order. The concept of the 'monstrous-feminine' (Creed, 1993) is particularly relevant in this discussion. These ghosts, characterised by their malevolent or alluring non-conforming personas, vividly embody this notion. By doing so, they disrupt binary constructions of gender and undermine the long-held ideal of docile femininity. A paradigmatic example can be found in film, particularly in the character of Nie Xiaoqian from *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Siu-Tung Ching, 1987, Hong Kong). Her dual nature, oscillating between vulnerability and seductiveness, reflects society's deeply ambivalent attitudes toward non-normative women. This character not only signifies a departure from traditional gender expectations but also serves as a conduit for examining the intricate intersections of gender, power, and the supernatural within Chinese cultural imaginaries.

Cultural studies provide a comprehensive perspective on the cultural context in which female ghost and spirit figures are deeply rooted. Traditional Chinese ghost culture, characterised by its intricate and ritualistic death practices, funerary customs, and rich mythological beliefs, serves as the foundational framework for these figures. The evolution of the fox-demon archetype exemplifies this transformation compellingly. Initially manifested in early Chinese mythology as a more primitive and animalistic entity, it has evolved into a symbol of female allure and sexual ambiguity in subsequent literary and cinematic representations. This metamorphosis underscores the dynamic nature of cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality throughout history.

Cultural studies illuminate the ways in which adaptations of traditional narratives integrate indigenous and external elements. For example, *A Chinese Ghost Story* draws upon a rich reservoir of traditional Chinese ghost lore while simultaneously incorporating aspects of Japanese comic aesthetics and Western cinematic techniques. This hybridisation reflects the cultural fluidity and globalisation that characterised Hong Kong cinema during that era. Furthermore, it illustrates how traditional cultural symbols can be creatively reinterpreted and presented within a new cultural framework. In this process, they give rise to a novel form of cultural expression that resonates with contemporary audiences while preserving an unbroken connection to its cultural roots.

Film theory, particularly the concept of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975), is essential for analysing the visual representation of female ghosts and spirits in cinema. In numerous cinematic adaptations, female ghost characters are often objectified and portrayed as visually captivating spectacles designed to appeal to a male audience. Their bodies, movements, and expressions are meticulously choreographed to cater to a male-centred perspective. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Nie Xiaoqian's character is frequently framed in ways that emphasise her beauty and vulnerability, thereby inviting the male gaze. However, certain films subvert this prevailing paradigm. There are instances in which female ghost characters are imbued with agency, and the camera adopts their subjective perspectives, thereby challenging the traditional male-dominated visual narrative.

In the realm of film adaptations, various interpretations of narratives such as *A Chinese Ghost Story* have reflected the evolving cultural and social contexts. *The Enchanting Shadow* (Han-Hsiang Li, 1960, Hong Kong) presented Xiaoqian as a victim of patriarchal oppression, dominated by Grandma. Her journey towards self-discovery and autonomy symbolised the burgeoning consciousness of female

liberation in 1960s Hong Kong. The 1987 adaptation of *A Chinese Ghost Story* took this character in a markedly different direction. While still adhering to the male gaze to some extent, it also subverted traditional gender roles. Nie Xiaoqian evolved from a passive object subjected to male scrutiny into an active agent who plays a pivotal part in the narrative. At times, she even assumed the responsibility for rescuing the male protagonist. This metamorphosis mirrored the increasing impact of the global feminist movement on Hong Kong society during the 1980s. *A Chinese Fairy Tale* (Wilson Yip-Wai Shun, 2011, China) further delved into the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade'. In this portrayal, Xiaoqian emerged as a symbol of pure love; however, beneath this façade lay latent strength. This representation encapsulated the intricate and often contradictory nature of gender relations within contemporary society, where ideals of female empowerment coexist with enduring traditional gender-based expectations.

The new generation of Chinese magic films, exemplified by the *Painted Skin* series, represents a pioneering advancement in adapting traditional Chinese mythological elements. In *Painted Skin* (Gordon Chan, 2008, China), the character Xiaowei emerged as a complex figure. She embodied a 'feminist hero' by defying conventional expectations of female docility and subservience. Her employment of 'performative femininity' as a form of 'post-feminist masquerade' served as a strategic manoeuvre to navigate the intricate power dynamics within the film's narrative. While she presented herself as a beautiful and innocent woman on the surface, she simultaneously possessed the attributes of a powerful and independent fox spirit with her agenda. *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* (Wuershan, 2012, China) delved deeper into themes such as destiny, good versus evil, and human nature. This sequel also had to navigate the regulatory requirements imposed by the Chinese film industry, which significantly influenced both its narrative structure and character development. The *Painted Skin* series not only provides entertainment for audiences but also contributes to an ongoing cultural discourse regarding gender identity and the interplay between

traditional values and modern perspectives. It is important to duly recognise the limitations that Chinese regulations have imposed on the horror genre. This recognition underscores the importance of making distinctions when analysing films from the PRC and Hong Kong, as these regulations can have different manifestations and impacts in each context. Moreover, it highlights the role of cinema and literature as cultural artefacts that both reflect and shape social attitudes.

Chapter Four extends analysis scope to the issue of female deviance. In the dynamic landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema, the intersection of gender, crime, and social perception has emerged as a compelling area of study. With the gradual relaxation of film censorship in mainland China and the exponential growth of the Chinese film market, crime films have gained significant traction. Filmmakers are increasingly drawing inspiration from a rich tapestry of global cinema, including the alluring femme fatales of Western action and noir films, as well as the vengeful heroines of Japanese and Korean crime flicks. This trend has given rise to the appearance of a new breed of Chinese crime films that consciously integrate feminist and post-feminist perspectives into their narratives, often featuring female protagonists in perpetrator roles.

Two fundamental theoretical concepts form the basis of this exploration. Firstly, 'moral panic', as put forward by Stanley Cohen (1972) and Howard S. Becker (1963), suggests that society can experience heightened anxiety, fear, or concern about a specific group or issue is regarded as a threat to the stability and structure of society. In the realm of Chinese-language crime films, particularly those that depict female criminal behaviour, especially among adolescents, the media, including these cinematic representations, plays a pivotal role in exaggerating and sensationalising the issue. This phenomenon can incite moral panic, which subsequently influences public perception and societal responses toward youth and their actions.

Secondly, the crucial concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' proposed by Angela McRobbie (2007, 2009) and further explored by Tingting Hu (2019, 2021) in the analysis of Chinese-language crime films. This theory posits that although women may appear empowered in various aspects of life, as depicted in the media or reality, this empowerment is often surface-level or circumscribed by patriarchal norms. It aids in understanding the delicate balance between the ostensible empowerment of female characters and the underlying constraints imposed by societal moral panic and government censorship related to crime-related phenomena. By examining these theoretical frameworks in the context of contemporary Chinese-language crime films, we can achieve a deeper understanding of how these films both shape and reflect societal attitudes toward gender, crime, and the status of women in modern China. In the Chinese-language crime films analysed in this chapter, this concept is instrumental in grasping the intricate equilibrium between the seemingly empowered female characters and the underlying limitations imposed by societal moral panic (response to perceived threats to social order) and government censorship regarding crime-related issues.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This literature review delves into the intricate relationships among the representation, stereotypes, and dynamic evolution of female images within the rich and diverse context of contemporary Chinese-language cinema. It aims to analyse how transgressive women in Chinese-language films, including those with extreme deviance, are visually depicted, contextualised, and re-interpreted on screen within existing academic work.

The critical discourses surrounding the representation of Chinese women are a key focus of this study. These discourses cover the evolution of female images, from one-dimensional portrayals to transgressive representations, and ultimately extend to the presentation of themes of deviance and criminality. By drawing on the work of various scholars in this area, we can gain valuable insights into the latent cultural, social, and ideological connotations embedded within visual representations. The investigation of these dimensions seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersection and negotiation of deviance, gender, and cultural values in contemporary Chinese-language cinema. This analysis not only clarifies the image-building in films but also has broader implications for understanding the social and cultural contexts that shape, and are shaped by, these representations.

This review provides a comprehensive overview of the dynamic representations of transgressive women across various genres in Chinese-language cinema. By situating the critical discourse within the distinct nuances of the Chinese socio-cultural context, while also engaging with broader international discussions on Western feminism, gender theory, criminal theory in film analysis, and post-feminism, this dual-perspective approach enhances our understanding of the complex theoretical frameworks that underpin the study of evolving patterns of female representation in Chinese-language cinema. By recognising both the local cultural, historical, and social contingencies and the extensive influence of global intellectual trends, it

highlights how these factors have profoundly shaped, and continue to shape, the cinematic portrayal of women in China.

Central to this literature review is the elucidation of a fundamental concept underpinning the thesis, specifically the notion of the 'post-feminist masquerade'. This analytical approach investigates its profound and far-reaching implications for examining transgressive and even deviant portrayals of women within Chinese-language cinema. In doing so, it not only contributes to expanding the burgeoning body of academic knowledge surrounding gender representation in Chinese media but also establishes a robust theoretical foundation for future research endeavours. On this basis, it becomes feasible to explore more incisively and subtly how post-feminist ideas are translated into visual and narrative strategies employed in Chinese-language films that represent transgressive and deviant women. This examination reveals complex and often convoluted intersections among gender, culture, and ideology within cinematic discourse. Such an exploration not only deepens our understanding of specific manifestations of gender within Chinese-language films but also has potential implications for enhancing broader theoretical discussions on gender representation within a global context.

1.1 Chinese Cinema's Female Portrayals: Evolution, Representation, and Critique

In the realm of academic research on Chinese-language film and television works, the examination of female transgressive behaviours is of utmost importance. As significant bearers of social and cultural values, women's behavioural manifestations within film and television not only reflect the dominant social ideologies and cultural foundations of a particular era but also profoundly impact the formation of audience perceptions and the construction of societal values. An in-depth exploration of female transgressive behaviour can uncover a wealth of latent information, including gender consciousness, the path of social evolution, and the processes of cultural inheritance and transformation. This exploration is essential for comprehensively understanding the complex and symbiotic relationship between Chinese-language film and television art and the broader social and cultural context, thereby providing invaluable theoretical support and practical guidance for fields such as film and television creation and cultural studies.

Berry et al. (2016) held a roundtable discussion to explore the current situation and key issues in Chinese film studies. Although this research did not directly focus on female transgressive behaviour, it established a solid and essential foundation for subsequent related inquiries. As a result, it allowed scholars to obtain a comprehensive view of the scope and significance of research on Chinese-language film and television works, offering a broad and fertile academic background for the in-depth study of female-related themes.

In 2003, Stevens employed a meticulous textual analysis approach to deeply explore the representations of 'new women' and 'modern girls' during the Republican era in China. His study findings showed that these female archetypes emerging during the Republican period (1911 - 1949) not only mirrored the anxieties generated by the transformation of gender ideology but also encapsulated the complex emotions

intertwined with the processes of modernisation and nation-building. While the 'new women' were characterised by an optimistic and proactive embrace of modernity, the 'modern girls' presented a more complex and nuanced persona (Stevens, 2003). This research provided a novel perspective for understanding the cultural imagery of women in the Republican period and served as a crucial reference for subsequent investigations into the cultural and historical roots of female unconventional and transgressive behaviour in Chinese-language film and television works, effectively connecting female images with the concept of modernity. However, his study was somewhat limited in scope. By solely focusing on the two specific female archetypes during the Republican era, it might not comprehensively capture the long-term evolution of female images related to transgressive and unconventional behaviour. Additionally, the analysis mainly centred on these two predefined categories, potentially overlooking other important aspects of female representation during that time.

Berry (2003) concentrated on the relationship between Chinese cinema and the nation. Taking *The Red Detachment of Women* (Xie Jin, 1970, China) as an example, through a combination of textual analysis, historical research, and interdisciplinary methods, he constructed a theoretical framework to understand the complex relationships among Chinese films, national images, national culture, and national identity. This provided a macro-level context for studying female unconventional behaviour presented in Chinese films since the founding of PRC and the subsequent Maoist era. However, the over-emphasis on the relationship with the nation might have sidelined some of the more micro-level aspects of female character development. For example, while demonstrating how female characters fit into the national narrative, it could have delved deeper into the individual motivations and psychological aspects of female transgressive behaviour within the film.

Han (2021) also selected *The Red Detachment of Women* as the core of his research

and used a combination of textual analysis and historical research methods to explore the construction of female narratives and the myth of modernity. The results of his study indicated that this iconic film work, through its unique narrative strategies, had successfully created female images with significant contemporary relevance, vividly depicting the complex experiences and proactive roles of women in their pursuit of modernity. By delving into the female narratives of classic works, Han was able to clarify the developmental logic of female characters within specific historical periods, thus enhancing our understanding of the cultural roots of women's behavioural changes across different historical backgrounds. Nevertheless, relying on a single film may not be sufficient to represent the broader range of female transgressive behaviour in Chinese cinema. It could be argued that a more extensive sample of films would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural roots of female behaviour in different cinematic contexts.

Through the application of literature research and historical research methods, Denton's research on the cultural 'propaganda' during the Mao Zedong era (Denton, 2009) was crucial for understanding the context in which unconventional and transgressive female images were constructed. His research involved a detailed examination of the forms, contents, dissemination mechanisms, and impacts of cultural propaganda during that period, as well as an exploration of its contemporary significance. This research has provided an essential historical context and cultural reference for the study of female transgressive behaviour in Chinese-language film and television works, enabling a better understanding of the intricate relationship between the construction of female images and social and cultural propaganda efforts in specific historical periods. However, his study might have been overly focused on the propaganda aspect. It could have further explored how the cultural propaganda interacted with other social factors, such as economic changes and grassroots cultural movements, to influence female transgressive behaviour in films.

Li's study (2000) on the liberation and development of women in China over the preceding fifty years provided another solid historical background. His research involved a systematic review of the achievements made by women in various fields, as well as an in-depth analysis of the factors that have promoted their progress. On one hand, the female representation in films since the Maoist period deviated significantly from traditional gender stereotypes, portraying women as active participants in the communist revolution, which was consistent with the social liberation that Chinese women experienced during this period. On the other hand, these portrayals were not without flaws. Whether they were sincere explorations of female empowerment or merely tools of political propaganda remains a subject of debate. The oversimplification of gender equality, along with the neglect of the intersectional nature of women's experiences, represents critical areas that require further investigation. This limitation may be related to the fact that, as the second stage of women's liberation (from 1977 onwards), as identified by Li Xiaojiang (2000), brought about the emergence of female self-awareness and self-consciousness, earlier portrayals might not have fully captured the complex inner growth and differentiation of women.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese film industry has gradually seen the emergence of feminist perspectives in its cinematic landscape (Li, 2000). This development can be regarded as a continuation of the second phase of the women's liberation movement. Different from the grand narratives favoured by many male directors, Chinese feminist films during this period mainly focus on themes of family and love, which are intricately intertwined with intergenerational conflicts, the dilemmas of balancing family and career, and the contradictions between modernity and tradition. These themes reflect the new-found focus on women's intimate relationships and self-perception, which is in line with the shift towards women focusing on themselves during the second liberation stage (Li, 2000).

By analysing the development achievements of women and the influencing factors, Li's research has helped to clarify the social forces driving women's behavioural changes in different historical periods, laying a solid foundation for examining the transformations in female behaviour depicted in film and television works from a macro perspective of social change. However, Li's research was more of a general overview of the changing role of women in contemporary Chinese society rather than a targeted analysis of female representation in cinema. The connection between the broad social changes and specific female transgressive behaviour in films was not clearly established, leaving room for further exploration.

Collectively, these scholarly works form a cumulative and mutually reinforcing body of research. They cover a wide range of perspectives, from the macro-level aspects of the film industry landscape, historical and cultural roots, and national and social contexts to the micro-level details of specific film and television works, cultural propaganda efforts in specific historical periods, and the driving forces behind social development. Through this comprehensive and systematic approach, they have established a logically coherent and intellectually rich research framework for the study of different and unconventional portrayal of female behaviour in Chinese-language television and film works. This framework not only enriches our understanding of this complex and intellectually stimulating research topic but also provides a solid foundation for future scholarly inquiries in this area, enabling us to delve deeper into the multifaceted dimensions of female representation and behaviour within the realm of Chinese-language cinema and television.

Moving on from these broader historical and contextual studies, researchers have also honed in more specifically on female-related issues in Chinese-language films. Chow (1995), for instance, uses a combination of close textual reading, cultural studies, and interdisciplinary theories. By analysing the interweaving of elements like visuality, sexuality, and ethnography in contemporary Chinese cinema directed by the Fifth

Generation directors, Chow's work provides a unique and innovative perspective for understanding the cultural and social context of female character with unconventional behaviour.

Dai (2002) adopts a blend of close textual analysis and contextual analysis. By integrating Western feminist and Marxist theories, Dai explores the complex relationship among gender, class, and culture in Chinese cinema mainly directed by the Fifth Generation directors[2]. Dai criticises the 'self-orientalising' tendencies of Fifth Generation Chinese filmmakers. From her perspective, the historical imagery presented in their films often leads to the construction of 'oriental landscapes' that are strategically designed to appeal to Western sensibilities and gain recognition through awards. In this context, the women who appear to transgress societal norms are frequently portrayed as static 'others' within a patriarchal social framework. They operate within a Chinese historical narrative that supplants traditional concepts of 'Father's history' with a new discourse focused on 'the Other' (Dai, 2002).

Dai's research is valuable for the study of female transgressive behaviour in Chinese-language film and television as it reveals the underlying cultural and ideological roots that influence the portrayal of female characters, thus helping to understand why certain female unconventional and transgressive behaviours are presented in films. At the same time, it applies a Western theoretical framework to analyse the complex relationship among gender, class, and culture in Chinese cinema, particularly in the works of the Fifth Generation directors. This approach provides a new perspective and theoretical tool for exploring the cultural connotations and social implications of female images in Chinese films. By integrating Western feminist and Marxist theories, Dai is able to uncover the 'self-orientalising' tendencies of Fifth Generation Chinese filmmakers and the ways in which women are constructed as 'others' within a patriarchal social structure in these films. This not only helps to deconstruct the traditional representation of women in Chinese cinema but also offers

insights into the broader cultural and political context in which these films were produced. However, in some respects, the over-reliance on Western theoretical frameworks might have overshadowed the actual Chinese film-specific nuances. The application of these theories could have been more firmly grounded in the specific Chinese context to better illustrate the cultural and political shaping of female transgressive behaviour.

Wu (2020) utilises text analysis and comparative research methods to contrast the female images created by fifth-generation and sixth-generation directors in Chinese cinema. Fifth-generation directors typically place women within the broad context of history and culture, endowing female images with strong symbolic connotations. In contrast, the Sixth Generation directors[3] focus more on women on the social fringes or at the bottom, presenting more realistic and individualised female portrayals. This transition is not merely a matter of stylistic preference; instead, it is firmly rooted in the new generation's engagement with contemporary social issues, especially gender equality, and their subversive stance towards traditional cinematic narrative frameworks (Wu, 2020). Previous studies may have mainly focused on the female images of a single director or a particular period. By conducting an inter-generational comparison, Wu's research broadens the scope and deepens the understanding, facilitating a more comprehensive comprehension of the developmental trajectory of female images in Chinese cinema. However, although female characters in the works of sixth-generation directors may display agency in some respects, it is crucial to question the degree to which these portrayals can effect real transformative change. Wu's work often fails to fully address the broader structural constraints imposed by gender-based power dynamics. Although the films Wu analyses may showcase individual acts of female empowerment, they may not fully engage with the systemic issues that perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

Li and Gao (2024) adopts a combination of case studies, interview-based research,

and a synthesis of text analysis and theoretical frameworks to investigate how female directors in Chinese-language cinema shape female images. Their work emphasises the distinctive creative perspectives of female directors, which have contributed to the diversification of female images and explores the social impact of their works. They carefully select representative Chinese female directors such as Li Shaohong, Ann Hui, and Joan Chen, along with their respective works. Their films offer alternative visions of femininity. For example, instead of conforming to the passive and one-dimensional female archetypes common in mainstream cinema, the female characters in these female directors' works are created with a remarkable sense of agency and complexity.

In parallel, by integrating feminist theory and film narrative theory, Li and Gao interpret the selected film texts. From a theoretical perspective, they analysed how female directors constructed female images through film narration, camera language, and other means, revealing the inner worlds and emotional experiences of women. Their research may have found that female directors have significantly enriched the types of female images in Chinese cinema, breaking traditional one-dimensional and stereotypical portrayals. They have created female characters with independent minds who dared to pursue self-worth and challenge traditional concepts, thus providing a broader space for the representation of female transgressive behaviours in films. Li and Gao also acknowlede the practical constraints that these directors faced. Censorship, as a regulatory force, and market pressures, driven by commercial imperatives, are identified as significant factors. Censorship can limit the scope of themes that directors can explore, potentially curbing their ability to present a more radical or unfiltered view of gender relations. Market pressures, on the other hand, may push directors towards creating more market-friendly content, which could weaken the strength of their original gender-related messages. These constraints, the scholars argue, can impinge upon the directors' capacity to fully express their creative visions (Li & Gao, 2024).

When compared with Wu's (2020) research on the representation of female images by fifth- and sixth-generation directors, these two pieces of literature enrich the research field of female images in Chinese cinema from different angles. Wu's study focuses on comparing different generations of directors, uncovering the influence of social changes on the shaping of female images. In contrast, Li and Gao's research focuses on the specific group of female directors, delving deeply into their unique contributions to the construction of female images.

Liu further investigates the impact of female filmmakers on the representation of women in 21st-century Chinese mainstream cinema (Liu, 2024). She traces the development of female filmmakers and compares the differences in female character portrayal between male and female directors. This research, from the perspective of female filmmakers' creation, helps us understand the diversity of female character behaviour portrayal and the underlying social and cultural factors.

The literature on female representation in Chinese cinema is rich and multifaceted. Scholars such as Stevens (2003), Berry (2003), Han (2021), Chow (1995), Dai (2002), Wu (2020), Li and Gao (2024) have used textual analysis, which is effective for extracting nuanced insights from filmic narratives. Complementarily, Berry (2003), Han (2021), Denton (2009), Li (2000) and Liu (2024) have adopted historical research to contextualise female imagery within broader cultural and political shifts across different eras.

Collectively, these studies have advanced our understanding of the dynamic and layered portrayals of women in Chinese cinema. By offering historical, cultural, and theoretical perspectives, they collectively construct a more comprehensive picture of how gender intersects with societal, political, and ideological forces. Crucially, they have laid a foundation for future research by identifying gaps in knowledge, such as

the under exploration of systemic gender inequalities and the role of female agency in cinematic narratives. Moving forward, integrating interdisciplinary methodologies and expanding case studies could deepen our comprehension of female transgressive behaviour in Chinese-language film and its broader socio-cultural implications.

1.2 Transgressive Female Characters and Gender Dynamics in Chinese Cinema

In the extensive literature on female characters in Chinese-language films, previous research has thoroughly explored their historical evolution, diverse forms, and critical interpretations. From the early days of the Chinese film industry, when female characters adhered to Confucian norms, to the major changes brought about by social, political, and cultural upheavals such as the New Culture Movement, the Maoist era, and the influence of economic reforms and Western feminism, a comprehensive analysis has been built.

However, while mainstream female representation in Chinese cinema has been well-studied, transgressive female representation remains largely uncharted. Previous discussions have focused on general trends in female portrayals, but transgressive images, which deviate from traditional gender norms in behavior and appearance, have received little academic attention.

These transgressive depictions of women hold the potential to provide unique and invaluable insights into the evolving power dynamics of gender, the processes of cultural construction, and the role that cinema plays in subverting established gender-related discourses. However, their full implications and significance remain largely unexplored. As we initiate a shift towards examining transgressive cinematic representations of women, it is crucial to recognise the importance of addressing this gap within existing scholarly literature. The following analysis aims to synthesise existing research findings and academic perspectives on transgressive female representation in Chinese cinema, delving deeply into its theoretical foundations, cultural significance, and various manifestations.

1.2.1 Transgression: Empowering Female Representations in Cinema through Feminist Theories

Transgression is an inherently intricate and multifaceted concept that occupies a pivotal position within cultural and social analysis. As put forward by scholar Chris Jenks in his research on cultural reproduction, transgression serves as a dynamic and often paradoxical force in the process of cultural reproduction. It simultaneously embodies both revolutionary and conservative traits (Jenks, 2003).

Through comprehensive literature research, in-depth case analysis, and interdisciplinary investigations, Jenks posits that transgression constitutes an affront to the ordinary, challenging established norms. It dismantles existing rules and boundaries, acting as a catalyst for cultural evolution. Transgression introduces novel ideas, values, and practices that have the potential to completely reshape the cultural landscape. This injection of new elements can trigger substantial social change, presenting fresh opportunities for both individuals and society as a whole (Jenks, 2003). Despite its revolutionary potential, transgression also plays a crucial role in maintaining social order. By re-affirming certain rules, it counterbalances its revolutionary tendencies, ensuring that the changes it initiates do not plunge society into chaos (Jenks, 2003). This duality of transgression makes it a complex and paradoxical concept within cultural analysis. Jenks's multi-dimensional analysis of transgression, which emphasises its complex impact on social culture, provides a macro-theoretical framework. This framework enables us to explore the significance, origins, and implications of such behaviours within the social-cultural fabric, thereby laying the groundwork for further exploration of how transgressive female characters in films challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

Within the realm of cinema, transgressive representation, particularly of female characters, holds significant importance in gender-related debates. Film, being a

powerful medium for reflecting and challenging social norms, extends the concept of transgression.

Kate Millett's (2016) extensive work on patriarchal belief systems has been foundational in understanding how women are marginalised within such systems, often being reduced to objects and confined to passive roles. In the Chinese context, scholars such as He-Yin Zhen (as discussed by George, 2015) have illuminated the role of traditional Chinese cultural values, particularly those embedded in Confucianism, in perpetuating gender-based power disparities. Confucianism, with its emphasis on hierarchical social structures and well-defined gender roles, has historically restricted women's agency. Cinema, as a powerful medium, has the potential to act as a subversive force against these traditional norms. Transgressive female characters in Chinese films can deviate from the long-established gender stereotypes. Such portrayals challenge the existing gender power dynamics by presenting complex and multi-dimensional female characters, thereby countering the conventional representation of women as merely submissive and docile.

Judith Butler's performativity theory (1990) further enriches this understanding. Transgressive female characters can be seen as embodying a form of gender performativity that defies the traditional gender script, highlighting the fluid and constructed nature of gender.

Furthermore, bell hooks (1996) emphasises that transgressive representation empowers female characters by allowing them to assert their agency, rebellion, and resilience. It challenges the male-centred gaze and offers a platform for female self-expression. Films featuring strong and independent female characters can inspire viewers, especially women, to break free from traditional gender stereotypes and establish their own identities. In this regard, the inclusion of transgressive elements in films can be instrumental in driving forward the cause of gender equality and

fostering meaningful social transformation.

The concept of transgression, as explored in relation to feminist theories and female characters in cinema, reveals a complex interplay between challenging and maintaining the status quo. Transgressive female characters in films have the potential to disrupt traditional gender roles, challenge patriarchal norms, and empower women. Through the lenses of various feminist theories, we can better understand how these representations can contribute to a more inclusive and equal understanding of gender.

1.2.2 Examples of Transgressive Female Representation in Chinese Cinema

The exploration of transgressive female images in Chinese cinema represents a vibrant and ever-developing field of research. Scholars have dedicated significant efforts to unravelling the multifaceted aspects of how these images are crafted and perceived within the cinematic realm.

Singh's (2013) research represents a significant contribution to the field. Employing a comprehensive mix of text analysis, reception research, cross-cultural research, and historical research, Singh meticulously investigated the reception of films such as *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987, China) and *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990, China). This multi-faceted approach enabled Singh to uncover the intricate connection between these films and the eras in which they were produced, as well as the impact of cross-cultural differences on film comprehension.

Singh places particular emphasis on vivid and rebellious female characters like Jiu'er in *Red Sorghum.* Jiu'er's independent decisions regarding marriage and her courageous resistance against Japanese aggression stood in stark contrast to the traditional stereotype of female fragility. Singh's analysis of the audience's response to such characters serves as a crucial link between film production and audience perception. This aspect is of great significance as it offers a real-world perspective on how transgressive female images are received. In turn, this provides invaluable insights into the portrayal of women and the evolution of female consciousness within Chinese-language film and television works.

In contrast to Singh's research, Kong's (1996) research adopts a distinct yet complementary approach. By utilising close-reading of texts, cultural analysis, and comparative research methods, Kong centres on the symbolic techniques employed in Zhang Yimou's early films. The rich symbolic meanings unearthed in Kong's study are not only pivotal for comprehending Zhang Yimou's artistic style but also have a

direct connection to the representation of transgressive female behaviour.

For example, the symbolic elements present in Zhang Yimou's films may be intricately interwoven with the portrayal of female characters' transgressive actions. Just as Singh's work explores the audience's reaction to transgressive female characters, Kong's research delves into the underlying cultural and aesthetic mechanisms that shape these characters. The subversive nature of the symbols in Zhang Yimou's films, as noted by Kong, can be regarded as a means of expressing female transgressive behaviour at a deeper cultural level. This connection between Singh's and Kong's research demonstrates how different aspects of film analysis, ranging from audience reception to symbolic construction, can be integrated to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of transgressive female images in Chinese cinema.

Pei's (2023) research enriches the discourse by concentrating on Lou Ye's films. Through the application of text analysis, cultural research, and comparative research, Pei analysed the unique style of Lou Ye's films, the construction of female images, and their ideological connotations. In Lou Ye's films, characters such as Mudan and Meimei in *Suzhou River* (Lou Ye, 2000, China) offer a modern and avant-garde exploration of transgressive female identities. As Pei (2023) contends, Lou Ye's films often gravitate towards the exploration of marginalised and transgressive themes, and these female characters serve as prime exemplars. They present a more modern and avant-garde narrative exploration. Their convoluted emotional experiences and unwavering pursuit of self-identity are emblematic of the confusion and self-discovery characteristic of transgressive women within an urban milieu.

Pei's study complements the work of Singh and Kong in several respects. While Singh focuses on film reception and Kong on symbolic techniques, Pei's analysis of Lou Ye's film style and ideology provides a fresh perspective on the presentation of

female transgressive behaviour. The complex emotional experiences and the pursuit of self-identity by Mudan and Meimei are characteristic of transgressive female figures within an urban context. This urban-centred exploration of transgressive female characters adds a new dimension to the existing body of research, especially when taking into account the changing cultural and social landscape of contemporary China.

Ai Yiran's conference paper (2024) analyses the Chinese romantic comedy film *B for Busy* (Shao Yihui, 2021, China). It highlights the director's fresh take on middle-aged romance and unconventional portrayal of women. Ai explores how director Shao Yihui innovatively represents transgressive female characters to break down deeply rooted patriarchal ideology in mainstream Chinese cinema. Using a conceptual framework that integrates Stuart Hall's theory of representation with Teresa de Lauretis's perspectives on gender, representation, and film, Ai demonstrates that the film meticulously constructs characters who embody an inherent ambiguity regarding gender norms. The protagonists illustrate this complexity by simultaneously embracing established female identities while subverting traditional gender conventions. This duality highlights women's reclamation of agency and their creation of space for unconventional choices within the cinematic narrative. Ai further examines how the film's representation of women contributes to feminist discourse, suggesting the potential for a new feminist representational system that views gender as a practice of self-expression rather than a binary-determined identity, blurring the lines of traditional gender definitions. Her research expands the understanding of transgressive female representation, emphasising the unique contributions of a relatively new director like Shao Yihui in challenging traditional gender norms in mainstream filmmaking.

In her paper titled 'Transgressing Boundaries: Reimagining the Fox Spirit and Women in Chinese Horror Cinema' (2024), Han Geng explores the unique cultural

space occupied by the fictional fox spirit in Chinese cinema. She argues that the fox spirit, which lies between human and non-human, divine and demonic, light and dark, offers a powerful and different lens by its ambiguous nature through which to examine underlying societal anxieties and struggles in modernising China. Drawing from Mary Douglas's theory on the challenges posed by ambiguous and marginal boundary-crossing figures, Han Geng analyses how horror films like *Painted Skin* (2008) exploit and amplify the fox spirit's marginality to challenge traditional phallocentric ideologies. Her work explores how to integrate fictional female characters into the narrative of Chinese horror films. Through this approach, her research reveals the complexity and diversity of transgressive female images in Chinese films, as well as how these images are reshaped within cultural and social contexts. One potential criticism of this research is that while it effectively links the fox spirit to transgressive female images, it may not fully account for the complex and often contradictory nature of the fox spirit in Chinese cultural mythology. The fox spirit has multiple connotations, and the study could have delved deeper into how these different meanings interact with the transgressive female representations in horror films.

In 'Wang Baochuan's Intermedial Trajectory: from Subordination to Female Transgression' (2024), Li Xunnan examines the figure of Wang Baochuan from Chinese classical literature and traditional theatre. He explores how Wang's portrayals across different media, including film, television, music videos, and internet platforms, contribute to our understanding of contemporary gender dynamics and female transgression. Li further proposes that the use of Wang Baochuan's image as a reference in discussions regarding contemporary Chinese women's subordinate positions in romantic relationships has given rise to a transgressive movement known as 'Wang Baochuan Wa Yecai (王宝钏挖野菜)'. In this movement, Wang Baochuan is depicted as finding happiness in her subordinate role, even sacrificing her dignified life to serve her husband and accepting his betrayal in marriage. The implications of

this movement warrant careful examination, including an exploration of its motivations and reception within diverse segments of Chinese society about feminism. This also sheds light on the intricate interplay between classical literary characters, evolving societal norms, and contemporary expressions of gender roles, along with the course of female transgressive behaviour manifested through online social media channels in the Chinese context. Li's study seeks to trace the trajectory of intermedial practices concerning iconic and counter-iconic female portrayals in modern and contemporary China, unravelling the interplay between evolving cultural norms, technological advancements, and the reinterpretation of gender dynamics.

From a cultural perspective, Liu (2024) posits that these transgressive female images in Chinese cinema function as potent cultural markers, signifying social transformation. These images are emblematic of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and freedom, and they reflect the gradual weakening of traditional gender-based social hierarchies. Their appearance across different historical epochs is intricately linked to the dominant social ideologies of those times. For example, during periods of rapid modernisation, transgressive female characters often embody the new values of individualism and gender emancipation.

Furthermore, Li (2016), Li and Gao (2024), and Hu and Cai (2024) have examined the cultural identity of female characters in contemporary Chinese films. They note that these transgressive figures embody the tension between traditional and modern cultures. In many films, transgressive women, in their quest for modern values, inevitably come into conflict with traditional cultural norms. This conflict not only exposes the complex dilemmas and choices that women face during cultural transitions but also serves as a microcosm of the broader cultural shifts occurring within Chinese society.

Research slso indicates that transgressive female images in Chinese cinema have a

subtle yet powerful influence on social concepts. Li (2024) contends that these images challenge long-standing traditional gender notions, compelling the audience to re-evaluate women's social roles and rights. Li Xunnan, in a conference paper (2024), argues that the effective portrayal of transgressive female characters in films provides new models for real-life women, inspiring them to seek self-fulfilment and assert their self-value. However, there is a tendency among scholars to over-idealise the impact of these images. The assumption that these images directly inspire real-life women to pursue self-actualisation may be overly simplistic. In fact, the relationship between cinematic representations and real-life social change is far more convoluted. Social norms are deeply ingrained, and the impact of a film on an individual's perception and actions is mediated by numerous factors, including personal experiences, family background, and the overall social environment.

Another dimension that has raised concerns and sparked debates regarding the depiction of transgressive female images in certain dramas or films relates to their potential commercial motivations and stereotypical representations. These tendencies can potentially undermine the positive social influence these images might otherwise have. Yang (2023) expounds on this worry in his examination of the commercialisation of female-focused films in the Chinese market. Yang emphasises that commercial considerations may shape the representation of women on screen. The commercialisation factor presents a substantial hurdle. In the pursuit of high box-office revenues, some filmmakers and screenwriters may transform transgressive female characters into nothing more than attention-grabbing devices. This not only lessens the authenticity of the transgressive narrative but also runs the risk of strengthening detrimental stereotypes. Take, for instance, the over-sexualisation of a transgressive female character as a means to draw in audiences. Such a portrayal could subvert the very goals of gender equality and female liberation that the character is intended to symbolise. Instead of promoting a meaningful and positive change in the perception of women, it might perpetuate objectifying views, thereby

counteracting the potential positive impact on the discourse surrounding women's rights and social status. This situation underscores the need for a more balanced approach in the film industry, one that can reconcile commercial interests with the authentic representation of transgressive female experiences to ensure that the intended positive social messages are not lost or distorted.

1.2.3 Gaps in Research on Transgressive Female Characters in Chinese Cinema

The existing literature on transgressive female images in Chinese cinema has offered valuable insights into their cultural significance and social impact. However, despite the progress in modern academic studies, significant gaps remain in our understanding.

One of the most prominent shortcomings lies in the narrow scope of film-text selection in a large part of existing research. Many studies tend to confine their focus to a relatively restricted set of films. They often privilege mainstream or well-known directors' works. In the process, they overlook emerging genre films and those that are uniquely tailored to the specific Chinese cultural, social, and historical contexts. These overlooked films could be rich sources of insights into the construction of transgressive female identities. Operating on the fringes of mainstream cinematic discourse, they may present alternative perspectives, subversive narratives, and avant-garde aesthetic strategies that challenge and expand the dominant paradigms of transgressive femininity. By sidelining these films, researchers limit their understanding. Transgressive female characteristics are created, reconciled, and presented in multifaceted ways within the rich tapestry of Chinese cinema. This oversight means that researchers miss out on understanding these complex processes, resulting in an incomplete and skewed view of identity construction and failing to account for the diverse cultural, social, and ideological forces at play. It is as if researchers are viewing the rich panorama of Chinese cinema through a narrow keyhole, missing out on the full spectrum of creative expressions and the underlying power dynamics that shape transgressive female identities.

Most contemporary research, while ostensibly acknowledging cultural differences, often fails to engage comprehensively with the intricate nuances of diverse cultural contexts. When discussing Chinese transgressive female characters in film, there is a common tendency to homogenise 'Chinese culture', ignoring the vast regional,

historical, and class-based variations within the country.

China's long and multifaceted history has given rise to a rich and diverse tapestry of gender norms, which have evolved and diverged significantly across different dynasties, regions, and social classes. For example, in films set in the Tang Dynasty, renowned for its relatively open and cosmopolitan culture according to historical records, the representation of women often shows them enjoying a considerable degree of freedom and social status. Cinematic portrayals might depict women engaging in various social activities, such as participating in public gatherings, studying literature and art, and even holding positions within the imperial court to some extent. Characters inspired by prominent female figures like Princess Taiping and Wu Zetian are often shown wielding significant political power, challenging the traditional gender norms typically associated with confining women to domestic roles in film narratives. These depictions highlight the more permissive gender norms of that era as interpreted through a cinematic lens.

In contrast, films set in the Qing Dynasty often present a different scenario. As the feudal patriarchal system reached an advanced and rigid state during this historical period, and with Neo-Confucian ideology exerting a profound influence on social values, the representation of women in film reflects even more constrictive gender norms. Female characters are frequently shown to be firmly bound by stringent rules of chastity and obedience, expected to be entirely submissive within both family structures and society at large. The practice of food-binding, which was prevalent in earlier dynasties and persisted during the Qing, is sometimes used in films as a powerful visual symbol of the extreme subjugation of women and their confinement to domestic spheres. When filmmakers attempt to include transgressive female characters in Qin-Dynasty-set films, they often have to fictionalise these characters to introduce elements of rebellion against the dominant norms depicted.

This illustrates how, within the same nation, varying historical periods as depicted in film can yield significantly different interpretations of what constitutes an 'appropriate' or 'transgressive' representation of women on screen. Whether through the portrayal of actual historical figures adapted for cinematic narratives or the invention of fictional literary characters, these cinematic representations play an important role in shaping audience perceptions regarding gender roles and instances of transgression across diverse historical contexts.

Similarly, when considering the regional aspect, the social, cultural, and political landscapes of mainland China and Hong Kong have diverged significantly. The unique cultural norms, values, and power configurations of each area strongly influence how transgressive female characters are depicted. Hong Kong, with its blend of Eastern and Western cultures, has a particular set of values that might allow for more diverse representations. Mainland China, rooted in its long-standing traditional and socialist values, has a different framework. Censorship rules and release limitations, which vary greatly between the two regions, are also key determinants. In Hong Kong, the regulatory environment has its own characteristics, enabling a certain degree of freedom in presenting transgressive themes within legal boundaries. In contrast, mainland China's censorship policies, aimed at maintaining social and moral stability, impose more constraints. These differences in regulations have a significant impact on the visibility and representation of transgressive female characters, highlighting the complex relationship between regional characteristics and media content.

However, current research often glosses over these differences, treating 'Chinese culture' as a monolithic entity. This study will delve deeper into these specificities, conducting a more granular and context-sensitive analysis. This will involve a careful exploration of the historical contingencies, regional idiosyncrasies, and social power dynamics that contribute to the manifestation of transgressive femininity in Chinese

cinema. By doing so, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how transgressive female characters are both products of and active agents in shaping their cultural environments, rather than reducing them to mere representatives of a homogenised cultural construct.

The preponderance of research has predominantly centred on film as the primary medium for representing transgressive female characters, inadvertently relegating other media formats, including literature, television, and new digital media, along with the interactions between different media, to the margins of academic inquiry. Even though scholars such as Li mentioned Wang Baochuan in literary texts and classic dramas, there is still much to be explored regarding the intermedial aspects. Given the profound and far-reaching influence these alternative media exert on shaping gender perceptions, this neglect is notably concerning. Within the intricate fabric of the Chinese media landscape, dramas, web series, and digital novels frequently feature transgressive female characters, each with its own unique set of narrative strategies, audience demographics, and cultural implications. Studying their representation in these media can uncover distinct trends, narrative strategies, and audience responses that differ significantly from those in film. Each medium has its unique affordances, constraints, and cultural logic, which shape how transgressive female characters are constructed, presented, and received. For instance, the episodic nature of television dramas may offer a different narrative rhythm for character development. By excluding these media from the research scope, we are missing a crucial opportunity to understand the multifaceted ways in which transgressive female identities are negotiated across different media platforms. This not only limits the understanding of the role of media-specific characteristics in shaping gendered representations but also fails to capture the complex interplay between different media in constructing and disseminating ideas about transgressive femininity.

The majority of studies on transgressive female characters have approached the

subject from either a film studies or a cultural studies perspective, resulting in a conspicuous lack of in-depth interdisciplinary research that synthesises elements of sociology and history. This disciplinary insularity has hampered the ability to fully understand the complex motivations and behaviours of transgressive female characters.

Historical analysis can provide a temporal dimension, showing how the concept of transgressive femininity has evolved and how it is influenced by broader historical events. An interdisciplinary approach that combines film studies, cultural studies, sociology, and history would not only enrich the analysis of transgressive female characters but also provide a more comprehensive insight into the complex interrelations among individual agency, social structures, and cultural representations.

Existing research on transgressive female characters in Chinese-language cinema has predominantly focused on gender theory, often neglecting the potential insights offered by cross-disciplinary integration. This narrow focus limits the comprehensive understanding of these characters' complexity and the multifaceted nature of their transgressive behaviours. By incorporating criminological and post-feminist analyses, among other frameworks, we can explore multiple dimensions of power, identity, and representation.

Furthermore, post-feminist and criminological analytical tools are of great significance when applied to the deviant representation of female characters. While there is a limited body of scholarly literature addressing female characters who transgress societal norms in Chinese-language films, there remains a notable deficiency in the exploration of female characters exhibiting deviant behaviours. Moreover, the academic inquiry into how these representations of deviance diverge from those considered transgressive has been conspicuously underrepresented in current research. Transgressive and deviant representations of female characters

indeed require distinct analytical approaches, a distinction that will be further elaborated in the subsequent section. To address this critical gap in the existing research, there is an urgent need for a more comprehensive methodology. By integrating multiple disciplinary perspectives, we can achieve a more holistic understanding of these complex character portrayals.

1.3 Unveiling Female Deviance in Chinese-Language Films

The exploration of female deviance and criminality from a criminological perspective remains a significantly under-researched yet inherently vital aspect within the broader academic discourse. Understanding the nuances of such representations is essential, as it contributes to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of gender portrayal in Chinese-language films. This examination serves as a lens through which the complex influences of Chinese social and cultural factors can be discerned, thereby establishing an important connection between criminology and media studies. The subsequent analysis aims to conduct a rigorous and incisive critical evaluation of the existing scholarship in this field, identify persistent research gaps, and propose viable directions for future research endeavours.

1.3.1 Terminological Clarifications: Deviance and Transgression

The concept of 'deviance', as defined by Clinard and Meier (1963), and Goode (2015), represents a broad category that encompasses a wide range of non-conforming behaviours, actions, beliefs, and characteristics. These are behaviours that deviate from what is considered normal by society or its controlling agents. 'Deviance' is not limited to criminal acts and includes elements such as sexual deviance[4], mental abnormalities[5], and physical characteristics that deviate from the societal norm[67] (Clinard & Meier, 1963; Goode, 2015, Chapter 1).

'Criminality' constitutes a subset of deviance[8], which is constructed both socially and legally around the central concept of 'common core-harm'. This construct is typically associated with what criminologists refer to as index crimes and street crimes (Goode, 2015, Chapter 1). While all criminal acts are deviant, not all deviant behaviours are criminal. This distinction is crucial as it separates the more serious, legally-sanctioned forms of non-conformity from the broader range of behaviours that may be socially unacceptable but not criminal. 'Homicide' represents an extreme and severe form of criminality. It represents the extreme end of the spectrum of deviant and criminal behaviours, entailing the most severe violations of legal statutes and social norms.

The disciplinary field of 'deviance' within sociology does not exhibit a complete overlap with the fields of 'criminology' or 'homicide'. These three areas of study, while distinct, examine intricately interconnected phenomena. However, some scholars like Bader et al. (1996) have posited that the content covered in texts pertaining to 'deviance' tends to exhibit a higher degree of redundancy when compared to that found in texts focusing on 'criminology' and 'homicide' (Bader et al., 1996). In light of this, it is proposed that the subsequent discussion eschew the examination of typical criminal cases and instead concentrate on a more expansive range of non-criminal yet deviant occurrences. It is also imperative to note that the forthcoming discussion will predominantly rely on the constructionist definition of

deviance. [9] Constructionism deemphasises the inherent or objective aspects of deviance, crime, and homicide, and instead places a strong emphasis on the processes through which these concepts are conceptualised, perceived, judged, evaluated, and responded to. This perspective aligns closely with the present analysis inside this thesis, which aims to investigate how the medium of film presents or constructs female deviance in a manner that differs from that of male deviance, particularly in terms of its emergence.

Moreover, as Goode (2015, Chapter 1) posits, the idea of 'deviance' is subjective and exists on a continuum, with its perception varying across different societies and historical periods. Hendershott (2012) further notes that what was once considered deviant in the past may now be reframed as victimhood in contemporary society. Many individuals, particularly women, often display a dual nature, conforming to societal norms in public while potentially engaging in covert deviant activities.

When exploring female deviance, the differential advantage that deviant women may have compared to men, especially through the application of the 'sick-role' concept, cannot be overlooked. Historically, the reclassification of 'delinquent' individuals as 'ill', particularly in relation to female criminality and mental health issues, has been influenced by Talcott Parsons' (1975) 'sick-role' concept. This concept exempts the ill from normal social obligations and expects them to seek medical assistance. In the context of female deviance, this has led to a complex situation where women may be excluded from the 'deviant' category due to assumed mental health problems. This can be seen as either leniency, sparing them from harsher criminal penalties, or discrimination, as it pathologises their deviance instead of addressing it within the criminal justice framework. This ongoing oversight and controversy call for more in-depth exploration

In literature and cultural studies, 'transgression' and 'deviance' are often used to

describe norm-defying behaviours or representations, but they have distinct meanings, which are essential to understand when analysing female representations in Chinese cinema.

'Transgression' is defined as the act of stepping over or infringing upon limits that have been set, which can pertain to various aspects such as ethical norms, social conventions, or legal regulations. It involves a conscious effort to push against or break through existing limits, which means that it is a deliberate and purposeful act, and a conscious decision to challenge or subvert the existing norms. In many cases, 'transgression' is regarded as a positive or empowering act, associated with resistance, liberation, or the pursuit of greater freedom. Transgressive acts or representations usually aim to bring about change or question the status quo, and they can lead to broader social or cultural shifts (Jenks, 2003). In the context of Chinese cinema, a transgressive female character could be one who actively challenges patriarchal norms, like a woman who defies traditional gender roles to pursue her career or personal dreams, such as the protagonist in *Send Me to the Clouds* (Teng chongchong, 2019, China).

'Deviance', on the other hand, refers to behaviour that diverges from established norms or conventions in a way considered abnormal or unacceptable. Unlike 'transgression', it does not necessarily imply a conscious effort to challenge norms. 'Deviance' can be unintentional or accidental, perhaps resulting from a lack of awareness or understanding of norms rather than a deliberate attempt to oppose them. 'Deviance' is often seen as negative or problematic, typically associated with abnormality, social disapproval, or even pathology. Deviant behaviour usually evokes a negative response from society, such as stigma, punishment, or marginalisation. In Chinese cinema, a deviant female character might be someone portrayed as 'other' or 'abnormal' because of her behaviour or identity. For instance, a woman depicted as mentally unstable or socially ostracised might be considered deviant rather than

transgressive.

Distinguishing between transgressive and deviant portrayals of female characters in Chinese-language films is of great significance. Transgressive female characters are often lauded for their empowerment and agency, while deviant characters tend to be marginalised or stigmatised. This understanding helps in discerning whether a film is challenging norms ('transgression') or reinforcing negative stereotypes ('deviance'), thus providing a more accurate analysis of female representations in Chinese-language cinema.

1.3.2 Female Deviance in Chinese-Language Films: Examples and Analysis

The portrayal of female deviance in Chinese-language films has become a focal point of academic inquiry in recent years, intersecting with wider discussions on gender, power dynamics, and social transformation. This section critically synthesises and compares existing research, particularly within the crime genre, exploring how these representations both reflect and challenge traditional gender norms from a criminological perspective.

Hu (2021) has identified three main archetypes of female deviance in Chinese crime films: 'the female victim, the female perpetrator of violence, and the female professional'. The portrayal of women as victims, deeply ingrained in patriarchal discourses, reinforces traditional gender roles by highlighting female vulnerability and the supposed need for male protection. This depiction not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also perpetuates the concept of women as passive agents in the face of adversity. By positioning women as victims, these films often overlook the agency and resilience that women may possess, thereby limiting the complexity of their characterisations.

When women are depicted as perpetrators of violence, it can sometimes be a manifestation of what Hu (2021) refers to as a 'post-feminist masquerade'. On the surface, these characters may appear empowered, challenging traditional gender expectations through their use of violence. However, a closer examination reveals that their actions are often driven by personal grievances or societal pressures rather than a genuine pursuit of power. In films such as *The Stool Pigeon* (Dante Lam, 2010, Hong Kong) and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (Diao Yinan, 2014, China), female characters often transition from being victims to becoming 'passive perpetrators of violence'. After experiencing profound psychological trauma and significant losses, these women seek revenge, but their actions are fraught with moral conflict and a sense of conscience (Hu, 2021). This raises questions about the nature of female agency in these

portrayals. It could be argued that these women, in their act of taking revenge, are exercising a form of agency, even if it is within a framework of trauma and desperation. However, the conflict of conscience also raises questions about the moral implications of such portrayals.

Hu (2021) further suggests that the representation of female professionals, although seemingly empowered and independent, often reveals their subordination to male authority figures. Despite efforts to diversify female roles, patriarchal influence persists, suggesting that true gender equality in these cinematic portrayals remains unachieved. This indicates that even when female characters appear to break free from traditional roles, the underlying power structures in Chinese society continue to shape their representation.

Historically, Chinese-language crime films have predominantly cast women in passive or secondary roles, thus reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. However, over the past decade, there has been a notable shift. Contemporary films now showcase a more diverse range of female characters, including strong, independent, and violent ones who drive the plot and challenge gender expectations. Chen (2024) has made a significant contribution to the study of female deviance in Chinese-language crime films by highlighting the evolving role of female characters within the genre between 2013 and 2023. The observation that female characters have increasingly assumed more central positions during this period is crucial, as it signals a potential shift in the narrative focus and the exploration of female agency in crime-related storytelling.

Taking *Blind Shaft* (Li Yang, 2003, China) as an illustrative example, Chen delves into the film's portrayal of female deviance. From a criminological lens, the film is commended for exposing structural factors such as poverty, a dearth of economic opportunities, and a corrupt social system that drive individuals, including women, towards criminal acts like the exploitation and murder of miners. This aligns with

broader criminological theories that accentuate the impact of social and economic conditions on criminal behaviour (Chen, 2024). Nonetheless, Chen's critical analysis uncovers notable limitations in the film's portrayal of female deviance. The characters' actions are predominantly presented as reactions to external forces, resulting in a one-dimensional representation. This oversimplification fails to explore the full spectrum of internal motivations, psychological complexities, and the exercise of agency that real-life women involved in similar criminal activities may exhibit. For instance, it may overlook the role of personal choice, ambition, or a desire for revenge that could be independent of the immediate economic pressures. By highlighting these inadequacies, Chen underscores the need for more nuanced and complex representations of female deviance in Chinese-language crime films.

In the context of existing literature, Chen's analysis fills a gap by highlighting the need for more nuanced and complex representations. Previous research has often either focused on the archetypal roles of women in crime films (such as victims or perpetrators in a rather simplistic sense) or has not thoroughly examined the multi-faceted nature of female deviance. By pointing out the limitations of *Blind Shaft*, Chen paves the way for future research. This could entail more in-depth character development, delving into the psychological aspects of female criminality, and achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between external factors and internal agency. Such research would provide a more accurate reflection of the diverse motivations and experiences of real-life women involved in deviant behaviour.

Shifting from crime-related female deviance, Hu (2021) offers a distinct and compelling perspective. Hu's work centres on the role of independent Chinese films in reflecting evolving gender relations, particularly in relation to sexual liberation. Films featuring female characters in extramarital relationships or exploring non-traditional sexual orientations serve as a microcosm of changing attitudes towards

sexuality in Chinese society. These representations challenge long-standing conservative sexual mores in traditional Chinese culture. Analysing these acts of deviance through the lenses of shifting social attitudes, individual agency, and societal reactions affords a multi-dimensional view of cultural and social shifts. They mirror the growing acceptance of diverse sexual identities while also highlighting the ongoing tension between individual aspirations and deeply ingrained societal expectations.

Contemporary Chinese cinema frequently resorts to gender-related factors such as postpartum depression, domestic abuse, or maternal anxieties to account for the violent or deviant acts of women (Hu, 2021). While this can heighten awareness about real-life issues faced by women, it has significant drawbacks. By solely ascribing female violence to these factors, it oversimplifies the complex nature of violence. It may create a false perception that all female violence can be neatly explained by these factors, disregarding other possible motivations like personal ambition, greed, or a desire for power. Moreover, it risks strengthening the preconceived notion that women are more prone to violence due to their emotional and psychological states, rather than recognising them as complex individuals with a wide range of behaviours.

Recent research, such as the study by Hu and Cai (2024) which examined 360 films from 2001-2018 across various genres, has utilised quantitative methods to analyse the depiction of women and their power levels in Chinese-language films. The finding that despite increased visibility of female characters in professional and deviant roles, their power levels remain limited concurs with Hu's (2021) analysis of female characters in crime films. This highlights the need for more nuanced and empowering portrayals that genuinely challenge patriarchal norms. The limited representation of female power in Chinese films indicates that underlying power structures in Chinese society continue to influence female portrayals in popular culture, despite the growing demand for more diverse and inclusive gender representations.

Hu's (2021) application of the concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade' adds an additional layer of complexity. Even when female characters are depicted as active perpetrators of violence, the male-dominated narrative structure often persists. This false impression of empowerment is concerning as it gives the appearance of female agency while actually reinforcing existing power dynamics. This phenomenon in film representation is closely intertwined with how deviant female behaviour is presented and perceived in other media and societal contexts.

The portrayal of deviant female behaviour in news media and adapted films significantly impacts public reactions and perceptions of female criminality. In the popular social sphere, deviance is frequently dramatised. Given the influence of Confucian-inspired strictures on Chinese socialisation, when Chinese women engage in criminally deviant acts, the public's response is often one of shock and outrage, which is more pronounced than the reaction to male criminal behaviour. This clearly highlights the gendered nature of public perceptions of crime. Film, as a powerful medium, both reflects and reinforces these societal biases and norms. As Fishman (1980) posited, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of criminal behaviour. In the context of Chinese-language cinema, the way female criminals are portrayed can exert a profound influence on how society views women and crime. For instance, if films consistently depict female criminals as irrational or driven solely by emotional factors, it can strengthen existing stereotypes and shape even public attitudes in a negative way.

The limited direct interaction of the general public with the legislative and law enforcement communities means that their perceptions of law enforcement are largely shaped by the narratives and representations in news reports and crime films. Films, being a widely-circulated medium, have a profound impact on public views regarding gender and crime, as noted by Raftet (2007) and Carrabine (2008). Incorporating

criminology into film analysis provides a unique opportunity to enrich theoretical development and uncover the emotional dimensions of crime that are often overlooked in mainstream criminology. However, the influence of films on public perceptions is two-fold. On one hand, films can raise awareness about important social issues related to crime and gender, prompting public discourse and potentially leading to social change. On the other hand, they may perpetuate stereotypes and misinformation, reinforcing existing biases and hindering a more nuanced understanding of female criminality.

Criminological theory does not originate solely from academic institutions but has deep roots in popular culture. Crime films, in particular, serve as a medium that brings criminological theories to life, effectively bridging the gap between social reality and cultural interpretation, as argued by Rafter and Brown (2011, pp. 1-4). These films can illustrate concepts such as the impact of social environment on criminal behaviour or the psychological motivations of criminals in a more accessible way for the general public.

Despite their significance, film analysis in popular cultural criminology has lagged behind studies on alternative media formats like mystery stories, print news, and television (Rafter & Brown, 2011). The complexity of analysing visual media, which demands a distinct set of methodological tools compared to textual analysis, is a major factor contributing to this lag. However, crime films hold a unique position in criminology. They embody a form of 'popular criminology' that aligns with academic criminology and has equal importance in the social fabric (Rafter & Brown, 2011). This means that understanding the representation of deviant female behaviour in crime films is not only relevant for media studies but also for criminology as a whole, as it can provide insights into how society perceives and responds to female criminality.

1.3.3 Gaps in Research on Female Deviance in Chinese-Language Films

In recent years, the enduring popularity and significant viewership of crime films have necessitated a more thorough and meticulous examination of this genre by criminologists. Given the extensive social implications of these films, it is imperative that we closely and comprehensively analyse how crime is depicted, constructed, and framed within the context of contemporary Chinese society.

The existing literature on crime films has been predominantly shaped by male Western scholars, as noted by Guastaferro (2013). This dominance has led to a considerable oversight: the near-absence of representations of female crime fighters, offenders, and avengers in Chinese-language cinema. Despite the potential richness and complexity that these female characters could contribute to the genre, they are often marginalised. Moreover, academic research has largely neglected to address portrayals of deviant female criminal behaviour in contemporary Chinese-language films. This neglect is particularly troubling because female characters can play a pivotal role within the crime film genre. By failing to adequately explore these representations, we not only diminish our understanding of the true complexity and diversity inherent in female characters but also impede our ability to fully grasp the social and cultural contexts that give rise to, and shape, these portrayals.

In Chinese-language cinema, female-oriented crime films frequently demonstrate a pronounced inclination towards intense and compelling murder narratives. This creative decision starkly contrasts with the factual realities observed in society, where property offenses constitute the most prevalent forms of criminal activity committed by women. This disparity can be largely attributed to the film industry's efforts to cater to audience preferences, which are determined by the sophisticated interrelation of cultural, social, and psychological forces. While this may be a strategic move to attract and retain a large viewership, it unfortunately results in a limited exploration of more authentic and realistic portrayals of female criminal behaviour. Such

shortcomings distort public perception and understanding of female crime and fail to capture the rich range of motivations, circumstances, and nuances that may drive women to engage in criminal acts. Existing studies often do not sufficiently investigate the complex dynamics surrounding these portrayals and their broader implications, leaving a gap in the research.

Scholarly examination of adolescent crime within Chinese-language cinema is notably scarce. Adolescent crime is an issue that often triggers 'moral panic' in society. However, the lack of comprehensive analysis of its representation in film means that we miss crucial insights into how this sensitive topic is depicted on screen and how such representations might influence public perceptions and attitudes. This area clearly requires more extensive investigation. By delving into these under-researched aspects, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of crime representation in Chinese-language cinema, especially regarding female and adolescent characters.

Chinese-language films are produced in a variety of distinct cultural settings, including the cultural landscapes of mainland China, Hong Kong, and those created through international collaborative production efforts. However, there is a conspicuous lack of research that compares the portrayal of female deviance across films from these different regions. Each region has its own unique cultural, social, and legal systems, which significantly influence how female deviance is represented on screen. For example, Hong Kong's distinct colonial history and its current status as a special administrative region likely result in portrayals of female deviance that are quite different from those in mainland China. Moreover, censorship varies significantly. In mainland China, film censorship upholds moral, political, and social values. Content that could be seen as contrary to mainstream values, such as overly explicit or inappropriate depictions of female deviance, is restricted. Hong Kong, with its unique historical and legal background, has different regulatory mechanisms. International co-productions must balance multiple cultural and censorship

expectations, often leading to negotiated portrayals. A comprehensive cross-cultural comparison could potentially provide invaluable insights into the cultural factors that shape these representations and how they reflect and reinforce broader social values and norms.

The representation of deviant female behaviours in Chinese-language cinema is a complex and multi-faceted issue that requires continued exploration and incisive critical analysis. By examining the significant disconnect between the real-world manifestations of female crime and their cinematic representations, the influence of news media and film on the public's perspectives and interpretations, the integration of criminological theories and methodologies into film analysis, the role that crime films can play in advancing criminological theory, and the persistent underrepresentation of female figures in both Chinese crime films and related research, this thesis aims to highlight the urgent need for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of this area. The overarching objective of this thesis is to address the inadequacies in the existing literature on the subject. It seeks to explore the diversity of female criminal behaviours depicted in Chinese-language cinema, the social and cultural factors that shape these portrayals, and the potential societal impact of these representations. Through this in-depth exploration, we can gain a more detailed and sophisticated understanding of the intricate gender dynamics, social norms, and cultural values that underpin contemporary Chinese society.

1.4 'Post-feminist Masquerade' in Chinese Cinema: Unveiling Gender Representations and Gaps

In Chinese-language crime films, Tingting Hu's work (2021) has been instrumental in highlighting the 'post-feminist masquerade' as a pivotal concept for analysing the empowerment of deviant female characters. This concept, which Hu deploys, has its roots in the scholarship of feminist scholars who have theorised post-feminism. Post-feminism is not merely an academic construct but a far-reaching socio-cultural phenomenon that has emerged in response to the evolution and perceived limitations of second-wave feminism. Western scholars such as Angela McRobbie, Judith Butler, and Christina Hoff Sommers have engaged in extensive debates, challenging and redefining traditional feminist assumptions. Their contributions form the theoretical substratum against which Hu situates her analysis of female deviance in Chinese cinema.

1.4.1 Post-feminism and 'Post-feminist Masquerade'

Post-feminism, a sophisticated and ever-evolving theoretical paradigm, has emerged as a response to the perceived limitations and achievements of second-wave feminism. It encompasses a diverse spectrum of viewpoints and ongoing debates among Western scholars, including Christina Hoff Sommers's discussion on the overstatement of women's oppression (1995), Judith Butler's exploration of gender performativity and the fluidity of gender identities (2017; 2020), as well as Angela McRobbie's critique of the neoliberal turn in post-feminist culture (2004; 2007; 2015). These scholars often challenge conventional feminist assumptions while simultaneously building upon the strides made in the pursuit of gender equality.

In the realm of cinema, post-feminism offers a valuable analytical framework for examining the multifarious representation of female characters and the negotiation of gender power dynamics. A pivotal concept within the domain of post-feminism is the idea of 'post-feminist masquerade'. Western scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2007; 2015) and Rosalind Gill (2008; 2017) have made substantial contributions to the comprehension of 'post-feminist masquerade' in Western media.

The concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' encapsulates the multifaceted and complex ways in which femininity is discursively constructed and performatively enacted within contemporary cultural contexts. It is characterised by a paradoxical and often contradictory amalgamation of empowerment and subordination, a duality that presents both fascination and theoretical challenges for analysis. In her 2007 study, McRobbie conducted a meticulous examination of popular media representations, with particular emphasis on certain reality television shows. Her close reading of these texts revealed a complex interplay between the portrayals of female contestants as ostensibly empowered agents capable of making autonomous choices within the competitive environment of the show. However, a more critical and in-depth analysis demonstrated that these choices were intricately embedded within consumer-driven

and capitalist-oriented narrative structures (McRobbie, 2007).

The so-called 'empowerment' experienced by these female contestants was, upon closer inspection, confined to individual-level agency, primarily manifesting through consumer choices such as selecting specific brands of cosmetics or fashion items. Notably, this form of individual empowerment failed to engage with or challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that pervade contemporary society. Thus, this instance serves as a paradigmatic example of 'post-feminist masquerade'; wherein the superficial appearance of female agency functions to mask and obfuscate underlying subordination to both consumerist imperatives and patriarchal norms (McRobbie, 2007).

McRobbie's work is particularly notable for her incisive critique of the ways in which post-feminism has been co-opted and commodified by consumer culture. She compellingly argues that consumer-driven manifestations of post-feminism often promote a narrow, constricted, and individualistic form of empowerment that ultimately proves superficial and fails to address the structural and systemic inequalities that continue to shape gender relations in contemporary society.

In her 2015 study, McRobbie conducted a comprehensive examination of marketing campaigns for beauty products specifically aimed at women. These campaigns, frequently framed within the rhetoric of 'empowerment' through self-care and enhancement of physical appearance, exemplify the shallow and limited nature of post-feminist empowerment within the context of consumer culture. McRobbie's analysis revealed that such forms of empowerment do not engage with fundamental systemic inequalities, including the persistent gender pay gap or the chronic underrepresentation of women in positions of political and economic leadership. This failure to confront structural issues highlights the limitations inherent in post-feminist representations as cultural expressions that, while seemingly progressive on their

surface, ultimately reinforce and perpetuate existing power imbalances (McRobbie, 2015).

In contrast, Rosalind Gill's examination of the concept of 'post-feminist sensibility' provides a complementary and equally significant perspective on the intricate relationship between feminism, gender representation, and contemporary culture. Gill characterises post-feminist sensibility as a distinct cultural climate in which feminism is both celebrated and trivialised, a paradox that engenders a contradictory set of expectations for women. Within this framework, women are anticipated to embody both ideals of empowerment and sexual allure, a duality often manifested in popular cultural forms such as music videos and mainstream films. In these media representations, female characters are frequently portrayed as strong and independent; however, they are simultaneously objectified through revealing costumes, hypersexualised choreography, and various other visual and narrative techniques. This complex portrayal of women within the context of 'post-feminist sensibility' underscores the persistent tensions and contradictions inherent in contemporary gender relations while illustrating how popular culture reflects and reproduces these dynamics

In Western academic discourse, the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' is frequently analysed within the context of neoliberalism and consumer culture. Scholars such as Alison Phipps (2014) have noted that feminism has been significantly influenced by neoliberal and capitalist ideologies. These ideologies have co-opted feminist ideals, diverting the focus from collective action towards individual empowerment. This shift is also conspicuous in the media-friendly portrayal of post-feminism. Post-feminism, in this context, celebrates the 'achievements' of feminism while relegating the feminist movement to the annals of history. This particular manifestation of post-feminism fortifies the perception that Western society is fundamentally grounded in meritocracy and solidifies the connection between

post-feminism and neoliberalism.

The concept of 'double entanglement' further illuminates this phenomenon, providing a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between post-feminism and feminism. According to McRobbie (2004), post-feminism enables a comprehensive deconstruction of feminist politics, thereby weakening the impetus for its rejuvenation. The emphasis on individual empowerment, supported by postmodern rhetoric that challenges the idea of a universal female experience, seemingly has smoothed the transition from third-wave feminism to post-feminism. However, this transition is rife with contradictions and tensions. The promise of individual empowerment often fails to translate into broader social change for women.

Rooted in neoliberal ideology, which places a high value on individualism, consumerism, and personal autonomy, the 'post-feminist masquerade' often presents itself as a feasible avenue for empowerment. Nevertheless, upon a more meticulous and discerning examination, it becomes evident that this form of empowerment is often illusory and transient, as it serves to reinforce traditional gender expectations while creating the deceptive impression of challenging them. It is crucial to acknowledge that the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' does not aim to undermine or trivialise the importance of post-feminist themes in cinema; instead, it adds a layer of complexity and depth to the discourse by highlighting the inherent ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions within these representations.

1.4.2 'Post-feminist Masquerade' in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

While the preceding analysis has predominantly delved into the manifestations and implications of the 'post-feminist masquerade' within Western visual contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge that this phenomenon transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries of the West. In contemporary Chinese-language cinema, a rich and complex interplay exists where the 'post-feminist masquerade' is intricately intertwined with neo-liberalism and consumer culture, permeating various layers of society and influencing the representation of gender in profound ways.

Fan Yang's (2023) work marks a significant departure from the predominantly Western-centric perspectives that have long dominated post-feminist scholarship. Utilising a sophisticated methodological triangulation of literature review, textual analysis, and comparative study, Yang embarks on an exploration to uncover the unique manifestations of post-feminism within Chinese chick flicks. By meticulously examining Western post-feminist literature and gathering extensive data on China's women's movement, the burgeoning consumer culture, and the rise of the middle class, Yang constructs a comprehensive theoretical and historical framework. This process not only reveals the limitations of applying Western post-feminist theories to the Chinese context but also highlights gaps within indigenous research, thereby establishing a novel trajectory for further investigation.

Yang's textual analysis, which examines 11 emblematic Chinese chick flicks such as *Sophie's Revenge* (Eva Jin, 2009, China), *Go, Lala Go!* (Xu Jinglei, 2010, China), and *Love is not Blind* (Teng Huatao, 2011, China), serves as a masterclass in close reading. By dissecting elements such as character construction, narrative arc, dialogue, and mise-en-scène, Yang reveals the intricate mechanisms of what she terms 'consumerist pseudo-feminism' within these films. The analysis uncovers a complex web of middle-class female fantasies that includes idealised male archetypes and Western-inspired urban landscapes, alongside the power dynamics and gender norms

that lie beneath the ostensibly liberatory rhetoric of 'free choice' (Yang, 2023). Yang's conclusions are far-reaching; they demonstrate that 'consumerist pseudo-feminism' is intricately interwoven with China's socio-political, economic, and cultural tapestry. The 'contract' between the women's movement and the state has resulted in a dilution of feminist ideals. Furthermore, the 'double alienation' from liberal and socialist feminism has precipitated a profound impasse in the pursuit of gender equality (Yang, 2023).

This study not only offers a fresh perspective for understanding the cultural psychology and gender ideologies of contemporary Chinese women but also provides invaluable insights into the behavioural motivations of female characters in Chinese-language films. Additionally, it sheds light on underlying feminist discourses and socio-cultural determinants at play.

Tingting Hu's (2019) study is equally groundbreaking. Drawing on Angela McRobbie's concept of 'post-feminist masquerade', Hu employs a combination of close textual reading, theoretical deconstruction, and comparative analysis to explore the portrayal of female criminals in Hong Kong crime films, such as *The Stool Pigeon* and *Accident*. Through meticulous narrative analysis, Hu reveals how female criminal acts, shaped by the confluence of 'post-feminism' and 'Chinese traditional values', are utilised to construct complex female characters within these films.

Her study exposes the paradoxical phenomenon wherein films ostensibly present strong and intelligent female characters under the guise of 'post-feminist masquerade', while simultaneously reinforcing deeply entrenched male-dominated gender norms. Hu's critical interrogation regarding whether the (violent) female transgressions depicted in these films genuinely constitute empowerment or merely represent a performative illusion is particularly incisive. By thoroughly analysing representations of female victimhood, transient portrayals of female violence, problematic desires

among female criminals, and their inevitable punishment, Hu elucidates the mechanisms through which traditional gender hierarchies are perpetuated.

This research not only innovatively applies the theory of 'post-feminist masquerade' to the study of Hong Kong crime films, thereby providing a novel theoretical lens for understanding female criminal characters, but also offers profound insights into gender norms within these narratives. Moreover, Hu's work fosters critical reflection on the true nature of female empowerment in cinema, compelling both researchers and audiences to look beyond surface-level depictions of feminine strength and engage with underlying power dynamics as well as real-world implications for women's status.

Both Hu and Yang's studies are of inestimable value. They offer robust theoretical frameworks and practical methodological exemplars for understanding the multifaceted nature of female behaviours, the dynamic evolution of female images, and the complex development of female consciousness in Chinese-language films. By addressing the unique cultural, social, and historical factors that shape these representations, their work enriches the theoretical foundation of film gender studies. This paves the way for future research to explore the ever-shifting landscape of gender representation in cinema with greater depth and sophistication.

Mohammed (2024) introduces the genre of the Disney animated film *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook, 1998, the United states), which features a Chinese-themed narrative. The film highlights how Chinese character Mulan challenges the expectations of society and the grip of patriarchal norm, exemplifying post-feminist ideas like the freedom of choice, empowerment and individualism. The study emphasises Mulan's strategic expertise and courage, which enable her to succeed in a male-dominated society. However, it is also observed that the film perpetuates some gender stereotypes and reinforces conventional notions of femininity. Mohammed

concludes that Mulan's character exemplifies the intricate relationship between feminist and post-feminist ideologies, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse regarding cinematic gender depiction in popular media.

Gender-bending and cross-dressing have long been recognised as potent tools for subverting traditional gender norms in Chinese cinema. The character of Mulan, as depicted in the 1998 American film *Mulan* and its various Chinese adaptations, stands as an iconic exemplar. Mulan's decision to disguise herself as a man in order to take on her father's military obligations constitutes a profound challenge to conventional societal expectations and gender roles. Rooted in the theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), this performative act of gender transgression disrupts the rigid binary demarcation between male and female identities, thereby challenging the essentialist understanding of gender as an immutable and innate characteristic. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that the employment of gender-bending and cross-dressing in Chinese cinema is not always a straightforward or unadulterated form of resistance. In certain instances, it may be co-opted primarily for entertainment value or as a visual spectacle, inadvertently reinforcing rather than challenging traditional gender stereotypes (Mohammed, 2024). This trivialisation of gender transgression not only undermines its potential for social change but also reinscribes the existing gender hierarchies.

Films from mainland China, Hong Kong, and those featuring Chinese characters in American cinema each provide unique perspectives on how post-feminist concepts are adapted across varied cultural and historical settings. However, it is vital to acknowledge that the depiction of female characters in the public sphere of Chinese cinema does not necessarily correspond to unequivocal or unqualified empowerment. In certain instances, such representation may serve to reinforce rather than subvert traditional gender norms and expectations. This kind of depiction can be regarded as yet another instance of the 'post-feminist masquerade', where the outward semblance

of female empowerment conceals the underlying gender disparities and power asymmetries that persist within the narrative framework.

Post-feminism and the concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade' offer penetrating understandings of how female characters are depicted and the intricate maneuvering of gender power relations in Chinese-language films. Through a meticulous examination of how femininity is constructed and enacted in contemporary Chinese culture, we can attain a more profound and nuanced comprehension of the intricate and often paradoxical aspects of gender relations within Chinese society. Simultaneously, it is imperative to take into account the inherent restrictions and challenges within post-feminist theory.

1.4.3 Existing Gaps on the Application of 'Post-feminist Masquerade' on Chinese cinemas

While previous analyses have concentrated on chick flicks, crime films, and Hollywood productions that depict Chinese female characters within the framework of an ancient, historicised China, the vast landscape of Chinese cinema encompasses a wide array of other genres that merit investigation in relation to the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade'. The uniqueness of my study lies in the application of the 'post-feminist masquerade' across a diverse range of genres. Genres such as domestic costume historical dramas, ghost fiction films, and mainland-produced crime narratives, including those centred on adolescent crime, offer unique contexts where post-feminist ideas can be expressed in distinctive manners. Each genre employs its own set of strategies for constructing female characters within post-feminism, which constitutes a central focus of this thesis.

In domestic historical dramas, female characters are often thrust into a complex interplay of traditional gender roles and power structures. These narratives are set against the backdrop of specific historical periods, during which societal norms and expectations were firmly entrenched. On one hand, one may encounter female protagonists who exhibit remarkable strength of will and resourcefulness. They might challenge the patriarchal status quo through their intelligence, using their wits to navigate the treacherous political landscapes of courts or influence significant decisions. For instance, a noblewoman could manipulate court intrigues to protect her family's interests or to advance her own position, demonstrating a level of agency that defies the typical passive roles assigned to women in historical settings.

However, this seemingly empowered portrayal can often be a manifestation of the 'post-feminist masquerade'. Despite their outward displays of strength, these female characters remain constrained by the overarching historical context. Their actions are often framed in a way that still adheres to traditional ideals of femininity. Instead of

directly confronting male dominance head-on, they may rely on their charm, beauty, or nurturing qualities to achieve their goals. This means that while they may be making an impact, they are still operating within the boundaries set by a patriarchal Chinese society, and their empowerment is more of a surface-level phenomenon that does not truly challenge the underlying power dynamics, which leaves room for further discussion.

Ghost fiction films in Chinese cinema offer a compelling and otherworldly platform for the exploration of post-feminist concepts. Female ghost or spirit characters within the film narratives are often portrayed as multi-dimensional figures, embodying both terror and sympathy. They serve as potent and powerful metaphors for the repressed desires, frustrations, and unfulfilled aspirations of women in Chinese society. Consider a female ghost who haunts a specific location, driven by a tragic past; she may have been a victim of injustice, wrongfully accused or persecuted due to her gender, and her spectral existence manifests her unresolved anger and yearning for justice.

In certain instances, these female ghost characters are depicted as seeking revenge, utilising their supernatural powers to rectify the wrongs inflicted upon them. This portrayal can be interpreted as a form of female empowerment, wherein they take matters into their own hands and confront historical injustices. However, their status as ghosts also conveys an inherent sense of powerlessness and isolation. They exist in a liminal space between the living and the dead, unable to fully engage with either realm. Furthermore, their actions may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles; for example, they might be characterised by emotional motivations and personal vengeance rather than being rational agents striving for broader social change, thus perpetuating stereotypes that depict women as more emotional and less capable of strategic thinking.

A young female protagonist may resort to crime as a means of escaping the cycles of poverty, abuse, or neglect prevalent within her family. At first glance, her actions can be interpreted as manifestations of toughness and self-reliance, aligning with certain post-feminist ideals surrounding female empowerment. However, a more nuanced examination reveals that her choices are profoundly influenced by the limited options available to her. She is ultimately a product of a society that has failed to provide adequate support, education, or opportunities; thus, her criminal behaviour represents a desperate attempt to exert some control over her circumstances.

Furthermore, the representation of these adolescent female characters in media and film narratives often tends toward simplification and binary categorisation. They are typically depicted either as victims of their circumstances or as hardened criminals, with insufficient attention paid to the intricate web of factors shaping their behaviour. This one-dimensional portrayal neglects to address the underlying social and gender issues contributing to their involvement in crime, issues include gender inequality, limited access to resources, and societal pressures that compel conformity to established expectations.

In addition to these genre-specific considerations, the visual and narrative techniques employed in these films also have a pivotal impact on the representation of female characters and the manifestation of the 'post-feminist masquerade'. In historical dramas, the costumes, hairstyles, and makeup of female characters are often meticulously crafted to evoke a sense of traditional beauty and femininity, even when these characters are engaged in actions that are supposed to be empowering. The camera angles and editing can also reinforce traditional gender roles, focusing on the female characters' physical appearance or their emotional reactions rather than their agency and decision-making processes.

In ghost fiction films, the visual effects used to create the female ghost characters can either subvert or reinforce traditional gender norms. A female ghost might be depicted in a way that emphasises her vulnerability and otherworldly beauty, while her actions and powers are downplayed. On the other hand, some filmmakers might use visual techniques to challenge these norms, presenting female ghosts as powerful and intimidating figures.

In crime narratives about adolescent crime, the use of music, lighting, and setting can all contribute to the portrayal of female characters. For example, a dark and gritty setting might be used to emphasise the harsh realities of the female protagonist's life, while a more upbeat or energetic soundtrack could be used to suggest her rebellious spirit. However, these techniques can also be used in a way that objectifies or stereotypes the female characters, reducing them to mere symbols of a particular social issue or a certain type of behaviour.

Furthermore, the existing analysis primarily focuses on films, yet it overlooks the significant role that other media play in either maintaining or challenging the 'post-feminist masquerade' within the Chinese context. Chinese television dramas, online streaming series, and news frequently feature female characters and engage with gender-related discourses. These media may present post-feminist ideas in distinct ways, either in a more toned-down or more extreme form compared to what is seen in cinema. For example, television dramas typically have a larger audience reach and thus have the potential to more powerfully shape the public's perception of gender roles. To fully understand the phenomenon of the 'post-feminist masquerade' in Chinese society, it is essential to study how it is represented across various media platforms and how these representations interact with one another.

Even though the 'post-feminist masquerade' in Chinese cinema is intertwined with broader cultural and gender issues, there has been a dearth of exploration regarding its

potential social and policy implications. For example, does the widespread presence of the 'post-feminist masquerade' in cinema have an impact on gender-related policies? Specifically, how does this influence differ between Hong Kong and mainland China? The socialist system and the pursuit of a harmonious society in mainland China do impose certain restrictions on certain forms of depiction. Thus, the manner in which directors balance and utilise the 'post-feminist masquerade' is a topic that warrants further in-depth discussion. As these connections between cinema and social policies, especially in the context of gender relations, have not been fully established, the existing analysis fails to comprehensively recognise the role of cinema in either influencing or reflecting social change within the realm of gender dynamics in modern China.

In conclusion, 'post-feminist masquerade' offers a valuable, insightful, and theoretically robust framework for understanding the intricacies of cinematic gender depiction. On the surface, Chinese cinema may appear to advocate for female empowerment; however, they often subtly and insidiously reinforce traditional gender expectations. Future research should focus on grappling with these contradictions and delving into the evolving role of women in Chinese society. Particular emphasis should be placed on how cinema can promote a more equitable vision of gender relations.

Examining various genres through the lens of the 'post-feminist masquerade' reveals a complex and nuanced landscape of female character construction and representation. While there are instances of female empowerment and attempts to subvert traditional gender norms, the 'post-feminist masquerade' frequently lurks beneath the surface. This serves as a reminder that achieving genuine gender equality in Chinese-language cinema, and by extension, in society at large, is an ongoing and arduous process. Such understanding can guide us in our efforts to create more authentic and empowering portrayals of women in the future.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Film Selection and Genre Analysis

At the core of this research lies a meticulous and in-depth analysis of a purposively sampled corpus of Chinese-language films. The selection process is strictly based on the films' relevance to the overarching themes of female transgression, deviance, and post-feminist representation. To capture the full spectrum of these phenomena, films will be sourced from disparate time epochs, spanning from the nascent periods of Chinese-language films to contemporary works. While the main focus will be on more recent works, early works will mainly serve as a contrasting group or provide a historical background. This temporal breadth will enable the tracing of the evolution of these themes over time, taking into account historical events and cultural shifts that have influenced cinematic portrayals.

Geographically, films from mainland China and Hong Kong will be included. Each of these regions has its own unique cultural, social, and political trajectories, which have indelibly shaped the cinematic portrayal of female characters. For instance, Hong Kong's colonial history and its subsequent return to China have influenced its film industry's approach to gender and social issues. Additionally, the influence of socialist ideology and government-sponsored cultural policies in mainland China has also had an impact on the depiction of female characters in mainland film production.

To achieve a complete understanding, a variety of film genres will be included. Mainstream commercial films, which often reflect popular cultural values and market-driven aesthetics, will be analysed alongside dramas. The latter, with their often more nuanced and in-depth explorations, can offer alternative perspectives on female deviance, transgression, and related gender issue. It is particularly relevant in the case of independent female heroines in costume big heroine dramas. The examination of their feminist representation could be better served as a corpus within dramas rather than commercial films. Television dramas, with their episodic and

extended narrative structures, particularly in big heroine dramas, can gradually develop characters, relationships, and feminist themes over multiple episodes or seasons. This allows for an in-depth exploration of a female protagonist's daily battles against patriarchy, showcasing incremental progress and setbacks, and enabling a thorough investigation of gender-related social issues. Feature films, conversely, operate within a compressed time frame (90 minutes to 3 hours), necessitating a more concise and focused approach. In big heroine films, female character's transformation is often distilled into key events, sacrificing some nuanced character development for immediate impact. Besides, big heroine dramas enjoy greater creative leeway as they are less dependent on immediate box-office success, enabling exploration of complex feminist themes like gender intersectionality with class and other issues. Feature films, particularly those with substantial financial backing, possess greater resources to create visually captivating content, incorporate cutting-edge special effects, and cast renowned actors. However, this advantage also brings along the burden of having to attract a broad audience and generate significant revenue. This pressure often leads to a situation where there is less room for more radical feminist themes, as filmmakers may be inclined to play it safe in order to appeal to the mainstream.

For each film, a hermeneutic approach will be employed. This involves a close reading of the narrative architecture of films, where the plot progression, the development of subplots, and the resolution of conflicts will be dissected. The character development of female characters will be a focal point, examining how they are introduced, how their personalities evolve over the course of the film or the drama, and what internal and external factors shape their character arcs.

The analysis of female transgression and deviance in Chinese-language films, though aiming for comprehensiveness and nuance, has limitations. Relying mainly on textual analysis of films may not fully capture diverse audience interpretations, as it focuses on the film's content rather than the varied backgrounds of viewers that influence

their understanding. Future research could benefit from incorporating audience reception studies. Such studies could employ methods like surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gain insights into viewers' thoughts, feelings, and reactions. This would help reveal whether films effectively challenge traditional gender norms or, conversely, reinforce existing stereotypes held by the audience.

1.5.2 Multidisciplinary Theoretical Framework Integration

This analysis will be guided by an integrative and multidisciplinary theoretical framework that intertwines key components from gender theory, feminism, post-feminism, criminology, and cultural studies. Each of these theoretical strands offers unique insights and perspectives, facilitating a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the complex representations of female characters in Chinese-language films.

Gender theory, which contends that gender is a construct shaped by social forces, acts as a cornerstone for dissecting the complex manners in which gender roles and identities are depicted within the cinematic works being analysed. By exploring the dynamics of gender construction, this theory facilitates the identification of how traditional gender norms are either perpetuated or subverted within both the narrative and visual elements of films. Furthermore, gender theory underscores the vital interconnectedness of gender with other pivotal social classifications, specifically social class and age group. In the realm of class, historical dramas serve as a rich source of analysis. The on-screen portrayals of female empresses or noblewomen vividly illustrate how class dynamics intersect with gender. These depictions reveal the intricate ways in which power and gender are interwoven within imperial settings. For instance, the actions, privileges, and limitations of these female characters are often determined not just on account of their gender but also due to their elevated social class, showcasing a complex interplay between the two factors. When it comes to age, the representation of adolescent and juvenile female characters offers valuable insights. These portrayals can illuminate the processes through which gender norms are negotiated and challenged at different stages of life. Young female characters may encounter unique pressures and expectations shaped by both their gender and their age, and their experiences can reveal how societal gender norms are either reinforced or subverted during the formative years of adolescence and childhood. Through a lens informed by gender theory, this thesis analyses the interplay and mutual influence of

these multiple identities, thereby illuminating the intricate social fabric within which these characters exist.

Feminist theory encompasses a rich tapestry of diverse perspectives and approaches, each offering a unique set of critical tools for meticulously examining the interactions and responses of female characters to the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures within various cultural and narrative contexts. Among these frameworks, neo-liberal feminism emerges as particularly pertinent. Characterised by its unwavering commitment to the principles of equal rights and opportunities, neo-liberal feminism provides an invaluable lens through which we can evaluate the extent to which female characters actively pursue and attain equality across multiple spheres of life, including the workplace, educational institutions, and social arenas.

Neo-liberal feminism offers another framework for assessing how female characters navigate systemic barriers imposed by gender inequality and whether they succeed in overcoming such challenges to assert their rights and agency. This is particularly relevant in the analysis of transgressive female characters, as transgression often implies a deliberate act of challenging and subverting traditional gender norms and patriarchal expectations. By examining narrative structures and character development, neo-liberal feminism allows us to understand how these characters strategically maneuver within and against patriarchal systems, whether in their professional aspirations, educational pursuits, or social interactions.

Moreover, neo-liberal feminism highlights the importance of individual agency and self-reliance, which are central themes in many contemporary Western narratives featuring transgressive female characters. These characters often embody a form of empowerment that aligns with the ideals of neo-liberal feminism, striving for independence and equality in a male-dominated world. However, when applied to the Chinese context, neo-liberal feminism also reveals the limitations and potential

pitfalls of such representations. The portrayal of transgressive female characters in Chinese cinema must navigate these complex socio-political landscapes, balancing the need for authenticity with the pressures of social acceptability.

Post-feminism, characterised by its intricate and often paradoxical relationship with traditional feminism, provides a valuable analytical framework for examining the contemporary landscape of female empowerment in Chinese-language films. In an era where conversations about female empowerment have gained substantial mainstream attention, post-feminism allows us to identify instances of 'post-feminist masquerade'. These are situations in which the outward appearance of female agency and empowerment masks the continued presence of patriarchal power dynamics. By critically analysing the depictions of female characters through a post-feminist lens, it has the potential to reveal the nuanced methods in which gender inequalities persist and how these disparities are navigated and maintained within cinematic narratives.

This post-feminist analysis significantly intersects with criminological perspectives, offering a multi-dimensional view of female character portrayals in Chinese-language cinema. Deviance is generally regarded as something negative or problematic, often linked to notions of abnormality, social disapproval, or even pathology. Deviant behaviour typically elicits negative reactions from society, such as stigma, punishment, or marginalisation. In Chinese cinema, a deviant female character might be one who is portrayed as an 'other' or 'abnormal' due to her behaviour or identity. When contrasting deviance with transgression, the latter denotes a more active and subversive challenge to established norms. Given this distinction, criminological analysis emerges as a more appropriate framework for understanding representations of deviance. By employing criminological perspectives, it can explore how on-screen depictions of deviant female characters reflect and may even reinforce societal attitudes toward deviance. Furthermore, this approach enables us to examine how these portrayals interact with broader gender dynamics and power relations at play.

Cultural studies play a pivotal role in situating films within their broader cultural and historical contexts. By exploring the impact of traditional Chinese cultural values, particularly Confucianism, which has significantly influenced gender roles and family dynamics within Chinese society, one can gain valuable insights into how these values are both manifested and negotiated in cinematic texts. Furthermore, contemporary social transformations, including China's economic reforms, urbanisation, and the increasing impact of global culture, must also be considered. These changes have led to significant shifts in social norms, values, and identities, thereby exerting a profound influence on female characters in Chinese-language films.

1.5.3 Comparative Analysis

A meticulous comparative analysis will be undertaken to examine the disparities and similarities in the representation of transgressive and deviant female characters across diverse film genres, geographical regions, and temporal periods. This analysis will be structured along both horizontal and vertical axes, comparing mainland China with Hong Kong, and tracing the evolution of female representation over time.

On the horizontal comparison axis, it will examine different regions. This includes making comparisons between the West and China during the same period, as well as contrasting the films from mainland China and Hong Kong. By doing so, it can uncover how cultural, social, and political differences across these areas have influenced the portrayal of female deviance, acts of transgression, and post-feminist themes.

On the vertical time comparison axis, when depicting films featuring women across different periods from ancient to modern times in mainland China, different approaches are required. This may involve progressive or alternative forms of description. The analysis will also trace the evolution from historical records, to literary representations, and then to films. This chronological exploration allows us to understand how the perception and representation of transgressive female characters have changed over time. Additionally, it will include an examination of the portrayal in different genres of films on the same subject across various periods. This will help us identify trends, shifts in storytelling techniques, and the impact of social movements on the depiction of unconventional female characters in Chinese-language cinema.

Chapter 2: Unveiling the Complexities: Female Empowerment and Post-Feminism in Chinese Big Heroine Dramas

Introduction

The terrain of Chinese television dramas has witnessed a substantial transformation in the portrayal of female characters, especially within the category referred to as 'big heroine dramas'. This genre has emerged as a notable cultural phenomenon, emphasising narratives that focus on the lives of resilient, self-reliant, and powerful women set within the context of ancient China. The female protagonists in these dramas embody diverse and multifaceted roles, ranging from Empresses and Regent Empress Dowagers to self-proclaimed female Emperors and influential women from common origins.

These dramas weave a rich tapestry of elements, showcasing diverse components such as multiple storylines, unique character traits, and interwoven themes. They vividly depict characters resisting entrenched patriarchal authority and monarchical structures where men dominate society. This resistance serves as a powerful medium for exploring feminist consciousness, an awareness and pursuit of gender equality that challenges traditional gender roles assigned to men and women.

A significant number of these fictional big heroine dramas are adaptations from the emerging genre of contemporary women-oriented web fiction, authored by freelance writers (Chang, 2023). Grounded in the rich context of contemporary Chinese socio-cultural dynamics, these online literary works draw inspiration from real-life historical female figures. Through extensive fictionalisation, they imbue these characters with enhanced feminist attributes and identities. The dramatisation of these female figures has effectively reconfigured dominant historical narratives, infusing them with a more pronounced feminist perspective. This reimagining has resonated deeply with audiences, particularly among Chinese female viewers and consumers, propelling these dramas to the forefront of popular culture.

The appeal of these fictional big heroine dramas to contemporary Chinese audiences and consumers can be attributed to several factors. A primary factor is the allure of powerful, autonomous female protagonists who represent a significant departure from traditional gender norms. Furthermore, the dynamic interplay between historical storytelling and contemporary desires (Huang & Chitty, 2009) creates a unique narrative resonance. By seamlessly integrating historical elements with modern storylines, this genre effectively bridges the gap between past and present. It aligns the portrayal of historical feminine power and influence with contemporary conceptions of women's strength and autonomy, thereby emerging as a central point of contention within feminist discourse.

However, a comprehensive and nuanced analysis is essential to ascertain whether this transformation signifies a genuine advancement in female empowerment or merely represents a façade of empowerment, a so-called 'post-feminist masquerade'. The concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade', which is central to Western feminist critique, refers to an illusion of female empowerment that, despite its appearance of strength and autonomy, remains firmly rooted within the patriarchal framework (McRobbie, 2007).

Riviere (2018) and Doane (2004) developed the notion of the 'post-feminist masquerade', positing that femininity is a constructed process rather than an inherent or essential quality of womanhood. According to Riviere (2018), the term 'post-feminist masquerade' serves as an indicator of a harmonious heterosexual contract wherein 'women desiring masculinity may don a mask of femininity to prevent men from retaliating in kind' (Riviere, 2018, p. 35). This concept suggests that women may adopt exaggerated feminine behaviours or assume the guise of empowerment as strategic manoeuvres to navigate the constraints imposed by a male-dominated society.

In the academic landscape of gender studies, the discourse surrounding post-feminism has been predominantly shaped by Western contexts. The concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade' has been extensively debated within Western academia, yet its applicability to non-Western cultural productions, particularly Chinese big heroine dramas, remains largely uncharted territory. This lacuna is particularly significant considering the unique socio-political, cultural, and historical backdrop against which feminism and post-feminism have developed in China.

China has witnessed the emergence of post-feminist ideas; however, these concepts diverge significantly from their Western counterparts. The disparities are evident across multiple dimensions, including the social class demographics of those who subscribe to post-feminist ideals, the intricate relationship between female elites and the state, and the complex interactions between post-feminism and local cultural, social, and political contexts (Thornham & Feng, 2012).

To elaborate further, in Western contexts, post-feminism typically emerged among middle- and upper-middle-class women who have attained economic independence and educational success. These individuals often prioritise personal self-actualisation and individual choices regarding career paths, family dynamics, and appearance. This focus tends to occur somewhat independently of broader class struggles. In contrast, in China, post-feminist ideas are embraced more diversely across various social classes.

Western female elites operate within a liberal democratic political framework where they advocate for policies such as reproductive rights and anti-discrimination laws. Their relationship with the state can sometimes be adversarial when existing policies appear inadequate for achieving gender equality. Conversely, Chinese female elites experience a different dynamic. Rather than solely concentrating on individual rights

or challenging state authority directly, Chinese female elites view post-feminism as an opportunity to build upon past achievements while advancing collectively toward future goals. This perspective also reflects China's emphasis on harmony, collectivism, and the common good values that are deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society.

Western post-feminism is shaped by a longstanding individualistic cultural heritage, coupled with a rights-centred political framework that emphasises personal empowerment and the deconstruction of gender norms through an individual-centric perspective. This influence is particularly evident in popular culture, which often celebrates single independent women. In contrast, Chinese post-feminism must navigate a rich tapestry of traditional values that prioritise family cohesion, collectivism, and harmony. Chinese women aspire to achieve personal independence while simultaneously striving to uphold and maintain familial harmony.

This chapter undertakes a multi-faceted exploration of the representation of resilient female characters within the framework of television as a narrative medium. It delineates three interrelated yet distinct strands of analysis: the portrayal of influential women in imperial China as depicted in Confucian texts, the historical re-imaginings of these figures, and the contemporary representation of 'big heroines' in costume dramas based on online fiction novels. Each strand provides a unique perspective for examining the evolution, shifts, and continuities in the depiction of female power and agency. A comprehensive analysis is essential to understand how female transgressive characters are portrayed in these historical dramas. This examination focuses on their embodiment of robust and autonomous traits while also addressing the inherent contradictions that arise from these portrayals concerning Confucian-based cultural expectations surrounding female transgression.

Subsequently, this chapter delves into the complexities of the 'post-feminist

masquerade' and examines how the Chinese manifestation of post-feminism constructs and represents women's empowerment and new gender norms through a rhetorical 'masquerade' in Chinese big heroine dramas. It critically assesses whether these female characters embody a genuine triumph for feminism or are merely commoditised symbols co-opted by consumerist culture, thereby undermining their potential for feminist critique. Furthermore, the chapter explores the production context of big heroine dramas within the Chinese television industry to elucidate the genre's position and significance. The increasing role of the internet as a catalyst for female creativity is also addressed.

2.1 Background: Historical Gender Bias and 'Unwomen'

Traditional Chinese literary works prominently exhibit gender bias, primarily reflecting male perspectives. The representations of women in these texts often serve as symbolic manifestations of male fantasies within the framework of Confucian patriarchy. The roots of societal conventions regarding gender inequality can be traced back to ancient concepts of 'Yin' and 'Yang', which emerged approximately 2500 years ago. In Chinese, 'Yin' signifies conditions such as 'overcast' or 'shadow', associated with gloom, coldness, secrecy, frailty, and inactivity; it is widely perceived as linked to the negative aspects of nature or femininity. Conversely, 'Yang', synonymous with 'the sun', embodies qualities like brightness, warmth, strength, and openness - metaphorically symbolising masculinity or positive attributes. A specific poem from the *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry*) illustrates the disparity between 'Yin' and 'Yang': 'When a baby boy was born, he was laid on the bed and given jade to play with; when a baby girl was born, she was laid on the floor and given a spindle-whorl to play with'.

Dong Zhongshu (about 179 BC - 104 BC), a prominent Confucian philosopher, integrated the 'Yin-Yang' dichotomy into Confucian ideology, thereby perpetuating the associated concept of gender inequity. In his renowned work, *Chunqiu Fanlu* (*Luxuriant Dew from the Spring and Autumn Annals*)[10], he established a connection between the gender ideologies of 'Yin' and 'Yang' and the notion of the 'three bonds', which includes 'the way of the King' (Dong, the Western Han Dynasty[11]). Through this analysis, Dong elucidated that women's subordinate roles were determined by a higher authority that encompassed both fundamental principles governing the universe and those regulating rulers' conduct. This belief provided a metaphysical justification for establishing the Confucian patriarchal regime. The historical Chinese ideology firmly entrenched the notion of male superiority, enabling Confucianism to impose moral limitations as well as elevated moral standards and virtues upon women (Elvin, 1984)[12].

Consequently, a substantial body of literature emerged with the aim of idealising women by portraying them as embodiments of societal moral expectations. Virtuous women, regarded as paragons of chastity and prime exemplars of positive female ideals, were esteemed as catalysts for morality, loyalty, and righteousness. They wholeheartedly embraced the political allegiance traditionally expected from men. The 'Exemplary Woman Theme[13]' became a prominent and influential framework within traditional Chinese society, simultaneously promoting and constraining women's roles in accordance with societal norms. As Chien Chiao noted, 'The idealised virtuous woman is called lienü (烈女)' (Chiao, 1971, p.206). Lienü, as permitted or advocated by Confucian ritual texts, emphasised filial piety, devotion, sacrifice, chastity, and other morally commendable principles.

In the Western Han Dynasty text *Lienü Zhuan* (*The Biographies of Exemplary Women*), Liu Xiang (around 79 BC - 8 BC) categorised women's virtues into seven classifications[14] and introduced the term 'niepi' (孽嬖). This term, which refers to destructive concubines, emerges from a traditional male-centred perspective. In ancient society, concubines often occupied a vulnerable position within the harem. When dynasties or families faced difficulties or decline, some concubines were unjustly blamed and labelled as 'niepi'. This categorisation does not necessarily imply that these women were inherently malevolent; rather, it reflects the intricate power struggles and social norms prevalent in ancient palaces and families, alongwith the unfair evaluation of women's status in a patriarchal society.

Paradoxically, while *Lienü Zhuan* sought to promote female chastity in accordance with Confucian ideals, it simultaneously exposed societal contradictions regarding women's roles. The text emphasised the importance of chastity but also connected women's conduct to cosmic harmony. Liu contended that those labelled as 'unwomen', who deviated from virtuous standards defined by traditional Confucian culture,

disrupted natural order and consequently brought about ominous signs and calamities. Herein lies an application of the term 'unwoman' used to criticise those who did not conform to moral and behavioural norms such as chastity, obedience, and propriety expected of them. This usage highlights the one-sidedness and rigidity inherent in traditional moral concepts that confined women's behaviour within specific frameworks, suppressing their individuality and freedom of choice, and reflecting the unequal status between men and women during that era.

Liu implicated several imperial women, suggesting a connection between their unconventional behaviour and natural disasters. His belief in portents, along with the notion that certain calamities might arise from female actions, fueled his interest in advocating for female rectitude. By attributing significant influence to women over cosmic forces, Liu underscored the restrictive norms established by ritual texts concerning female conduct. Through moral language and historical examples, he constructed a political discourse addressing the limitations of female power and delineating women's appropriate roles within ancient Chinese governance.

Apart from Liu, historians of various imperial eras in China have frequently attributed a substantial portion of the blame for dynastic decline to malevolent female figures. Texts from the Western Zhou period[15] hinted at the detrimental effects of female authority during the late Shang Dynasty[16]. In the Warring States Era[17], this feminine archetype was embodied by Daji.[18] When analysing the fall of subsequent dynasties, later authors included other analogous wicked imperial consorts, such as Bao Si and Zhao Feiyan, in their historical evaluations, seeking to establish a recurring archetype of influential yet nefarious women throughout history. Over time, there have been significant shifts in perspectives regarding both the causes of dynastic downfall and women's roles, particularly their perceived culpability, in these calamities (Hinsch, 2006; Doran, 2011).

Eventually, a consistent pattern emerged during the Western Han Dynasty. Historian Sima Qian (around 145 BC - 86 BC) emphasised the negative portrayal of women as a recurring theme throughout history in *Families Related to the Imperial House by Marriage* of *Shiji* (Sima Qian, the Western Han Dynasty). Scholars such as Raphals (2014) and Nylan (2000) argue that the new system introduced during this period cultivated a 'misogynistic ideology' among the ruling class, which attributed various political issues to women. Drawing on Mann's arguments, it is posited that the consolidation of the empire marked the inception of beliefs portraying women as envious and obstinate, leading men to obstruct their access to political power (Mann, 1997; 2000). This tradition culminated in women's exclusion from political office, as evidenced by legal codes that increasingly restricted their roles in state affairs.

While there may be some validity to this misogynistic ideology, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying the evidence. It is essential to consider the complex nature of female culpability and wrongdoing, particularly as depicted in early historical writings. This text examines two archetypes of influential Chinese women: 'dangerous beauties/femme fatales', represented by alluring imperial concubines such as Bao Si, Daji, and Zhao Feiyan; and powerful Empresses or Empress Dowagers including Empress Lü, female Emperor Wu Zetian, and Empress Dowager Cixi.

The former typically ascended from concubine to Empress due to their husbands' affections, leading early historians to perceive them as primary instigators of dynastic downfalls. This perspective emerged from patriarchal narratives in classical texts that portrayed these women as distractions for emperors from governance through their sexual allure. Conversely, the latter often sought to protect their status or families from rival competitors or concubines, resulting in intense power struggles characterised by cunning plots and ruthless conspiracies.

In ancient Chinese courts, it was common for one woman to dominate others

regarding social status (Ko et al., 2003). The societal environment fostered a desire for distinctiveness and assurance of authority and social status.[19]

In the Confucian historical work *Families Related to the Imperial House by Marriage* of *Shiji*, historian Sima Qian elucidates Empress Lü's brutality as a rational response to the challenges encountered by women within the imperial harem. He presents her in a favourable light, highlighting her concerns as a threatened wife and her endeavours to secure wealth and status for her family while adhering to societal expectations associated with motherhood and wifely duties.

Michael Nylan's book, *Golden Spindles and Axes: Elite Women in the Achaemenid and Han Empires*, observes that Empress Lü grappled with maintaining her husband's affection (Nylan, 2000, pp. 209-210). Fear emerges as a recurring motif in both Sima's and Nylan's narratives; Empress Lü acted out of desperation to safeguard herself and her family from potential displacement. Her ruthless actions against rivals were rooted in this pervasive dread.

Essentially, the former archetype, exemplified by Zhao Feiyan and Bao Si, centres around a male monarch whose sexual desires precipitate calamity. In contrast, the latter archetype emphasises formidable female rulers such as Empress Lü, who employ stringent measures for their survival and that of their families. This thesis delves into the latter archetype, with the female regent serving as a paradigmatic example, primarily due to the latent yet profound feminist undertones embedded within their historical personas. In the longue durée of patriarchal social structures, which have persistently relegated women to the margins and subjected them to systemic oppression, these female regents emerged as outliers. They defied the deeply ingrained gender-based constraints that sought to confine women's agency within the domestic sphere.

From a historiographical perspective, the study of female regents provides a unique perspective through which to analyse the enduring struggle for female empowerment and the early pursuit of gender equality in pre-modern societies. In contemporary cultural contexts, screenwriters' reinterpretations of these influential female regents and their significant roles in big heroine dramas highlight the lasting resonance of their narratives. These adaptations not only serve to entertain but also function as cultural pedagogy, advancing narratives of female empowerment while challenging traditional gender norms within popular culture. As a result, they assume a pivotal role in the contemporary discourse regarding feminism and gender equality in the 21st century.

Over the years, predominantly male historians have analysed and reinterpreted the negative and dehumanising portrayals of influential female regents who deviated from the Confucian patriarchal social structure (O'Dwyer, 2019). They adjusted their interpretations to align with the prevailing attitudes and requirements of the present era. However, except for a few impartial and factual descriptions of these female regents, the historical accounts of these female regents who influenced national histories often exhibit significant gender bias.[20] An 'occasional woman' is typically portrayed as a 'bad' or 'evil' person who deviates from the norm and is occasionally seen as an 'unwoman'. In history, during the reigns of these unconventional 'unwomen', there was a transition period (an in-between transgressive time) and defiance. During this time, ideas and expressions about what was considered forbidden began to emerge and push the boundaries of societal acceptance. The depiction of powerful female monarchs who centralised power and deviated from traditional expectations varies across historical accounts, often depending on the gender and historical context of the chronicler.

It is essential to differentiate between the historical existence of these transgressive 'unwomen' and their representations in cultural productions. The narrative

surrounding 'unwomen', as articulated by historians, lays the groundwork for examining the portrayal of significant female figures within various cultural contexts. However, the depiction of influential historical women in art exhibitions, literature, and the emerging realm of graphic novels signifies a departure from earlier narratives predominantly shaped by male historians and their masculine ideologies.

There has been an increase in feminist interpretations of imperial 'unwoman' characters, particularly within heroine-centred historical dramas (Boisseau, 2004). This trend extends into literature, online fan cultures, and diverse forms of visual art that increasingly celebrate female empowerment. Such feminist reinterpretations have resonated with contemporary female audiences and have been utilised to address their psychological needs while catering to the demands of the Chinese entertainment market. Furthermore, these film and television portrayals have significantly influenced modern perceptions of these historical figures, offering a more nuanced understanding of their legacies.

It is essential to clarify that this chapter primarily concentrates on television studies rather than film studies. The differences between television dramas and feature films, particularly in terms of narrative structure, audience engagement, the interplay between budget and creativity, and cultural dissemination, significantly influence the portrayal of female characters within big-heroine narratives. Television dramas, characterised by their episodic format and ongoing connection with audiences, provide a vast array of creative opportunities. This creativity often transcends financial constraints and reaches a wide-ranging cultural audience. Consequently, due to their distinctive attributes, television dramas are more conducive to exploring the themes addressed in this chapter of the thesis; they allow for a deeper examination of feminist issues.[21]

Therefore, television dramas emerge as a more suitable medium for this chapter. They

possess an enhanced capacity to capture the diverse experiences and challenges encountered by empowered female characters. This capability ultimately enriches our understanding of gender-related issues within the realm of visual storytelling.

2.2 'General Attack': Re-imaginings and the Alternative Representation of Big Heroines

2.2.1 Androgyny, Gender Identity, and the Evolution of the Chinese Big Heroine Genre

The advent of the 'big heroine' notion during the third wave of the international women's liberation movement signified a pivotal juncture in the worldwide conversation regarding female empowerment. This period was characterised by a burgeoning demand for the portrayal of self-governing and self-reliant female protagonists. However, within the Chinese cultural context, most male authors faced substantial obstacles in visualising and authentically representing such complex female 'big heroines'. Instead, they defaulted to the reductive trope of the 'masculine woman' (男人婆), as exemplified in Zhu Deyong[22]'s comedy cartoon *Pink Ladies* (1992)[23]. Here, a leading female character, characterised as a tomboy, conforms rigidly to this stereotype. She is singularly focused on her professional pursuits, with a conspicuous aversion to romantic involvements, men, and marriage. This one-dimensional portrayal simplifies the concept of female empowerment, reducing it to a mere adoption of masculine-coded behaviours and a wholesale rejection of traditional feminine domains.

In the realm of gender and identity studies, the concept of androgyny, as explored by scholars such as Eva Cheuk-Yin Li (2015) and Ho et al. (2021), provides a crucial framework for deconstructing these portrayals. Li's perspective on androgyny is deeply rooted in the imperative to de-Westernise the study of gender and identity. She firmly contends that the unreflexive[24] application of Western-based androgyny concepts to non-Western contexts, especially the Chinese one, is a misguided approach.

In Western gender studies, androgyny is typically construed as a disruption of the binary classification of male and female traits. It often implies a conscious

transgression of the established gender norms, aiming to blur the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine. However, within the Chinese framework, which is deeply influenced by the Yin-Yang theory, androgyny assumes a different guise. It is more accurately characterised as a harmonious integration of masculine and feminine qualities. In traditional Chinese culture, a woman may exhibit assertiveness in business and career pursuits (Yang) while simultaneously demonstrating profound care for her family (Yin). This phenomenon goes beyond the mere imitation of male-like traits; it is about achieving a balance that respects and upholds the values inherent in Chinese culture.

The tomboy or 'masculine woman' character in *Pink Ladies* serves as an illustrative case. While this figure effectively blurs the distinct boundaries between traditional male and female roles with her pronounced career orientation and disinterest in romantic and domestic spheres, challenging the long-standing binary understanding of gender, it remains ensnared within the limitations of a simplistic stereotype. It fails to fully capture the multifaceted nature of female identity, as it reduces the complexity of female experiences to a set of masculine-associated behaviours.

A more in-depth analysis of the Chinese 'masculine woman' concept is warranted. A 'masculine woman' is not simply a woman mimicking men. In popular culture, a 'masculine woman' character's strong career orientation, often associated with masculinity, may stem from a genuine passion for her work, a desire to develop her talents or a need for financial independence. Her disinterest in romantic and domestic spheres may be a result of personal choices, such as a preference for solitude, a focus on personal growth, or a different understanding of relationships.

Moreover, the term 'unwoman', frequently used by early historians like Liu Xiang to categorise women who deviated from conventional feminine norms, is rife with problems when analysed from a non-binary perspective. A woman labelled as an

'unwoman' does not necessarily aspire to imitate male characteristics. Instead, she may be articulating a unique form of female identity that challenges the narrow definitions of femininity imposed by society.

Viewing 'unwomen' and 'masculine women' solely as women imitating male behaviour is an overly simplistic and reductionist perspective. This perspective fails to account for the numerous elements that play a part in shaping an individual's identity, such as cultural heritage, personal experiences, and psychological constitution. Eva Li's work on androgyny calls for a departure from binary thinking. Recognising the cultural specificity of gender concepts and acknowledging the complexity of individual identities promotes the cultivation of a more precise understanding of these phenomena.

The term 'general attack', originally situated within the aesthetic discourse of Danmei, which centres on male-male romantic and erotic narratives in fictional contexts, referred to a dominant character in same-sex pairings. This character was characterised by assertiveness, a strong sense of agency, and the capacity to take the lead in relationship dynamics.

However, contemporary Chinese women have reclaimed and transformed this term as a response to the limitations imposed by traditional media portrayals of female identities. Mainstream media in China has frequently depicted women in passive and submissive roles that fail to encompass the diverse range of female experiences and aspirations. In contrast, for Chinese women who appropriate the term 'general attack', it now symbolises a robust, assertive, and dominant female identity. A 'general attack' woman is one who fearlessly initiates actions, takes charge across various aspects of life, and asserts her will and power, defying conventional expectations surrounding female passivity.

This transformation of the term from its original Danmei context into a tool for female self-expression and identity construction holds profound significance. It represents a critical shift from passive consumption of media content to active engagement in shaping one's identity. Chinese women are no longer merely recipients of media narratives; they are actively utilising elements derived from such content to define and assert their own sense of self, a powerful manifestation of self-empowerment.

Culturally speaking, this appropriation challenges deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Traditional gender roles within Chinese society have long dictated that women should be submissive and deferential toward men. The emergence of the 'general attack' female identity disrupts these norms by illustrating that women can embody qualities typically associated with masculinity, namely dominance and assertiveness. This development has significant potential to reshape social and cultural perceptions regarding gender roles while fostering greater gender equality across various spheres, including the workplace, family dynamics, and social interactions.

In the domain of academic inquiry, the utilisation of 'general attack' as a self-referential term among female audiences provides valuable insights into the complex relationships between gender, sexuality, and media narratives. This usage underscores how cultural terminology can be recontextualised and infused with new meanings that reflect the needs and experiences of diverse social groups. The evolution of this term from a genre-specific descriptor within Danmei literature to a symbol of female empowerment and agency signifies a broader cultural transformation. It highlights the dynamic nature of gender identity in contemporary Chinese society and emphasises the role of media in facilitating both exploration and redefinition of such identities. Through this linguistic and cultural shift, women are empowered to carve out spaces for expressing and redefining their roles within mainstream culture, thus contributing to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender.

The acceptance of the 'general attack' by female viewers underscores the pivotal role that media narratives play in shaping individual and group identities. It highlights the formidable power of media to influence societal perceptions and enables a nuanced analysis of the evolving dynamics of gender roles and sexual identities. This phenomenon enriches our understanding of how popular culture can stimulate identity formation and social engagement, especially for marginalised communities striving for representation and influence in the public domain. By challenging the traditional gender representation of the aggressive male and the passive female, the usage of 'general attack' within the context of female self-identification assumes a distinctively feminist interpretation.

Moreover, the term 'general attack' has expanded beyond its association with visual texts and has been adopted as a marketing strategy by female celebrities and actresses such as Liu Tao and Yao Chen. These individuals, through their portrayal of female leading protagonists intertextually linked to their star personae, have contributed to the construction of a contemporary urban female imaginary centred around the 'general attack' concept. This concept, which first emerged in television dramas, has now become a defining feature of contemporary urban female characters, as seen in the portrayal of Andy (played by Liu Tao) in the TV drama *Ode to Joy* (Kong Sheng, 2016, China).

The thesis asserts that the Chinese big heroine genre encompasses both urban modern plays and historical dramas. Historical dramas, in particular, have undergone two primary stages of development, both characterised by the presence of a strong female protagonist, the 'general attack', within a constrained historical context.[25] The initial stage, primarily in the 1990s, focused on portraying historical female regents. However, during this period, patriarchal power structures continued to exert a significant influence on production, limiting the full emancipatory potential of these

portrayals. The second phase, beginning in 2013, saw the rise of online literary adaptations as a fertile ground for big heroine dramas. These dramas incorporate more fictional elements and are tailored to meet the viewing preferences of modern Chinese female consumers.

The initial phase manifests as grandiose historical or imperial narratives centred on prominent imperial female characters (Ying, 2020). These dramas mainly depict historical events while occasionally incorporating fictional elements. They portray the narratives of autonomous female regents within ancient Chinese society who possess a contemporary understanding of female consciousness to some degree. These characters navigate and thrive in a patriarchal environment, conveying modern feminist ideals and contemporary notions of empowered women. Consequently, these portrayals have sparked intense discussions around how they engage with questions of gender.

2.2.2 Reinterpreting Wu Zetian: Feminist Reclamation in 1990s Cinematic and Literary Works

One of the most frequently portrayed historical figures in the context of big heroine historical dramas is the female sovereign Wu Zetian. Early historians depicted Wu as actively defying Confucian ideals of femininity and transgressing the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers. Her character has been constructed within a particular 'discursive historical formation' (Riley, 1988, p. 5), which implies that the narratives surrounding her have emerged from a broader historical and cultural discourse. This construction has been significantly shaped by an ideology that privileges masculinity, as noted by Ebrey and Gregory (1993).[26] In other words, the perspective through which historians have examined and depicted Wu has been influenced by a male-dominated viewpoint, likely impacting how her actions and character have been assessed and represented over time.

In this ideological paradigm, Wu was stereotyped as the 'lascivious seductress' and 'ruthless concubine'[27], and the derogatory phrase 'a hen crowing like a rooster at daybreak' (牝鸡司晨)[28] was used to imply that she was a scourge. While scholars from different historical periods have emphasised different aspects of Wu's traits, the dominant perception of her as an 'unwoman' has persisted. In contrast, the corpus of literary works, including historical, literary texts, novels, plays, and operas, offers a more nuanced portrayal of Wu as a complex and ambiguous character.

In the 1990s, director Zhang Yimou's attempt to create a film about Wu Zetian involved a team of five screenwriters, both male (Su Tong，Ge Fei，and Bei Cun) and female (Xu Lan and Zhao Mei).

The recruitment process can be compared to a competitive arena where two separate lineages of modern writing converge. [29] Historically, male authors have often connected their narratives with a male-centric perspective to portray Wu Zetian's

transgressive and rebellious character. The alignment of this interpretation of Wu Zetian's character with the perspectives presented in literary critiques and historical analyses, as exemplified by scholars Lei Yaoming and historian Ray Huang, bolsters the argument by offering historical context regarding the male writers' treatment of her narrative. From the perspective of those affected (referred to as the 'victims'), specifically the offspring of the Li Tang Dynasty and the deceased progeny of Wu Zetian, a narrative has surfaced that presents Wu Zetian in an unfavourable light, hence exposing a widespread unease with women holding positions of power. The characterisation of Wu as a lecherous and monstrous lady is frequently employed, drawing from historical sources and scholarly interpretations that align with the conventional Confucian patriarchal viewpoint.

The genesis of these viewpoints can be traced back to the pioneering contributions of Lin Yutang. Drawing on Western psychoanalytic theories prominent in the early 20th century, Lin Yutang proposed an ironic perspective of Wu Zetian. He portrayed her as a psychologically disturbed perpetrator responsible for the demise of innumerable individuals (Lin, 1957, p.viii). While Lin admired Wu's exceptional qualities, he refrained from comparing her with other prominent Western female rulers. Instead, he presented her as 'the antithesis of Maria Teresa' or the female equivalent to Stalin, emphasising her role as a disruptor of historical precedents (Lin, 1957, p.ix).

In a recent biography, Yeling Yiren employs a similar discursive approach, characterising Wu as a female figure with qualities reminiscent of snakes and scorpions, including cunning, deceitfulness, malevolence, and political acumen (Yiren, 2000). Classical Chinese literature, folk history, and certain contemporary novels frequently depict Wu Zetian in moralistic language, portraying her as the epitome of a promiscuous and immoral woman. This singular and stereotypical representation has, however, paved the way for modern reinterpretations.

By contrast, female authors have exhibited a preference for examining Wu Zetian's fixation on her father and delving into the psychological aspects of her marital experiences. [30] Notable among these authors are Anchee Min, who presents a comprehensive depiction of Wu Zetian in her novel *Empress Orchid* (2005), and Xinran, whose work *The Good Women of China* (2002) covers themes of female empowerment in historical contexts. Although not screenwriters, both authors contributed substantially to the literary domain with their insightful perspectives. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish the feminists within this particular framework from the female writers. The portrayal of Wu Zetian by female writer Xu Lan can be seen as equally pathological to that of Lin Yutang. In contrast, feminist author Zhao Mei adopts a more objective and critical feminist perspective, characterising the authoritarian ruler Wu Zetian as an individual who undergoes a process of self-discovery.

In Zhao Mei's recent biography titled *Woman: Wu Zetian* (2007), she presents a counterargument to the prevailing Chinese cultural narrative that depicts Wu as a morally depraved female ruler ('unwoman') who abused her authority (Song, 2010). Although grounded in historical perspectives, Zhao Mei's scholarly contributions primarily offer a feminist critique rather than adhering to a traditional historical interpretation. It critically examines the stigmatised identity attributed to Wu. It offers a reinterpretation of her life by investigating the connection between her personal experiences and public and political endeavours. [31] This analysis highlights the influence of Wu's private life on her public role, shedding new light on her historical significance

Zhang Yimou's film, notwithstanding its lacklustre commercial performance, occupies a significant position as a mediated cultural phenomenon within the global cultural sphere (Jin, 2021). Through a competitive process among literary screenwriters, it undertakes the ambitious task of introducing the iconic figure of Wu

Zetian to a Western audience. From the perspective of post-colonial theory, this endeavour can be regarded as a form of cultural self-representation within the global context.

Informed by Judith Butler's performativity theory, the film could potentially explore how Wu Zetian's gender performance deviated from the traditional norms of her time. This deviation is not confined to her political ascension but extends to her quotidian interactions and public appearances as a Chinese 'androgyny'. Such an exploration would not only unearth the constructed nature of gender but also elucidate how Wu Zetian strategically harnessed gendered performances as a means to consolidate her power. Adopting an intersectional perspective, which takes into account the intricate interplay of gender, class, and ethnicity in Wu Zetian's era, the film could potentially unearth the idiosyncratic challenges and opportunities she encountered. This cinematic exploration transcends the realm of mere artistic endeavour; it serves as a pivotal cultural exchange, bridging the chasm between Chinese historical narratives and Western audiences' comprehension. In the process, it challenges the Euro-centric historiographical perspective that has long exerted a hegemonic influence over the global understanding of history, thereby proffering an alternative narrative firmly rooted in Chinese culture. This alternative narrative possesses the potential to enhance a more diverse discourse on global history.

The portrayal of Wu Zetian functions as a potent metaphor for the intricate socio-political landscape of 1990s China. During this period, China was in the throes of a profound transformation, as the opening-up policy exposed the nation to a profusion of global influences. The film encapsulates the complex power dynamics of observation and being observed. For instance, as China was emerging as a significant global power, it was under the intense scrutiny of the international community, much like how Wu Zetian's every action was meticulously monitored by the court and the public within the literary and filmic narrative.

Wu Zetian's character, with her transgressive gender roles and ambitious political pursuits, mirrors the complex dialectic between gender and nationality. Her portrayal functions as a lens through which one can observe China's arduous struggle to redefine itself in a rapidly evolving global landscape. From a gender-studies perspective, Wu Zetian's non-conforming gender role in the film reflects the evolving gender roles in Chinese society during the 1990s. As women were increasingly penetrating the public sphere, they were challenging traditional gender norms that had been deeply entrenched in Chinese society for centuries. This not only reflects the evolving status of women but also symbolises the wider cultural and social transformations occurring within the country. These transformations were not solely a response to internal social changes but were also precipitated by China's engagement with global feminism and gender equality discourses.

2.2.3 Reimagining Wu Zetian: A Feminist-Infused Reinterpretation in Contemporary Media

The subsequent part conducts a comprehensive analysis of the reimagined depictions of Wu Zetian. This exploration functions as a case study within the context of two prominent historical dramas with powerful female leads: *Wu Zetian* (Chen Jialin, 1995, China) and *Palace of Desire* (Li Shaohong, 2000, China). Set against the backdrop of the burgeoning feminist awakening in the 1990s in China, these televisual renditions serve as a rich site for examining the transformation of historical narrative, the subversion of deeply-rooted gender paradigms, and the re-evaluation of a historical icon. Employing an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates gender studies, cultural theory, and historiography, the subsequent part dissects how these two dramas not only contest traditional conceptions of Wu Zetian but also foster a more intricate and inclusive comprehension of gender, power, and historical representation. In the process, it sheds light on the dynamic interplay among contemporary cultural values, feminist discourses, and the re-interpretation of history within popular media.

The 1990s in China was a period rife with cultural ferment and social metamorphosis, marked by the burgeoning of feminist consciousness. This ideological shift permeated various aspects of cultural production, most notably the re-evaluation of historical figures. Among these, Wu Zetian emerged as a focal point of re-interpretation, as her life and reign offered a fertile ground for exploring gender, power, and the subversion of traditional norms. The following aims to critically analyse how Chen Jialin and Li Shaohong, two influential directors, reconfigured the narrative of Wu Zetian in their respective big heroine dramas, thereby challenging long-standing patriarchal and historiographical conventions. This new representation is more in line with Eva Li's concept of gender harmony, which posits the integration of traditionally masculine and feminine traits as a means of transcending the limitations of traditional gender binaries. When compared to earlier portrayals of Wu Zetian in literature and film, which often adhered strictly to patriarchal perspectives, the works of Chen Jialin and

Li Shaohong stand out as revolutionary, offering a fresh and more accurate view of a complex historical figure who defied the odds and left an indelible mark on Chinese history.

Chen Jialin's portrayal of Wu Zetian represents a radical challenge to the fundamental tenets of Chinese cosmology, specifically the theory of Yin and Yang[32]. In traditional Chinese thought, Yin and Yang, the complementary yet antagonistic forces, are thought to be the fundamental structuring elements of the cosmos. Yin embodies femininity, passiveness, and the capacity to receive, whereas Yang typifies masculinity, activeness, and a dominant nature. This binary has long served as the ontological and cultural bedrock upon which Chinese social, philosophical, and ethical systems are constructed.

Wu Zetian, as depicted by Chen Jialin, disrupts this fixed dichotomy. She embodies masculine traits such as assertiveness, ambition, and political acumen within a female body. Her assumption of societal responsibilities, realisation of ambitions, and governance of the state directly contravene the traditional gender roles assigned to women within the patriarchal framework. In a feudal, male-dominated society, women were expected to be confined to the domestic sphere, with their roles primarily defined as wives and mothers. Wu Zetian's usurpation of men's traditional political and social missions and her dismantling of restrictions on women's physical and verbal expressions thus signify a profound rupture in the established gender order.

It is crucial to recognise the historical context that enabled a female empress to ascend to power. Typically, this occurred when the emperor was infirm, incapacitated, or deceased, and the heir was of a tender age. In such circumstances, it was customary for an empress to assume temporary governance as a regent and transfer authority to the heir-apparent upon the latter reaching an appropriate age. However, many female rulers held de-facto authority as regents without formal recognition, and a significant

number did not relinquish power to their sons upon the son's adulthood. Moreover, even when power was transferred, these empresses often retained substantial influence and control.

Chen Jialin's portrayal of Wu Zetian reveals a more complex power dynamic. Wu extends her influence not merely by circumventing established regulations, as some empresses did, but by strategically establishing or manipulating existing precedents. For instance, she actively participated in rites that were typically excluded from women's involvement and utilised titles or terms that were traditionally reserved for men. This portrayal of Wu Zetian as a strategic power broker challenges the simplistic view of female rulers as merely filling a power vacuum.[33]

In this drama, there is a captivating scene that vividly portrays Wu Zetian's determination to challenge gender norms and assert her power in a male-dominated society. The scene occurs during a grand imperial ceremony held in the majestic palace. As the camera pans across the opulent setting, we see a procession of high-ranking officials adorned in intricate robes towards the sacred altar. The air is filled with anticipation and reverence. Amidst the sea of male dignitaries, Wu Zetian stands tall and resolute, dressed in regal attire that exudes authority. She confidently steps forward, breaking the conventional boundaries set for women, and takes her place alongside the male officials. Her presence amidst the male officials is met with astonishment, admiration, and even resistance. Some men look on in awe at her audacity, recognising her as a formidable force challenging the status quo. Others exhibit scepticism and disapproval, struggling to accept a woman's involvement in such hallowed rituals. Nevertheless, Wu Zetian remains undeterred, radiating a commanding aura throughout the ceremony. Her actions inspire awe and respect from those witnessing her unyielding determination to break barriers and claim her place in a traditionally male-dominated sphere.

Chen Jialin's drama, in its portrayal of Wu Zetian, emerges as a formidable challenge to the deeply-rooted masculinist construal of sexual differences that has pervaded the works of preceding historians and certain male biographers, prominently exemplified by Lin Yutang and Yeling Yiren. When undertaking historical reinterpretations, these predominantly male-authored perspectives exhibit a marked proclivity towards privileging the scrutiny of Wu Zetian's personal history. This approach effectively confines her identity within the strictures of the Chinese ontological and philosophical framework, particularly the Yin-Yang paradigm, which has long served as a cornerstone for defining womanhood in Chinese cultural and intellectual traditions.

The focal point of their analysis is firmly centred on Wu Zetian's actions directed towards those within her immediate social and political milieu, as well as the manipulation strategies she employed to actualise her personal and political objectives. With a specific emphasis on her conduct within the private sphere of her life, these biographers accord her gender a preeminent role in their evaluative frameworks. Consequently, their accounts are disproportionately weighted towards her interpersonal relationships, thereby relegating her extraordinary governance of an expansive empire during a period widely acknowledged as one of the most resplendent in Chinese history to a secondary position.

Wu Zetian's substantial achievements in the realm of public influence, which have indubitably played a pivotal role in shaping the historical trajectory of China, have been persistently overshadowed by representations that depict her as a figure embodying ruthless and unrestrained exercise of authority. This one-dimensional and reductive portrayal perpetuates a long-standing Chinese cultural trope that posits women, upon attaining positions of power, as more likely to exhibit heightened levels of ruthlessness and diminished compassion in comparison to their male counterparts. Such a narrative not only distorts the multi-faceted complexity of Wu Zetian's character but also serves as a testament to the deeply ingrained gender biases that

have permeated historical and biographical discourses.

Chen Jialin's work, in contrast, disrupts this hegemonic narrative. Through a meticulous and comprehensive exploration of Wu Zetian's strategic acumen, her remarkable capacity to navigate and transform the intricate political landscape of her time, and her far-reaching contributions to cultural and economic development, it proffers a more holistic and nuanced perspective on her reign. This portrayal reveals that her rule was not merely a manifestation of power-hungry ambition but was, in fact, characterised by a series of far-reaching policies and initiatives that left an indelible mark on Chinese history.

Chen Jialin's research, which facilitates a re-evaluation of Wu Zetian, carries significant implications for the academic investigation of gender within the historical context. It challenges the traditional historiographical methodologies that have often marginalised, misrepresented, or oversimplified the experiences of women in positions of power. By presenting a more nuanced and context-sensitive portrayal of Wu Zetian, it compels historians to engage in a critical re-examination of the sources they utilise, the research questions they formulate, and the underlying assumptions they hold when reconstructing the lives of historical figures, especially those who defied conventional gender norms.

Furthermore, it possesses the capacity to motivate a new wave of scholars to explore the lives of other influential women throughout history, unearthing their hitherto obscured stories and contributions that have been consigned to the margins of historical memory by the weight of patriarchal bias. In this regard, Chen Jialin's work on Wu Zetian functions as a catalyst for a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of history. It underscores the importance of recognising the full spectrum of human experiences and the diverse ways in which individuals, irrespective of their gender, have actively participated in and shaped the course of

historical events. This, in turn, contributes to a more democratic and representative historical narrative that reflects the richness and complexity of the human past.

As a prominent figure within the esteemed Fifth Generation of Chinese directors, Li Shaohong has been at the forefront of revitalising Chinese cinema. Her body of work has garnered international acclaim, bringing Chinese stories and aesthetics to a global audience. In *Palace of Desire*, she undertakes a complex and nuanced portrayal of Wu Zetian. By exploring the multifaceted roles of Wu Zetian, as a romantic partner, spouse, mother, and female ruler, Li Shaohong provides a holistic view of a woman who defied the odds and shattered the glass ceiling of her time.

The drama's strength lies in its subtle yet powerful integration of feminist commentary. Every aspect of the production, from the meticulous craftsmanship of garments and accessories, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of material culture that reflects the gendered power dynamics of the time, to the harmonious musical accompaniment that sets the emotional tone, and the fluid camera movements that guide the viewer's gaze, work in concert to create a masterpiece centred around an independent and powerful female protagonist. Li Shaohong's adept use of language further amplifies the distinctly feminine perspective, allowing the audience to see the world through Wu Zetian's eyes.

Historically, Wu Zetian has been the subject of predominantly negative portrayals. Previous male-dominated interpretations often fixated on her private life and interpersonal relationships, overshadowing her remarkable achievements as a ruler. These portrayals frequently vilified her, presenting her as a ferocious, twisted, and insidious figure. For instance, her relationship with her children has been a focal point of such negative characterisations, with male writers[34] often blaming her for the deaths of her children and portraying her as lacking maternal instincts.

In *Palace of Desire*, a revolutionary and intellectually stimulating portrayal of Wu Zetian unfolds. Li Shaohong undertakes a bold reimagining enterprise. She reconceptualises Wu Zetian as an ancient 'general attack', a construct that, when contextualised within the multifaceted and intricate framework of Eva Cheuk-Yin Li's analysis of gender harmony, becomes a focal point of intense academic interrogation.

The 'general attack' archetype, a relatively novel and compelling concept in the field of character studies, denotes a character who is unreservedly self-assured. This self-assurance is not merely a superficial display of confidence but a profound, internalised conviction in one's competencies and self-worth. Such a character is also highly proactive, consistently seizing the initiative in diverse situations rather than passively awaiting the unfolding of circumstances. Moreover, when assuming leadership roles, they do so with unwavering resolve and without the slightest vestige of hesitation. In the context of *Palace of Desire*, Wu Zetian incarnates this concept. She deftly synthesises the assertive leadership attributes typically associated with the Yang principle in the Yin-Yang theory. The Yang principle, characterised by its active, dominant, and externally oriented nature, is palpable in Wu Zetian's decision-making processes, her political stratagems, and her capacity to command the deference of her subjects. Concurrently, she also exhibits the emotional profundity and nurturing qualities commonly associated with the Yin principle. The Yin principle, with its passive, receptive, and internally-oriented characteristics, is manifested in her tender solicitude for her daughter, Princess Taiping, and her empathetic comprehension of the populace's needs in specific instances.

This harmonious integration of the Yang and Yin qualities is perhaps most vividly and strikingly exemplified by Wu Zetian's audacious assertion of her right to have male concubines. Historically, this privilege was the exclusive prerogative of male emperors, firmly embedded in the patriarchal power edifice. This act is far from being a mere exercise of power. On a deeper level, it represents a resounding and bold

avowal of her personal desires, shattering the traditional gender binary. By daring to claim this right, Wu Zetian defies the one-sided and constrictive expectations that society has long imposed on women. She challenges the ingrained notion that a woman in a position of power must sacrifice her personal desires or conform to a narrow, essentialist definition of femininity. Instead, she demonstrates that a female ruler can be both politically and socially powerful and possess personal desires, thereby aligning precisely with Eva Li's concept of the harmonious integration of gender-associated traits. According to Li, true gender harmony is attained when individuals, irrespective of their gender, can embrace and express the full spectrum of qualities traditionally ascribed to the opposite gender.

Li Shaohong's portrayal of Wu Zetian as a 'general attack' has far-reaching ramifications. Firstly, it constitutes a direct and potent challenge to the patriarchal framework that has long subverted female leaders. For centuries, patriarchal societies have insisted that female leaders lack feminine virtues such as gentleness, nurturance, and emotional self-control. By presenting Wu Zetian as a complex character who melds strength with vulnerability, and leadership with compassion, Li Shaohong exposes the fallacy of this patriarchal argument. Secondly, this portrayal substantially facilitates a more nuanced comprehension of gender and power. It compels us to re-evaluate our preconceived notions about how gender intersects with power dynamics. In the traditional view, power has been predominantly associated with masculinity, while femininity has been relegated to a secondary and often submissive position. However, Wu Zetian's character in *Palace of Desire* effaces these boundaries, demonstrating that power can be expressed in diverse ways, both masculine and feminine.

It serves as a prime exemplar of how contemporary media can play a pivotal role in re-evaluating historical figures through the lens of modern feminist theories. By re-presenting Wu Zetian in this new light, Li Shaohong enables viewers and scholars

alike to transcend the traditional cultural and gender-based limitations that have long obfuscated our understanding of historical female figures. This not only enriches our historical knowledge but also furnishes invaluable insights for contemporary discussions regarding gender parity and the part women play in leadership roles. In the broader context of historical representation, such portrayals invite us to question the constructed nature of historical narratives and the ways in which gendered biases have shaped our understanding of the past. They also prompt us to consider how we can use media and popular culture as tools for challenging and redefining traditional gender norms in the present.

2.3 The Complex Interplay of Neo-Liberal Feminism, 'Post-feminist Masquerade', and Big Heroine Dramas

During the late 1990s and early 21st century, the initial phase of big heroine historical dramas centred on prominent legendary female regents, such as Wu Zetian. It is crucial to note that patriarchal power structures still exerted a significant influence on these productions, restricting the degree of their emancipatory potential. In 2012, a significant turning point emerged in Chinese big heroine dramas, notably with the emergence and wide dissemination of prominent works like *Empresses in the Palace* (Zheng Xiaolong, 2011, China). Zhao Hui, an associate professor at the Communication University of China, characterised this development as a pivotal moment for the genre of Chinese big heroine dramas.

In contrast to preceding historical big heroine dramas, the second stage of big heroine dramas, drawing inspiration from online literary creation, achieved a remarkable dual triumph in terms of viewership ratings and positive reception.

A plethora of drama series within the same genre followed suit. These included spin-offs from *Empresses in the Palace*, such as *Empresses in the Palace: The Legend of Miyue* (Zheng Xiaolong, 2015, China) and *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* (Wang Jun, 2018, China). Additionally, adaptations of online romantic big heroine fiction that had already attracted a substantial female audience, like *Princess Weiyoung* (Li Huizhu, 2016, China), *Ten Great III of Peach Blossom* (Lin Yufen, Yu Cuihua & Ren Haitao, 2017, China), and *Princess Agents* (Wu Jinyuan, 2017, China), contributed to this trend. Furthermore, *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (Ding Hei, 2017, China) also attracted a large social audience and critical attention.

These dramas showcase a diverse array of female protagonists whose life trajectories serve as the central narrative thread, extending beyond the experiences of political female regents. Set against imperial court backdrops, these characters navigate the

vicissitudes of fate and endure various tribulations, ultimately rising from low social status to positions of prominence by surviving in a ruthless court environment. Notable examples include Zhen Huan in *Empresses in the Palace*, Miyue in *Empresses in the Palace: The Legend of Miyue*, and Ruyi in *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*.

In martial-fantasy contexts, heroines triumph over conspiracies and competitions to become grandmasters of martial arts, as exemplified by Chuqiao in *Princess Agents*. The narratives within these plots resonate with contemporary neo-liberal ideals that reflect aspirations among young girls today; they are portrayed as highly adaptable to societal changes and capable of transforming themselves into empowered, flexible, creative, and resilient individuals. Furthermore, these stories engage with discourses surrounding aspiration linked to upward mobility as a universally desirable goal.

2.3.1 The Association and Constraints Between Big Heroine Dramas and Neoliberal Feminism

At first glance, big heroine dramas in China seem to bear a resemblance to Western neoliberal feminism in their narrative structures. Neoliberal feminism, with its emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, posits that women can attain success through their endeavours within competitive, market-like environments. In big heroine dramas, this is manifested as female characters surmounting numerous challenges and achieving upward social mobility. This framework aids our understanding of how female characters overcome challenges and attain upward mobility throughout these dramas. Such portrayals are not only a projection of contemporary ideals onto historical settings but also serve to attract modern audiences, especially young women, by presenting characters who embody self-improvement and independence.

Similar to neoliberal feminism itself, these dramas often gloss over structural and systemic issues that have been fundamental to the historical and social constraints faced by women throughout real-life history. By highlighting individual agency at the expense of broader social structures, they risk creating a false sense of empowerment, as if women's historical and contemporary struggles can be solely attributed to personal inadequacies rather than deeply rooted social, economic, and political inequalities.

However, a more in-depth critical analysis reveals significant limitations in this parallel. It is crucial to note that the concept of feminism in China, along with the neoliberal feminist narratives associated with big heroine dramas, diverges substantially from the ideals of neoliberal feminism prevalent in the West. In the Western setting, neoliberal feminism frequently defines female success as attaining a harmonious equilibrium between career and family (McRobbie, 2013, 2015;

Rottenberg, 2022). This Western-centred perspective neglects to consider the distinct socio-political context of China.

The governance framework of Chinese government, as Finch (cited in Rottenberg, 2022, p. 16) emphasises, contains elements of patriarchal authoritarianism. In response to what it perceives as threats from feminism, the state propaganda apparatus has been reviving certain traditional Confucian ideals regarding gender roles, women's status, and motherhood. This has a direct impact on big heroine dramas, which, despite their seemingly progressive narratives, continue to be influenced by and reflect these outdated and feudal notions of womanhood.

Chinese big heroine dramas are a complex synthesis of historiography and modern fiction, both grounded in neoliberal feminist ideals. Within these narratives, the lines dividing authenticity, fictionality, and the connection between the past and the present are intricately entangled. Feminism, in this context, attempts to mirror the contemporary experiences of empowered and independent women. However, authenticity, which is related to women's historical contexts, often suggests a historical reality marked by regression and hardship.

These dramas, while a form of historical re-enactment, exhibit a relatively lower commitment to historical accuracy compared to big heroine dramas based on what can be termed 'institutional historiography'. The latter ('institutional historiography') encompasses chronological records, classical literature, and modern historical novels, mostly written by men who prioritise fidelity to actual historical events. 'Institutional historiography' represents a more traditional, 'official' approach to historical representation, and the author uses this categorisation to distinguish between different types of history-based dramas.

The big heroine dramas under discussion here either adapt from the real-life stories of female figures, embellishing them with detailed plots to construct a modern-day success narrative for the neo-liberalist subject, or create a fictional dynasty where the political, cultural, and social modalities stand in metonymic relation to the real imperial dynasties of China. This creative approach, while offering a fresh perspective on female empowerment, also raises questions about the authenticity of the historical representation and the potential for reinforcing rather than challenging existing power structures.

In conclusion, while big heroine dramas may seem to promote a form of female empowerment inspired by neoliberal feminism, a more critical examination reveals their complex relationship with historical and contemporary gender issues, as well as their potential to inadvertently perpetuate certain gender-based stereotypes and power imbalances.

2.3.2 The Examination of Character Development and Gender Dynamics in Big Heroine Dramas from a Post-Feminist Perspective

The following section undertakes an in-depth examination using the perceptive framework of post-feminist theory. This theoretical framework, which has attracted substantial scholarly attention within the academic circles of Europe and America, warrants a more nuanced understanding. It is of utmost significance to recognise that the post-feminist perspective transcends the parochial boundaries of Western contexts and cultures. It holds profound relevance in diverse global settings, particularly when applied to the intricate analysis of Chinese big heroine dramas. Merely acknowledging its cross-cultural applicability is insufficient; we must delve into how it interacts with the unique socio-cultural fabric of China

This section embarks on a meticulous investigation into the multifaceted influence of the 'post-feminist masquerade' on the empowerment and representation of formidable female protagonists in Chinese big heroine dramas. By juxtaposing these dramas with contemporaneous works from Western countries, this thesis aims to not only dissect the nuances but also to unearth the underlying power dynamics of how the post-feminist paradigm operates within the Chinese cultural and dramatic landscape. Through a painstaking comparison of the representative qualities of these protagonists with those in similar international productions, this analysis endeavours to discern the complex ways in which big heroine dramas serve as a unique nexus where historical authenticity and modern-day realities not only converge or diverge but also create a dialectical tension that shapes the portrayal of femininity.

Furthermore, the section delves deeper into how neo-liberal feminism is articulated through the intricate lens of the 'masquerade' rhetoric. In the post-feminist era, the 'masquerade', which encompasses the performative or exaggerated enactment of femininity, is not a mere surface-level phenomenon. This examination probes into how the widespread yet often illusory belief in the attainment of gender equality

impacts women's self-presentation at a psychological and socio-cultural level. It also contemplates the far-reaching and often insidious repercussions of such performances on gender dynamics, individual identity construction, and societal expectations. For instance, does the 'masquerade' empower women by allowing them to subvert traditional gender norms, or does it inadvertently reinforce the very patriarchal structures it seemingly challenges?

In contrast to the institutional historiography-based narratives of earlier big heroine dramas, as elaborated in the previous section, a new echelon of fictional big heroine dramas has emerged. These dramas, birthed from contemporary female-authored and female-reader-oriented web fiction, signify a notable advancement in women's autonomous awareness. However, this advancement is not without its contradictions. While they are manifested through a kaleidoscope of female-centric narratives that traverse a wide gamut of themes, including eroticism, power dynamics, and personal development, with a heightened emphasis on articulating women's desires for love and passion, they also often fall prey to commercial and cultural constraints. Moreover, their trenchant critique of the victimisation and subjugation of women stemming from male desires may sometimes be overshadowed by the need to conform to market demands or traditional gender ideologies.

Since 2017, a fervent scholarly discourse has erupted around these big heroine dramas. The core of these debates, which primarily revolves around the question of whether these works can be deemed 'truly feminist' (Ying, 2020), reveals a deeper divide within the academic community. Scholars have espoused a spectrum of perspectives on this matter, with stances ranging from enthusiastic endorsement to vehement opposition. However, these binary positions often oversimplify the complex nature of these dramas.

On one hand, some scholars contend that these dramas are progressive. They posit

that the female heroines depicted therein serve as role models for autonomous and contemporary women. Ren, for instance, argues that although these narratives are set in imperial China and centre on palace intrigues, the portrayal of 'successful' women within these dramas mirrors the autonomy and industriousness of modern career-oriented females (2017, p. 102). Ren further notes that these dramas illustrate women's burgeoning capacity to act independently and their waning reliance on men, a phenomenon plausibly linked to their increased participation in the workforce. However, this view fails to consider that the very concept of 'independence' in these dramas may be framed within a neo-liberal capitalist paradigm that values individual achievement over collective empowerment. Additionally, the representation of women's romantic escapades with multiple heterosexual partners, while argued to be a strategic marketing ploy aimed at attracting a broader audience (Ren, 2017, p. 101), may also perpetuate heteronormative ideals and objectify women under the guise of empowerment.

Conversely, an alternative school of thought challenges Ren's argument. Scholars such as Brunsdon & Spiegel (2007) and Lei (2017) assert that these dramas lack the requisite progressiveness to be classified as 'feminist'. In her analysis, Lei (2017) attributes the shortcomings of these dramas to their portrayal of female characters as 'narcissistic' and possessing a quasi-independent nature. This characterisation is rooted in the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's worth is predominantly determined by her desirability within romantic relationships. While these critiques are valid, they may also overlook the subversive potential within these dramas. For example, even if female protagonists rely on male assistance, the nature of this reliance may be complex, and it could be a strategic adaptation within a patriarchal society rather than a complete submission. Moreover, the adversarial roles assigned to other women may be a reflection of the limited narrative space available within the genre rather than a deliberate reinforcement of misogyny.

These debates underscore the fact that fictional big heroine dramas incorporate elements of historiography and neo-liberal storytelling. As a result, they are more modern and progressive than their first-stage counterparts. However, the concept of 'progressiveness' is not as straightforward as it seems. In comparison to big heroine dramas predominantly grounded in 'institutional historiography', those based on online fiction exhibit a more pronounced sense of 'progressiveness'. This concept of 'progressiveness' is deeply embedded within the constraints of a linear historical narrative, which erects a hierarchical structure between the old and the new, as well as between backwardness and progressivism. Such dynamics have indelibly shaped the contours of Chinese feminist discourse, but they also risk creating a false dichotomy that ignores the hybridity and complexity of these dramas.

The term 'progressive' has undergone a semantic evolution during the neo-liberal era. In this context, progressive women are characterised by traits such as independence, competitiveness, pragmatism, ambition, and the ability to maintain an appealing appearance while achieving career success through personal effort. These attributes closely align with the key tenets of neo-liberal feminism. McRobbie posits that neo-liberalism accentuates individualisation and equates female success with an illusory sense of control over life's challenges (McRobbie, 2015, p. 4). From this vantage point, Chinese big heroine dramas exemplify a narrative model that is reflective of neo-liberal feminism. However, this alignment also raises questions about the nature of empowerment in these dramas. Is it a genuine form of empowerment that challenges the status quo, or is it a co-opted version that serves the interests of capitalism and patriarchy?

Nevertheless, this thesis urges extreme caution against adopting a monolithic perspective. It emphasises the distinct representation of independent female figures in Chinese big heroine dramas when compared to the ideals of neoliberal feminism prevalent in the West. For example, a quintessential notion within neoliberal

feminism is the pursuit of a balance between family and career (McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2022). A prime illustration is Alicia Florrick from the American drama *The Good Wife* (Charles McDougall, 2009, the United States). As the wife of a politician, she spent thirteen years as a housewife. Following her husband's imprisonment, she re-entered the workforce as a defence attorney. Endowed with remarkable inner strength and exceptional skills, she deftly manoeuvres through high-intensity work environments marked by long hours and fierce competition. Her meticulously curated outfits and confident demeanour resonate favourably with the audience. Although she occasionally grapples with achieving work-family equilibrium, Alicia ultimately manages to surmount these challenges successfully. Her relationship with her two children is amicable and founded on trust, positioning her as an emerging icon for female fulfilment, values, and liberation. However, Alicia's narrative is also a product of Western cultural and social norms, and it may not be directly applicable to the Chinese context. In Chinese big heroine dramas, the concept of female success is often influenced by a complex interplay of traditional Chinese values, modernisation, and gender politics, which may not necessarily prioritise the family-career balance in the same way.

Alicia Florrick serves as an illustration of the Western ideal associated with neo-liberal feminism, where female success is often equated with achieving a balance between family responsibilities and professional aspirations. By using this American television character, one can contrast her with portrayals of female characters in Chinese big heroine dramas. In these Chinese narratives, concepts of female success often deviate from the model that emphasises family-career balance. Highlighting Alicia's character arc in *The Good Wife* effectively clarifies the differences in how neo-liberal feminism is manifested in Western and Chinese cultural and dramatic contexts. However, this comparison should not be seen as a simple binary opposition but rather as an opportunity to explore the hybridity and complexity of gender representation across different cultures.

Notably, the Chinese version of neo-liberal feminism shows a less positive attitude towards marriage and the self-sacrificing aspects of womanhood. This antagonism is closely related to the patriarchal authoritarianism that is a crucial basis for the Chinese government's governance. However, this view may be too simplistic. In response to state-level opposition to feminism, the state propaganda apparatus has sought to revive certain Confucian norms related to femininity, womanhood, and motherhood. These norms often cast women in the roles of obedient wives and dedicated reproducers of patrilineal descendants, relegating their personal aspirations and professional ambitions to secondary status. The portrayal of heterosexual romantic love in Chinese big heroine dramas further exemplifies the persistence of regressive and patriarchal notions of femininity. However, it is equally important to observe that these dramas might incorporate subversive components which question these norms, albeit in a subtle manner.

For instance, in *Empresses in the Palace*, Zhen Huan's emotional journey serves as a poignant illustration of this phenomenon. Her initial innocent yearning for love, followed by her profound devotion to Emperor Yongzheng, culminates in her eventual disillusionment upon realising that she is merely a substitute for the Emperor's affections. This narrative unfolds within the confines of a patriarchal system. The unexpected miscarriage, her exile to Mandew Temple[35], and her subsequent affair with the King of Guojun further complicate her story, highlighting the intricate interplay between love, power, and gender within the drama. However, Zhen Huan's actions also demonstrate her agency within the constraints of the system. Her attempt to assert control over her sexual relationships, although limited by the patriarchal framework, shows a form of resistance that should not be overlooked.

Zhen Huan evinces a desire to challenge the limitations imposed by her marginalised status as 'the other' (the Emperor's concubine) and seeks to assert control over sexual

relationships. By engaging in a liaison with the King of Guojun, she endeavours to redefine her subjectivity and achieve parity with men in matters of sexuality. However, despite the evolution of her emotional experiences, Zhen Huan ultimately finds herself ensnared by the societal expectations imposed on women within a patriarchal framework, fulfilling the roles of an obedient wife and a dedicated bearer of patrilineal descendants[36]. This tension between her desire for autonomy and her subjugation to societal norms highlights the complexity of female identity in a patriarchal society.

Regarding the case of Zhen Huan, there exists a prevalent misinterpretation suggesting that while pregnant with an illegitimate child fathered by the King of Guojun at the temple, she returned to the palace by seducing Emperor Yongzheng and subsequently deceiving him about her child's paternity a month later. However, this interpretation diverges from the original narrative. In fact, the child she carried upon her return to the palace was indeed Emperor Yongzheng's. This misinterpretation not only distorts the character's agency but also reflects the broader cultural biases that often shape our understanding of female characters in historical dramas.

Her return was precipitated by a convoluted web of political intrigue, personal ambition, and strategic manoeuvring. Driven by her desire to escape the desolation and hardships of temple life and to secure a future for herself and her unborn child, Zhen Huan's journey back to the imperial palace serves as a vivid microcosm of the intricate power struggles, convoluted love-hate relationships, and harsh realities endured by women within the feudal harem. This narrative arc not only highlights individual struggles experienced by a female protagonist but also reflects broader social and cultural constraints imposed on women in a patriarchal society. It underscores the complex interplay between gender, power, and identity.

Joan Riviere's concept of masquerade posits that women may adopt a guise, often

characterised by exaggerated femininity or other forms of performance, as a means of both conforming to and subverting gender expectations within a patriarchal society. Characters such as Zhen Huan and similar Chinese female protagonists can be interpreted as embodiments of this masquerade. They project an image of strength and sexual assertiveness, which ostensibly deviates from the traditional submissive role assigned to women in heterosexual relationships. This initial appearance of challenging gender norms is compelling, as it contradicts long-established cultural expectations regarding female docility.

Angela McRobbie further enriches this analysis. McRobbie has examined how women navigate and resist gender norms within various cultural and media contexts. In the case of Zhen Huan, the masquerade she adopts may appear to function as a form of resistance; her assertiveness seemingly allows her to carve out space for herself within a male-dominated imperial court. However, McRobbie also underscores the complexity inherent in such acts of resistance. The fact that Zhen Huan's strategies for survival, prosperity, and contentment are contingent upon her sexuality complicates the narrative surrounding female empowerment.

Zhen Huan employs her sexual allure to capture the Emperor's attention, a crucial step in her ascent within the harem hierarchy. Her ability to captivate him through sexual means grants her access to resources and confers a certain status upon her. Nevertheless, this reliance on sexuality is deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures; women's sexuality has historically been commodified and utilised as an instrument of control within such systems. Thus, Zhen Huan's strategic use of her sexuality can be viewed more accurately as an adaptation rather than a genuine challenge to these systemic constraints. McRobbie would likely argue that genuine empowerment necessitates a more profound transformation in the existing power dynamics. This shift would require the establishment of a system in which women are recognised and valued for their skills, intelligence, and contributions, extending beyond mere sexual

appeal.

This phenomenon aligns with post-structuralist interpretations of gender being a socially constructed concept. However, it simultaneously perpetuates a harmful fallacy: the reduction of a woman's value to her sexual attributes. In doing so, it reinforces the deeply entrenched cultural association between womanhood and sexual appeal within media representations. This reinforcement serves to sustain and reproduce the patriarchal power structure by confining women to roles primarily defined by their sexual desirability, thereby limiting their agency and subjectivity.

Building on Rosalind Gill's (2017) influential work on post-feminist media culture, the transition from being passive objects of the masculine gaze to engaging in self-objectification does not inherently result in achieving true subjectivity. In contexts such as dramas like *Empresses in the Palace*, self-objectification, characterised by the deliberate emphasis on feminine attributes, particularly within a sexualised framework, often engenders a misleading sense of liberation. The narrative surrounding gender relations in these dramas is typified by recurring motifs such as 'women hurt women' and 'men help women', which are deeply rooted in patriarchal discourse. This not only solidifies women's status as objects of male desire and social manipulation but also naturalises and reproduces existing power imbalances between genders, relegating women to positions of relative subordination.

The method under discussion is not a novel concept but rather a long-standing practice known as the 'masquerade', which involves the performance of femininity. Firstly, it is crucial to emphasise that the Chinese female protagonists in question are portrayed as strong-willed individuals (like Zhen Huan) who openly express and consciously acknowledge their bold sexual desires within heterosexual relationships. However, it is crucial to recognise that their primary means of achieving survival, prosperity, and contentment lies in their sexuality or their ability to charm others

through sexual allure.[37]

The presence of seemingly transgressive female protagonists and the portrayal of ostensibly equitable gender dynamics in big heroine dramas can be understood as manifestations of the dominant influence of male discourse on female perspectives. These depictions are ultimately shaped by the power dynamics inherent in traditional Confucian values and patriarchal systems (Kang, 2018).

In addition to assuming roles as rescuers, male characters frequently take on positions as mentors to the primary female protagonists. However, this does not mean that these dramas are entirely without subversive potential. There may be instances where female characters challenge the authority of male mentors or rescuers, offering a more complex and nuanced view of gender relations.

As an illustration, in another historical big heroine drama, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, Zhou Ying is portrayed as having a paternal figure but lacking a maternal presence. This narrative choice implies that her life experiences will likely be influenced and mainly relayed through interactions with her father or other male characters. Various individuals influence Zhou Yin's character development throughout her life. Her adoptive father, Zhou Laosi, plays a significant role in shaping her kind-hearted, righteous, and straightforward nature. Her husband, Wu Pin, also provides guidance on interpersonal relationships and ethical conduct, which deeply resonates with Zhou Ying. Furthermore, her father-in-law, Wu Weiwen, imparts valuable lessons on the importance of integrity in business. All of these factors (the company and the assistance of these male figures) contributed to laying a solid foundation for her potential to achieve legendary status in the business community of Qing Dynasty China. However, Zhou Ying's success should not be solely attributed to male influence. Her own agency, resilience, and unique personality characteristics also play an important role in her journey, and these aspects should be given more attention in

the analysis.

Therefore, despite the seemingly independent portrayal of women, these big heroine dramas featuring heroines reinforce the perception of women as dependent on men. This is mainly achieved through the emphasis on their feminine traits and sexual beauty, presenting a notion of liberation that is merely a façade rather than genuine freedom. However, it is essential to approach these dramas with a more nuanced and critical eye, recognising both their limitations and their potential for challenging and transforming gender norms in Chinese society.

2.3.3 The Dilemma in Chinese Big Heroine Dramas: From the Absence of Feminism to the Disguise of Post-Feminism

In the landscape of Chinese media, big heroine dramas have emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon. However, they are entangled in a complex dilemma, characterised by the absence of genuine feminist representation and the presence of a post-feminist disguise. The following part aims to delve into this intricate issue, exploring how traditional values, market dynamics, and political and social factors shape the portrayal of women in these dramas. Through a meticulous analysis of the scholarly contributions of eminent researchers and in-depth examination of specific case studies, it will be shown that although Chinese big heroine dramas may project an appearance of female empowerment on the surface, they, in fact, serve to reinforce the underlying patriarchal structures rather than subvert them.

Previous research, notably the works of Dai Jinhua (2002) and Wang Zheng (2017), has illuminated the ingrained impact of traditional values, particularly Confucianism, on the representation of women in Chinese media and online literature. Their studies, firmly rooted in the Chinese cultural and media context, offer a nuanced understanding of how these values interact with contemporary portrayals of women. Unlike Western feminist frameworks, which are shaped by different cultural and historical trajectories, Dai and Wang's research provides context-specific analyses that enrich the global feminist discourse.

Dai Jinhua's research (2002) reveals the contradictory nature of women's representation in Chinese media. On one hand, women are depicted as empowered and desirable figures. For example, in the case of big heroine dramas, female protagonists may exhibit qualities of strength and independence. On the other hand, their agency is often circumscribed by traditional gender expectations. The emphasis on feminine traits and physical beauty in these portrayals perpetuates the notion that a woman's worth is largely determined by her conformity to societal beauty and

femininity standards. This not only objectifies women but also reinforces restrictive gender norms.

Wang Zheng's work (2017) further explores the historical context that has contributed to the persistence of traditional gender norms in Chinese media. The lack of a robust feminist movement and widespread feminist awareness in Chinese history has led to the marginalisation of feminist viewpoints. As a result, media representations continue to reproduce stereotypical images of women, creating a cycle of limited representation that upholds patriarchal values. The absence of feminist initiatives has hindered the development of alternative narratives that could challenge these norms, leaving Chinese media trapped in a dichotomy of superficial empowerment and underlying constraints. This paradoxical representation highlights the urgent need for increased feminist awareness and advocacy within Chinese society to confront and reshape prevailing gender dynamics.

The concept of masquerade, as it applies to the portrayal of women in Chinese media, symbolises a false or inauthentic depiction of femininity. It serves as a strategy for women to gain certain advantages and a sense of liberation, albeit a limited one. In Chinese big heroine dramas, heroines may appear to possess self-awareness and a strong personal identity. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that these attributes are often strategic manoeuvres rather than genuine expressions of self. For instance, female characters frequently use their appearance, charm, and sexuality as tools to navigate social situations and achieve their goals. While this may seem empowering on the surface, it validates the notion that a woman's value lies in her ability to manipulate others through physical attributes. The so-called self-awareness and personal identity of these heroines are often illusory, as they are framed within the constraints of societal expectations and patriarchal norms.

McRobbie (2009) argues that the 'post-feminist masquerade' posits a novel

incarnation of gender power dynamics that serves to uphold heterosexual conventions and solidify male dominance. When considering Chinese big heroine dramas, while post-feminist heroines ostensibly acquire a certain degree of autonomy via professional progress, such as Zhen Huan's rise to the position of Empress Dowager in *Empresses in the Palace* and Zhou Ying's business success in *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, and emotional independence. However, this agency is not achieved by subverting the patriarchal social order but rather by conforming to it in a strategic way. Women's pursuit of 'self-perfection', when framed as an individual choice rather than a result of patriarchal influence, is both associated with feminism and caters to masculine admiration.

The portrayal of female protagonists in Chinese big heroine television texts often employs a form of 'calculated' pro-woman rhetoric within the framework of post-feminism. This rhetoric involves the strategic use of language and narrative to ostensibly promote women's rights and empowerment. However, it often serves as a superficial gesture aimed at appealing to an audience interested in female empowerment without truly challenging the underlying patriarchal structures.

For instance, a drama may feature a female protagonist who attains success but does so primarily by conforming to traditional gender-based expectations indirectly. The pro-woman statements embedded within the narrative tend to focus more on crafting a marketable image of female strength rather than advocating for authentic gender equality. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Western strong women figures characterised by a liberal post-feminist style. Thus, from the perspective of textual analysis, these characters appear powerful; moreover, they act and perceive themselves as strong and empowered women. Nevertheless, it is important to note that post-feminist discourse ultimately undermines their agency.

Dosekun (2015) posits that although the mobility of post-feminist culture and

sensibility is indeed a recognisable phenomenon, it remains predominantly circumscribed within specific national contexts, state boundaries, and discursive and practical frameworks. Consequently, when embarking on an inquiry into the diffusion of post-feminist discourse within the Chinese context, particularly in the intricate realm of big heroine dramas, it is essential to situate this discussion within the broader paradigm of Chinese culture and the diverse socio-political dynamics at play.

The cinematic depiction of strong women in contemporary Chinese post-feminist media is a complex phenomenon that demands consideration of a multitude of factors, which can, to a certain extent, elucidate the adoption of a 'post-feminist masquerade' strategy. Analogous to the situations in the United States and other Western nations, China's television and film industries encounter formidable challenges in presenting robust female characters in their programming that can effectively captivate and appeal to their target audiences (Thornham & Feng, 2012). It is crucial to underscore, however, that China's social and cultural milieu diverges significantly from that of Western countries in several key aspects, and these disparities have the potential to exert a profound influence on how strong and powerful female portrayals are received and perceived within the realm of mass media.

First and foremost, traditional Chinese attitudes and values wield a substantial influence over the depiction of women in the media. Despite the remarkable and rapid transformations that Chinese society has undergone in recent times, conventional notions of family and deeply ingrained gender role stereotypes continue to persist. In this particular context, portrayals of powerful women often necessitate a departure from traditional gender paradigms within the media landscape to attain recognition not only within the confines of familial structures but also within the broader social fabric. Consequently, the representations of strong and transgressive female characters in television programs and films must be rendered with a high degree of nuance, which is essential to effectively address the evolving expectations of modern

audiences while simultaneously demonstrating respect for traditional values.

Secondly, China's market environment and the diverse composition of its audience demographics assume a crucial function in constructing the depiction of strong female characters within media narratives. Amidst the rapid and continuous expansion of the Chinese economic landscape, there has been a notable increase in the diversity of consumer groups, accompanied by a growing emphasis on individual needs. Moreover, media creators are tasked with the imperative of accurately discerning and understanding audience preferences to ensure that the female characters they present resonate meaningfully with various segments of their viewership. For instance, younger audiences tend to exhibit a predilection for modern, independent, and autonomous female figures. In contrast, for more traditional viewer demographics, greater attention must be paid to the manner in which family and social roles are portrayed, as these elements hold significant importance in their perception and appreciation of the media content.

Furthermore, political and social issues also have a discernible impact on the acceptance of empowered female portrayals in the media. In China, the government exercises a certain degree of censorship and regulation over media content, and this regulatory oversight can impose restrictions on character development and plot arrangements, particularly when dealing with politically sensitive topics. Simultaneously, public opinion and societal values serve as additional influencing factors, indirectly shaping the way in which strong female characters are presented and received within media programs.

In summary, within the contemporary Chinese media landscape, the representation of strong female characters is intricately intertwined with the influences of traditional concepts, market-driven demands, and a plethora of political and social factors. These elements create a complex web that media creators, such as online screenwriters and

directors, must navigate. Only by comprehensively considering these diverse elements can they successfully develop strong female characters that seamlessly embody both modernity and tradition. This requires a delicate balance between respecting long-standing cultural values and meeting the evolving expectations of audiences in a rapidly changing society.

It is worth noting, however, that for directors and scriptwriters who produce content specifically for online platforms, the constraints associated with the portrayal of heroines may exhibit slight variations compared to those in other media contexts. These differences in constraints could offer one possible and alternative avenue for more empowered representations of women.

2.3.4 Post-Feminist Ideals and Constraints: Female Characters in Chinese Digital Media's Big Heroine Dramas

The digital age has ushered in a revolutionary transformation within China's cultural and creative spheres, with far-reaching and complex implications for gender representation and the advancement of female empowerment. This evolution is most prominently manifested in the flourishing domain of online literature and its symbiotic relationship with the production and reception of big heroine dramas, a relationship that both reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards gender.

The emergence of the internet in China over the past few decades has been a seismic shift, disrupting traditional paradigms of identity formation. The digital realm's characteristic anonymity has eroded the significance of conventional identity markers such as nationality, age, sexual orientation, and occupation. In this virtual space, the once-rigid binary framework of gender has become increasingly permeable. Drawing on Judith Butler's seminal post-structuralist feminist theory, which posits that gender is a performative construct (Butler, 2017), cyberspace has emerged as an unparalleled arena for women to re-imagine and reconstruct their gender identities. This not only challenges the long-standing belief in fixed gender roles but also opens up new possibilities for self-expression and empowerment.

Through various digital means, including avatars, online personas, and discursive practices in online interactions, women are empowered to liberate themselves from the constraints of traditional gender norms. For instance, in the realm of online role-playing games, female players can assume male-coded roles, exhibiting traits like aggression and leadership that have been historically associated with masculinity in the real world. This act of subversion not only questions the very foundations of gender essentialism but also underscores the malleability of gender identity in the digital age. It underscores the potential for a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of gender, wherein individuals are not confined by the limitations

imposed by biological sex or societal expectations.

The relatively liberal creative environment of online platforms has provided a rich environment conducive to the development of more radical and innovative female characters compared to traditional media formats. Freed from the limitations imposed by conventional publishing gatekeepers, online novelists have the freedom to craft heroines who boldly reject the constrictive boundaries of traditional gender roles. These characters represent a significant departure from the superficial and commodified versions of female empowerment often propagated in post-feminist discourse. Instead of being relegated to mere objects of desire or vessels for traditional feminine virtues, they are depicted as complex individuals with their agency, desires, and flaws.

Instead, they offer a more profound and nuanced vision of female empowerment that transcends the existing power structures. They eschew the traditional metrics of female worth, such as marriage and motherhood, in favour of pursuing their careers, dreams, and personal growth. Portrayed as complex individuals with agency, desires, and flaws, these female characters provide a more authentic representation of women. By offering a more profound and nuanced vision of female empowerment, these characters not only enrich the literary landscape but also provide a rich source of material for film and television adaptations. These adaptations possess the capacity to engage a broader audience and significantly shape cultural perceptions of gender on a more extensive scale.

Big heroine dramas often draw their intricate and multi-dimensional narratives from the diverse storylines shared on online platforms. Internet fiction plays a central and indispensable role in this process, serving as either the foundational source material or a wellspring of inspiration for adaptation. It enables the creation of innovative narratives that often deviate significantly from the conventional historical portrayals,

offering fresh perspectives on female experiences and challenges.

This medium also provides a unique and inclusive platform for female-authored and female-reader-oriented content. By doing so, it has the potential to foster a rich tapestry of diverse perspectives on female autonomy, self-awareness, and the reimagining of gender roles. The accessibility and interactivity inherent in internet culture play a crucial role in nurturing and expanding fan communities. These communities, in turn, exert a significant and far-reaching influence on the popularity and dissemination of these stories, shaping the way they are received and interpreted by audience.

However, the process of adapting online novels into dramas featuring strong female leads is fraught with numerous challenges, often resulting in significant modifications to the original characters. Directors and screenwriters often tone down the radical portrayals of female leads in the original novels. A pertinent example is the adaptation of *The Princess Agents* from the online novel *The 11th Secret Service Princess*. In the original text, Chu Qiao is portrayed as a cold-blooded and vengeful individual, exemplified by her act of pushing Song Dalang into an ice-covered lake and ensuring his demise by throwing stones. Conversely, in the television adaptation, Chu Qiao is re-imagined as a paragon of kindness.

This can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, there is a need to promote positive values that align with the moral and cultural ethos of contemporary Chinese society. Characters with extreme or morally ambiguous traits may be seen as conflicting with the prevailing public moral sensibilities. Secondly, in order to attract a broader audience, including those who are unfamiliar with the original work, the characters are often made more relatable and morally upright. While these alterations may be strategic in terms of expanding viewership and commercial success, they also raise questions about the authenticity of female empowerment in these adaptations.

Online novels and their adapted female-themed dramas have a profound influence on audience perceptions. If these adaptations can preserve and even enhance the subversive elements of the original female characters, they have the potential to challenge the prevailing post-feminist narrative paradigm. When a female character in a drama not only achieves success in a male-dominated field but also actively confronts and challenges systemic gender discrimination within that context, it can spark deeper public discourse about the true nature of female empowerment. This approach has the potential to transcend the limitations of post-feminist media representations, which often focus narrowly on individual accomplishments while neglecting the underlying structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities.

In the highly competitive neo-liberal media environment, freelancers, especially screenwriters, are significantly influenced by post-feminist ideology. Many screenwriters infuse their works with a celebration of individualism, implicitly supporting meritocratic ideals. The belief that through passion and hard work, an individual can achieve success is a common theme in many strong female-led dramas, as evidenced by the prevalence of the 'counter-offensive scenarios' trope. While this narrative may resonate with the post-feminist emphasis on personal achievement and choice, it also reflects the aspirations of many contemporary Chinese women who strive for success in their own lives. However, it is significant to notice that this focus on individualism can sometimes overshadow the collective struggles and structural barriers that women face.

In response to the demands of the digital economy, many screenwriters have even redefined feminism to align more closely with post-feminist values, emphasising individualism and personal choice. While this strategy may open up more opportunities for commissions and a wider audience, it often comes at the cost of diluting the more radical and transformative aspects of traditional feminism. It risks

reducing feminism to a mere consumer product, rather than a movement for social change that addresses systemic inequalities.

From the perspectives of post-feminism and cyber-feminism, the Internet has emerged as a powerful platform for Chinese women to challenge the deeply ingrained patriarchal systems that have long hindered their access to educational opportunities, career advancement, and social participation. The global reach and relative freedom of online expression enable Chinese women to engage with feminist ideas and movements worldwide, facilitating the sharing of experiences, the exchange of ideas, and the mobilisation for gender equality.

However, within this digital landscape, Chinese female figures who dare to defy societal norms may encounter what Liao Jiayao describes as 'mimetic mirroring and reverse transcendence' (2018, p. 119; p. 135). In adapted historical or biographical dramas with strong female protagonists, this concept becomes particularly relevant. Driven by mass culture and the pursuit of consumer attention, these dramas create a mimetic environment that appears historically accurate. However, the female mirror images in these narratives often deviate from both contemporary social realities and historical contexts. They exist within a carefully constructed mimetic time and space, where the elevation of women's status is often a form of satire.

For example, in some historical dramas, female characters may achieve high positions of power, but their actions and the overall narrative are often framed within the existing patriarchal power structure. This creates a sense of 'reverse transcendence' as it forces viewers to confront the gap between the representation of female empowerment in the drama and the reality of gender inequality in society. It prompts self-reflection and a more insightful perception of the complexities of gender relations, highlighting the need for more authentic and transformative representations of women in media.

The era of digital technology has ushered in substantial transformations in the portrayal of women within Chinese big heroine dramas. While there are opportunities for more radical and empowering portrayals of female characters, there are also challenges and limitations. The influence of post-feminist ideology, the imperatives of the market, and the need to conform to societal values all shape the way female characters are depicted in these dramas. To truly advance female empowerment, it is essential to critically examine these representations and strive for more authentic and transformative portrayals that challenge the existing power structures and promote gender equality.

Conclusion

The investigation into Chinese big heroine dramas unfolds as a profound exploration of the intricate intersections among gender, history, culture, and media in modern Chinese society. This research not only illuminates the multifaceted representations of female empowerment within these dramas but also delves into the theoretical frameworks that underpin them, thereby making a contribution to a more all-encompassing comprehension of gender relations in Chinese popular culture.

Traditional Chinese literary and historical texts were saturated with gender bias, firmly rooted in the Confucian-inspired patriarchal ideology. The Yin-Yang theory, when co-opted into the Confucian value system, became a cornerstone for justifying the subordination of women. Concepts like the 'three bonds' further institutionalised gender inequality, confining women to predefined roles and subjecting those who deviated to the label of 'unwoman'. However, the advent of big heroine dramas has signalled a paradigm shift. These dramas serve as a medium through which historical female figures, once marginalised or misrepresented, are being reclaimed. Female regents, who were often scapegoated for dynastic declines in traditional historiography, are now being re-examined from a more empathetic and nuanced perspective. This re-evaluation transcends a mere academic exercise; it serves as a cultural reclamation that offers a corrective perspective on the historically entrenched male-centric narratives. It also serves as a testament to the power of popular culture in revisiting and reinterpreting the past, thereby challenging the established historical canons and offering alternative perspectives on female agency in pre-modern China.

The evolution of the big heroine genre is closely linked with the fluidity of gender identity as well as the notion of androgyny. Early portrayals of female characters, such as the 'masculine woman' stereotype, were simplistic attempts to represent female empowerment, reducing it to a mimicry of masculine traits. However, the emergence of the 'general attack' concept, borrowed from the aestheticism (Danmei)

discourse, has revolutionised the way female viewers perceive and define themselves. This concept has transcended its literary origins and permeated various forms of media, from web TV series to the self-presentation of female celebrities. It represents a departure from the binary understanding of gender, enabling women to embrace a more complex and multi-dimensional identity. The 'general attack' is not just a term but a cultural phenomenon that mirrors the increasing self-consciousness and agency of contemporary Chinese women. It challenges the traditional gender roles that have long restricted female expression and participation, opening up new possibilities for female identity construction within the mainstream cultural context.

The reimagining of historical figures, particularly Wu Zetian, in cinematic and televisual works, has been a focal point of feminist intervention. In the 1990s, directors like Zhang Yimou attempted to introduce Wu Zetian to a global audience, grappling with the challenge of presenting a complex historical figure within a patriarchal-influenced narrative framework. Later, directors such as Chen Jialin and Li Shaohong took a more radical approach. Chen Jialin's portrayal of Wu Zetian disrupted the traditional Yin-Yang dichotomy, presenting a female figure who defied the established gender norms by embodying masculine qualities while remaining firmly within the female identity. Li Shaohong, on the other hand, re-imagined Wu Zetian as an ancient 'general attack', a character who seamlessly integrated the assertive leadership of the Yang principle with the emotional depth of the Yin principle. These portrayals not only challenge the traditional historiographical perspectives but also make contributions to a more subtle and intricate comprehension of gender dynamics and the distribution of power. They serve as a powerful example of how media can be used to reclaim historical female figures, presenting them as agents of change rather than passive victims or villains of history.

Big heroine dramas exhibit a complex relationship with neo-liberal feminism and the 'post-feminist masquerade'. On one hand, they share some similarities with Western

neo-liberal feminism, portraying female characters who achieve upward mobility through their own efforts in a competitive environment. This narrative resonates with the aspirations of contemporary young women, presenting a vision of self-improvement and independence. However, the Chinese context, marked by the state's influence and the revival of traditional Confucian ideals, has led to a divergence from Western neo-liberal feminism. The 'post-feminist masquerade' is evident in these dramas, where female characters may appear empowered on the surface but often rely on strategies that reinforce patriarchal norms, such as using their sexuality for survival or success. The debates surrounding the 'feminist' nature of these dramas highlight the tension between the appearance of female empowerment and the underlying structural inequalities. These dramas are a site of negotiation between modern feminist ideals and traditional gender ideologies, reflecting the complex sociopolitical and cultural landscape of contemporary China.

The digital age has had a profound impact on the representation of female heroines in costume big heroine dramas. The anonymity and interactivity of the digital realm have provided a platform for women to experiment with and redefine their gender identities. Online novels, in particular, have become a breeding ground for more radical and innovative female characters. These figures frequently spurn conventional gender norms and strive for their own aspirations and individual development. However, the adaptation of these online novels into dramas is a complex process. Directors and screenwriters often modify the original characters to conform to mainstream values and attract a wider audience. While this may limit the radical potential of the original works, when successfully adapted, these dramas have the power to challenge the post-feminist narrative that often reduces female empowerment to individual achievements. The digital realm also enables Chinese women to engage with global feminist ideas, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective action. It functions as a potent instrument for confronting the patriarchal frameworks that have, throughout history, circumscribed women's prospects, not only

within China but also on a global scale.

In summary, Chinese big heroine dramas are a rich and complex cultural phenomenon that reflects the ongoing struggle for female empowerment in contemporary Chinese society. They represent a locus of negotiation between tradition and modernity, between historical legacies and contemporary aspirations. While they have made significant progress in challenging traditional gender norms and redefining female identity, they also face challenges in fully transcending the post-feminist masquerade and addressing the underlying structural inequalities. As China continues to progress and transform, these dramas will undoubtedly make a crucial contribution to shaping the narrative around gender equality. They are influenced by a wide range of factors, encompassing historical progressions, cultural subtleties, socio-political upheavals, and technological breakthroughs. Prospective investigations could delve even deeper into examining how these dramas affect various audiences, the part played by media industries in creating gender-oriented content, and the possibility for these dramas to make contributions to more extensive social metamorphoses.

Chapter 3: Female Ghosts and Spirits in Literature, Classic Horror Films, and Contemporary Magic Cinema

Introduction

The figure of the transgressive female ghost and spirit within the Chinese literary and cinematic canon serves as a critical intersection for the subversion of deeply entrenched cultural, gender, and moral paradigms. This phenomenon transcends mere fantastical tropes; it represents a multifaceted cultural construct that has evolved over centuries, reflecting the dynamic social, political, and ideological landscapes of Chinese society.

In the early chronicles of Chinese literary heritage, within texts rich with the opulent mythological traditions of ancient China, the seeds of a transgressive female spirit were sown. These early manifestations often emerged from the fertile ground of animistic beliefs and shamanistic practices, where the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, the living and the dead, were fluid. For example, in ancient legends, certain female spirits associated with natural elements like rivers or mountains could intervene in human affairs in ways that defied the expected order. These early portrayals, while primitive in their narrative sophistication, laid the foundation for the more complex and nuanced transgressive figures to come.

As Chinese literature matured, especially during the imperial eras, the transgressive female ghost became a potent symbol within the literary imagination. Works written by Pu Songling provided a rich tapestry of stories featuring female ghosts who transgressed in multiple ways. Some pursued romantic liaisons with human men, defying the strictures of propriety and the afterlife's supposed separation from the mortal realm. Others exacted revenge on those who had wronged them in life, challenging the established moral and legal hierarchies that often failed to provide justice for women. These literary portrayals served as a veiled critique of the patriarchal structures that confined women to subordinate roles, both in life and in the

afterlife as imagined by traditional Chinese culture.

The advent of cinema in China brought about a new dimension to the representation of the transgressive female ghost. It is crucial to clarify that in the exploration of this particular aspect, the focus here is on Hong Kong cinema, or coproduction work between mainland China and Hong Kong, rather than cinema from the mainland of China. Hong Kong cinema holds a unique and prominent position in contemporary film studies. It has its own distinct style, diverse range of themes, and innovative means of expression, providing a rich trove of materials for research. Throughout the development of Hong Kong cinema, numerous representative works have emerged. These films have not only exerted a wide influence within Hong Kong itself but have also gained critical acclaim on the international stage.

Cinematic adaptations of literary works that feature transgressive figures, such as *The Enchanting Shadow*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and *A Chinese Fairy Tale*, all products of Hong Kong cinema or at least co-productions between Hong Kong and mainland China, have not only introduced these characters to a broader and more diverse audience but have also reinterpreted them in light of contemporary cultural sensibilities. These cinematic works from Hong Kong frequently employ the archetype of the rebellious and transgressive female ghost as a lens through which to explore modern concerns such as gender parity, sexual emancipation, and the disintegration of traditional value systems.

The emergence of the new magic film genre in China, exemplified by the *Painted Skin* series, signifies a notable advancement in the portrayal of transgressive female spirit on screen. These films adeptly integrate traditional Chinese mythological elements with contemporary cinematic techniques, influenced by global trends within the realms of fantasy and horror filmmaking. The character Xiaowei in *Painted Skin* serves as a quintessential representation of a transgressive female spirit who embodies

a multifaceted form of agency. Her pursuit of love and self-actualisation, while using her supernatural powers in a morally ambiguous way, challenges the simplistic binary understandings of good and evil, as well as traditional gender roles.

Hong Kong cinema occupies a prominent and pivotal position within the field of contemporary cinema studies, with numerous compelling dimensions that elucidate its significance. Historically, Hong Kong cinema boasts a rich and extensive legacy of amalgamating diverse cultural elements, seamlessly fusing traditional Chinese culture with Western influences. This cultural hybridity provides a unique perspective for exploring universal themes such as gender and morality. It serves as a crucible where cultural cross-pollination facilitates the interrogation of these themes in innovative and thought-provoking ways. Hong Kong filmmakers have consistently been at the forefront of innovation in storytelling techniques, visual effects, and genre experimentation. Their works frequently transcend the boundaries of traditional narrative structures and aesthetic conventions. By doing so, they offer fresh insights and alternative modes of cinematic expression, thereby enriching global discourse on cinema. In terms of global influence, Hong Kong cinema has an extensive footprint, with many films achieving acclaim in international markets. This global resonance suggests that its portrayals of transgressive female ghosts can significantly impact cross-cultural understanding and interpretation of such characters. These representations traverse cultural boundaries while simultaneously being shaped by various cultural perspectives.

The social and political context of Hong Kong has also left an indelible mark on its cinema. The region's unique history and status have given rise to films that often engage with issues related to identity, belonging, and social transformation. Consequently, analysing Hong Kong cinema serves as an invaluable resource for comprehending the cultural and social dynamics present in contemporary society.

Against this backdrop, this research undertakes a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the transgressive female ghost and spirit figure in Chinese literature and Hong Kong films. Employing a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on feminist theory, cultural studies, and film theory, it aims to uncover the hidden ideological underpinnings, the complex symbolic systems, and the historical contingencies that have shaped these representations. This research aims to make a more in-depth contribution to the comprehension of how these transgressive figures have not only mirrored but also shaped the cultural, social, and psychological tapestry of Chinese society over time.

3.1 Background

Traditional Chinese ghost culture encompasses a variety of elements, including death rituals, funerary practices, spirit invocation ceremonies, and sacrificial traditions. The primitive ancestors of ancient China, who lived in resource-scarce environments akin to untamed creatures, developed a profound reverence for nature that was expressed through sorcery rites. These ancestors perceived death as the cessation of bodily functions; however, they believed that the soul continued to exist and could potentially be influenced through witchcraft. This belief system gave rise to customs and notions surrounding deities and ghosts (Scott, 2007). Initially manifesting as animal forms or animal spirits, these apparitions gradually evolved into human-like representations.

According to Qu Yuan (around 475 BC - 221 BC), ghosts are depicted with characteristics associated with mountain deities that symbolise the power of the natural world.[38] Over time, there emerged a progressive divergence between the concepts of 'ghosts' and 'gods'. Entities capable of bestowing benefits upon humanity came to be regarded as 'gods', while those associated with misfortune were classified as 'ghosts'. According to classical Chinese legends, ghosts were initially portrayed without distinct gender attributes. For instance, the depiction of the fox demon first appeared in *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*[39][40]: 'There are beasts in Green Hills' mountains resembling foxes with nine tails; they emit sounds like infants and can devour humans without remorse' (the Warring States period[41]). In this context, the presence of the fox demon is not associated with seductive or flirtatious allure.

According to Gan Bao (around 317 - 420 AD) in *Search for the Gods*, there is an account depicting a transformed fox demon who assumes a beautiful human form referred to as 'Purple'. This entity possesses the ability to entice men into engaging in sexual relations, thereby absorbing their energy and spirit. Subsequently, the energy and spirit are utilised by the fox demon Purple to enhance her internal strength (Gan,

the Eastern Jin Dynasty[42]). The transformation of the fox demon in *Search for the Gods* presents a captivating exemplification of metamorphosis that deviates from the conventional portrayal of these entities; instead, it serves as a symbol of seductive or flirtatious allure. This deviation holds significant importance in comprehending the intricate characteristics of legendary beings within Chinese folklore and literature.

In Chinese mythology, the fox demon is often depicted as a shapeshifter capable of assuming the guise of an alluring woman, embodying qualities such as charm and cunning. However, *Search for the Gods* offers a nuanced perspective on this entity. The shift in focus primarily revolves not around physical attractiveness or romantic desires but delves into the deeper metaphysical essence of the fox demon. This particular portrayal can be understood through the Daoist philosophy prevalent during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Within Daoism, change serves as a recurring metaphor for the ever-changing and transient nature of material existence. Thus, the fox demon's ability to shapeshift can be interpreted as an allegory for both dynamic and illusory aspects of reality and worldly affairs.

Within this framework, the transformation of the fox demon extends beyond mere physical modification; rather, it symbolises profound philosophical notions inherent in Daoism regarding change and transcendence over ordinary life. Furthermore, this metamorphosis holds cultural and social significance within ancient Chinese civilisation by potentially representing upward social mobility or challenging established societal norms. By transcending its natural form, the fox demon challenges conventional identities and societal hierarchies, symbolising humanity's inherent capacity for unpredictability and transformative potential. From a literary perspective, the transformation of the fox demon in *Search for the Gods* serves multiple narrative functions. Its presence introduces an element of mystery and mystique that enhances complexity while facilitating an exploration of themes such as identity illusion and fundamental realities.

According to the literary text *Crusade Against King Zhou of the Shang*[43] (the Yuan Dynasty[44]), the portrayal of Su Daji as being possessed by a fox demon signified the emergence of a traditional 'femme fatale' narrative. As articulated in this work, the fox demon possesses an extraordinary allure that captivates King Zhou of Shang with her mesmerising eyes. This enchantment is so potent that it renders even the executioner powerless to harm her, as documented during the Yuan Dynasty (Lan, 2021). This depiction closely aligns with the archetype of the femme fatale, a character renowned for her seductive power and often perilous nature. In this text, the fox demon transcends mere supernatural existence; she embodies characteristics synonymous with a femme fatale, employing charm and beauty to exert control while posing a significant threat to established norms. The representation of the fox demon in this literary work is an intricate fusion of allure and danger, mirroring those inherent within the femme fatale archetype where attractiveness coexists with destructiveness. Through its transformative abilities, akin to those possessed by a femme fatale who utilises charm to achieve her objectives, often leading to calamity for those around her, this alignment with such an archetype has rendered the fox demon an enthralling figure within Chinese literature, epitomising tensions and fears associated with powerful femininity.

According to Xu Zhonglin (the Ming Dynasty[45]) in the literary work *Creation of the Gods*, deliberate efforts were made to amplify the licentiousness of the fox demon Su Daji, solidifying its categorisation as a symbol of 'subjugation'.[46] In this context, the term 'subjugation' denotes both a narrative and symbolic process through which adverse forces or morally ambiguous figures - such as the fox demon Su Daji - are ultimately conquered or suppressed. The act of subjugation is frequently achieved by heroic individuals or through supernatural intervention, exemplified here by the male character Jiang Ziya. This serves as a representation of moral excellence and order triumphing over chaos and immorality.

From a broader perspective, it can be interpreted as an embodiment of sociological and cultural principles that were prevalent during that era, when preserving social cohesion and ethical structures was paramount. Consequently, in *Creation of Gods*, categorising Su Daji as an entity requiring subjugation transcends merely defeating a supernatural being; it pertains to restoring and reinforcing ethical and societal frameworks. This aligns with significant themes in traditional Chinese literature, where resolving disorder and establishing harmony are vital motifs.

The portrayal of the fox demon Su Daji's pronounced negative characteristics renders her a powerful symbol representing disorder and ethical decay that necessitate confrontation and suppression.

These literary representations of fox demons have profoundly influenced subsequent generations of scholars and writers, who have drawn upon this archetype to portray other femme fatale fictional figures. The legacy of the fox demon, as shaped by these texts, transcends its mythological origins to become a symbol of women's seductive yet perilous power. This depiction has resonated through centuries of Chinese storytelling, serving as a template for characters that are both enchanting and threatening. In a broader historical and cultural context, the evolution of the fox demon into a femme fatale figure reflects shifting societal attitudes towards women and their roles. It encapsulates a complex interplay of admiration, fear, and fascination with female autonomy and sexuality. The enduring appeal of this archetype in literature and its widespread influence on other fictional femme fatales underscore its deep-rooted cultural significance and the ongoing discourse surrounding gender, power, and morality within Chinese society.

In contemporary China, the term 'fox demon' continues to be employed as a means of stigmatising women perceived to engage in illicit sexual activities or deemed morally

corrupt (Chao, 2013, p. 140). Chao's analysis of the concept 'fox demon' (huli jing) emphasises the persistent negative connotations associated with the character 'hu' (狐), particularly evident in terms such as 'humei' (狐媚) (denoting bewitchment or seduction) and 'huyi' (狐疑) (indicating suspicion or distrust). Both exemplify the adverse associations attributed to 'hu', especially when it appears at the beginning of words (Chao, 2013, p. 140). Furthermore, when applied to an individual woman, the term 'hu' is often accompanied by imagery depicting sexual immorality, boundary transgression, and illegitimate power. The continued perception of fox demons as inherently malevolent raises significant concerns across various Chinese historical contexts (Kang, 2005).

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing[47] Dynasties, Chinese female ghost[48] stories reached their zenith as a significant cultural phenomenon. These narratives gave rise to a plethora of captivating female apparitions that gained considerable popularity and widespread dissemination among the populace. In contrast to the harmful and seductive fox demon Su Daji, these Chinese female ghosts are characterised by attributes such as beauty, virtue, integrity, and kindness. Furthermore, they exhibit resolute and courageous natures while expressing emotions such as fury, love, and hate in their relentless pursuit of objectives. These distinctive features set them apart from their male counterparts.[49][50]

Subsequently, various forms of literary works spanning different dynasties present distinct representations of female ghosts; for example: Yuan Dynasty operas such as *Premature Death of a Beautiful Young Girl* (Zheng Guangzu, the Yuan Dynasty) and *The Peony Pavilion* (Tang Xianzu, the Yuan Dynasty); along with Qing Dynasty fictional novels including *Zi Silence* (Yuan Mei, the Qing Dynasty) and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Pu Songling, the Qing Dynasty) (Kang 2005; Deng & Luo 2022).

In *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling (1640–1715) presents a diverse array of narratives featuring female ghosts, thereby enhancing the global prominence of Chinese female ghost figures. He depicts these spectral beings in various forms and emotional states, primarily categorising them into three distinct archetypes.

One prominent archetype is the 'beautiful ghost girl', characterised by exceptional physical beauty and an untimely demise due to illness or tragic circumstances, which deprives her of life's joys. The aesthetic allure of her appearance often conveys a gentle and melancholic quality that evokes profound sentiments and lingering sadness while lacking robust vigour and fervour. For instance, in one narrative, Nie Xiaoqian, a visually captivating female ghost, reveals to the male protagonist Ning Caichen that 'Xiaoqian, surnamed Nie, died at the age of eighteen and was buried next to   temple, but was still threatened by demons and forced to perform menial labour, thus ashamed to face other' (Pu, 1766, p. 204). Xiaoqian implores Caichen with 'Your righteousness can surely rescue me from my suffering and miser' (Pu, 1766, p. 204). By expressing her oppressed state, Xiaoqian positions herself as vulnerable, humiliated, and victimised, eliciting sympathy and fondness from Caichen; Lian Suo is described as possessing outstanding beauty, 'She is as thin as if she reveals a chill, and is too thin to hang on to her clothes' (Pu, 1766, p. 398); In the case of Wu Qiuyue, it can be observed that her father's adherence to the fallacious belief of 'easy numbers' (易数) (a method of fortune-telling) leads him to predict and hold the conviction that Qiuyue 'would not live longer' (Pu, 1766, p. 818). Consequently, he prohibits Qiuyue from entering into marriage. As a result, Qiuyue, in the prime of her youth, experiences profound melancholy and unhappiness, ultimately leading to her premature demise at the age of fifteen.

The second category of female ghosts pertains to those who have entered into matrimony but have encountered an abusive or violent partner, leading to their profound discontent and eventual demise due to depressive circumstances. In the

instance of Zhang A'duan, it is documented that 'She enters into a marriage with an irresponsible and disrespectful individual, resulting in her unfortunate demise at a young age due to distress and dissatisfaction' ((Pu, 1766, p.770).

The third group of female ghosts typically meets their demise due to persecution by corrupt officials, authorities, or tormentors. Nan Sanfu, the landlord, seduces Dounü, a female character in the narrative, only to abandon her later on. Consequently, Dounü endures the childbirth with an illegitimate child and faces reprimands. Sanfu displays significant hesitance in taking responsibility for his actions, leading to the unfortunate outcome of both Dou and the infant succumbing to hypothermia. In another tale, Xue Weiniang, a young woman, is poisoned by a treacherous individual during a boat trip to visit her relatives. After falling into a comatose state, she is subsequently handed over to an official, who takes her as his concubine. Upon awakening from her ordeal, she becomes subjected to torment and confinement by the spouse of this authority figure. Weiniang exhibits symptoms consistent with depression and tragically ends up taking her life through suicide. Following her demise, she is interred in a distant burial site, detached from her native town, subsequently assuming the role of a solitary apparition subjected to mistreatment by fellow spectres.

Pu's unconventional portrayals that are different from an idealised form of femininity have garnered significant interest among contemporary scholars (Hom, 1986; Barr, 1989). As Marlon Hom notes in his analysis, Pu established a distinctive representation of female imagery that stands in stark contrast to the conventional depictions of mortal women (Hom, 1986). The ethereal figures he conjures are often characterised as 'defiant', 'rebellious', and 'unconcerned with traditional morality' (Barr, 1989, p. 501). A recurring theme in Pu's portrayal of women is their assertive pursuit of freedom and resistance against feudal rituals, traditional customs, and moral constraints. In an era marked by a societal structure that favoured men and conferred upon them higher social status, these female characters exhibit remarkable audacity in

asserting their voices and advocating for independence. Moreover, they demonstrate a courageous willingness to embrace and openly express their innate sexual impulses.

The depiction of female ghosts in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* offers a profound avenue for exploring transgressions against traditional ideals of femininity and 'true womanhood'. According to Huntington, this collection has become a focal point for discussions surrounding gender and identity, highlighting how the supernatural realm provided Pu with a unique platform to address issues otherwise constrained by societal norms (Huntington, 2005). This narrative device facilitates an exploration of the female experience under patriarchal constraints where typical expressions of sexual desires and personal ambitions are frequently stifled due to Women's inferior social status and limited power. The term 'ghostification[51]', which involves turning women into spectral beings, can be understood as a ritualistic manifestation of female self-empowerment in patriarchal Chinese society. This metamorphosis empowers women to free themselves from the limitations that traditional societal norms and gender roles have imposed. In their spectral forms, they often possess abilities and enjoy freedoms that remain inaccessible during their human existence. The process of becoming a spectral being follows symbolic patterns similar to a ritual, and through it, women can assert agency and gain a form of power that is typically denied to them within the patriarchal structure.

This transition from the suppression of human desires during earthly existence to an emancipated expression of love and retribution in the afterlife signifies a profound paradigm shift in agency. In their mortal lives, these female characters are often depicted as exemplars of Confucian virtues, embodying the roles of obedient and self-sacrificing daughters or wives within a patriarchal family structure (Huntington, 2005). However, their posthumous transformation into ghosts represents a radical departure from their previously culturally revered identities, evolving into what may be perceived as abject and menacing entities. This metamorphosis underscores a

162

significant deviation from traditional portrayals of femininity.

Furthermore, it is essential to examine the representation of specific female characters within these narratives who, having endured considerable hardships and adversities in their lives, resort to violence as a means of seeking retribution. Imbach emphasises that upon their demise, these characters often undergo a transformation into vengeful spirits or malevolent entities (Imbach, 2017). This act of vengeance, achieved through 'ghostification', transcends mere narrative devices; it can be interpreted as a ceremonial manifestation of self-empowerment. Through this metamorphosis, women acquire extraordinary capabilities that challenge prevailing patriarchal structures, enabling them to assert their agency and confront societal injustices.

This shift in narrative power raises significant questions regarding female subjectivity within these tales. If women are ideologically perceived as objects or sexual commodities within a hierarchical ancient Chinese society, then the prevalence of revenge narratives in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* may be interpreted as an affirmation of female subjectivity that contests this perception. Thus, these stories transcend mere folklore by providing critical insights into the dynamics of gender, power, and societal norms.

3.2 Evolution of the 'Literati Female Ghost' Archetype in Chinese-language Film: Gender, Culture, and Narrative Transformations

This section undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the 'literati female ghost' archetype, which holds profound significance in Chinese mythology and film narratives. The 'literati female ghost' refers to the female ghosts portrayed in literary works, typically embodying specific personality traits and symbolic meanings. In literary texts, these female ghosts exhibit a wide spectrum of emotions, ranging from sadness and melancholy to anger and revenge, as well as longing and desire, along with fear and vulnerability. These emotional complexities contribute to their rich characterisations, rendering them compelling subjects for study within the realm of literary analysis and broader cultural contexts. Furthermore, adaptations in the film that emphasise the emotional depth and personality traits of these female ghosts, as originally depicted in literary texts, can also be categorised under the 'literati female ghost' genre.

This archetype, immortalised in Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and its film adaptation *A Chinese Ghost Story*, has captivated audiences for over six decades, transcending cultural and historical boundaries. This chapter meticulously analyses three influential cinematic adaptations, *The Enchanting Shadow*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and *A Chinese Fairy Tale*. Each film offers a unique perspective on the intricate interplay of emotional nuances, sexual agency, and identity transformation in relation to the 'literati female ghost'. These adaptations extend beyond mere retellings of supernatural romances; they delve into the evolving interactions and dynamics between male scholars and female ghosts as reflections of changing ideals and attitudes towards these rebellious ethereal beings across different historical contexts.

In the original literary narrative, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, the protagonist, a male scholar named Ning Caichen, invites Xiaoqian to his residence following his wife's grave illness. Xiaoqian dutifully performs domestic chores

without voicing any complaints. After his wife's death, Caichen accepts Xiaoqian as his concubine. She diligently cares for Caichen's mother day and night while bearing children for him (Pu, 1766). Through Pu Songling's portrayal of Xiaoqian in literature, he challenges conventional feudal ideologies that uphold male dominance over women while simultaneously demonstrating appreciation for traditional Chinese femininity.

However, as a Confucian scholar himself, Pu retains certain patriarchal elements inherent in traditional Confucian culture within his depiction. He portrays Xiaoqian's character in a manner that conforms to traditional gender expectations, illustrating her as a dutiful daughter-in-law and emphasising her role as a child-bearing entity. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that Xiaoqian in the original literary work does not embody subversive or ideal femininity, nor does she function as an exemplary defiant heroine. Situated within a conventional framework, her character aligns more closely with established norms where the boundaries of existing gender roles and societal expectations largely dictate her actions and motivations.

Building upon this foundational literary framework, subsequent film adaptations, while partially adhering to Xiaoqian's narrative as a human spouse, shift towards a more nuanced depiction of her character. These cinematic interpretations place greater emphasis on portraying Xiaoqian as a multifaceted and complex individual. The three adaptations progressively validate and acknowledge the female ghost Xiaoqian's sexual desires within the context of mainstream society. This evolution is evident in the portrayal of both Xiaoqian and Caichen, transitioning from subtle and implicit allusions to sexuality in *The Enchanting Shadow* to representations of women as desirable objects in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Ultimately, it culminates in depicting women's yearning for pure love in *A Chinese Fairy Tale*. In these cinematic renditions, Xiaoqian transcends being merely an object of romantic interest or a passive figure; she gradually embodies profound thematic elements such as autonomy, desire, and

identity. Notably, these films often delve into Xiaoqian's internal struggles and transformative journey toward self-realisation. This represents a significant departure from literary portrayals of female characters that frequently confine women's roles within patriarchal norms. Instead, Xiaoqian is depicted with enhanced agency and self-determination, challenging stereotypical notions of femininity along with the role and position of women in a predominantly male-centric society.

Moreover, these cinematic adaptations explore the intricate emotional landscape surrounding Xiaoqian's character by presenting her not only as an entity entangled in supernatural romance but also as an individual grappling with existential dilemmas. This exploration adds depth to her emotional experience while rendering her more relatable and humanised despite her ghostly nature. Additionally, the portrayal of Xiaoqian in these three film adaptations reflects broader societal changes and evolving attitudes toward women and their roles within society. By reinterpreting Xiaoqian's character, these films contribute to contemporary discourse on femininity, empowerment, and gender dynamics. They offer a modern interpretation of the 'literati female ghost' archetype that resonates with current audiences.

3.2.1 *The Enchanting Shadow*: Metaphors of Gender Oppression and Resistance

The first cinematic adaptation by Han-Hsiang Li adeptly intertwines classical elements of spookiness with sensuality in its portrayal of the female ghost, Xiaoqian. This nuanced representation is particularly evident in a pivotal scene where Xiaoqian interacts with the traditional Chinese zither, known as the 'guqin'. In this moment, Caichen, entranced by the haunting melody, discreetly observes Xiaoqian. The scene reaches a climax when the strings of the guqin suddenly snap, signifying Xiaoqian's realisation of Caichen's hidden presence (see Figure 3.1 below). This interaction exemplifies both Xiaoqian's eerie allure and serves as a significant narrative device that encapsulates the tension and intrigue central to her character.

Grandma, an evil female ghost who embodies a tree demon, remarks: 'In my opinion, it must be a ghost'. Within the realm inhabited by both Xiaoqian and Grandma emerges a dichotomy between ghosts and humans; here, humans like scholar Caichen are perceived as 'outsiders' and become indistinguishable from ghosts. In Li's interpretation, the female protagonist Xiaoqian is compelled to assume the role of a puppet under Grandma's control. This arrangement positions Xiaoqian as a victim or sufferer within her transient existence.

Despite her inclination towards rebellion, within this narrative framework, Xiaoqian's 'true body', a symbol of her autonomy and freedom, is strategically concealed by Grandma for leverage. The separation from her 'true body' signifies not only her disempowerment but also serves as a metaphor for her inability to counteract Grandma's pernicious influences. This dynamic underscores themes of control versus autonomy within the story while reflecting broader issues concerning individual agency in confronting oppressive forces. Consequently, this results in subsequent narrative developments in which Caichen aids Xiaoqian in realising the manifestation of her 'true body'.

During the 1960s, Hong Kong underwent a significant transformation, marked by profound social, political, and cultural shifts. Within this context, the film *The Enchanting Shadow* serves as a poignant depiction of the challenges, subjugation, and gradual emancipation experienced by women in a predominantly patriarchal society.

The character of Xiaoqian, a female ghost trapped in servitude to the tyrannical supernatural figure, Grandma, epitomises the oppressed and marginalised position of women in Hong Kong's patriarchal setup during that period. Her plight vividly mirrors the limitations and subordination women faced. As Sa'eed and Jubran posit, the presence of hauntings in the film is emblematic of women's oppression and their longing for liberation (Sa'eed & Jubran, 2019, pp. 14-17). Munford delves into how Xiaoqian's portrayal represents the constricting societal expectations placed on women and their acts of defiance and resistance against patriarchal norms (Munford, 2016). The academic analysis of *The Enchanting Shadow* (Munford, 2016; Sa'eed & Jubran, 2019) reveals its adept use of symbolism as an essential narrative device. This symbolism is not merely aesthetic but serves substantive purposes by addressing broader issues related to gender disparities in 1960s Hong Kong. Through its nuanced storytelling, this film provides insightful commentary on societal norms and challenges faced by women at that time while reflecting the cultural and social milieu.

The depiction of Xiaoqian's journey from initial entrapment to ultimate liberation in *The Enchanting Shadow* carries profound significance. It serves as a microcosm that reflects the broader discussions and developments concerning women's rights and emancipation that gradually emerged in 1960s Hong Kong. Her initial servitude symbolises the subjugation women faced, characterised by limited access to education, career opportunities, and social mobility. Conversely, her path to freedom embodies the nascent hopes and efforts of women advocating for equality.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong saw increasing acceptance of women in public life. Women

began participating in community activities, social gatherings, and political discussions, moving beyond traditional domestic roles. Educational opportunities expanded as schools and colleges enrolled more female students, equipping them with skills for greater independence [52] (Criveller, 2022). While employment barriers remained, certain sectors like textile manufacturing, clerical work, and teaching started hiring more women, albeit often at lower pay and with fewer advancement opportunities.

The process of emancipation unfolded gradually throughout the 1960s. It was not an instantaneous transformation but rather a slow and incremental change. The early part of the decade saw women beginning to articulate their aspirations for equality; as time progressed, more concrete changes emerged through enhanced educational access, increased social participation, and broader employment options.

As women began to organise themselves, advocate for their rights, and demand equal opportunities, Xiaoqian's narrative encapsulates this burgeoning momentum. The film utilises her transformation as a lens through which the broader struggle for women's rights is illuminated, making it accessible to diverse audiences. It becomes an instrument through which emerging discourses surrounding women's rights can be visualised and comprehended, highlighting both the challenges faced and the potential for change inherent in 1960s Hong Kong society.

Ultimately, *The Enchanting Shadow* effectively encapsulates the zeitgeist of its era; it stands as a poignant reflection of women's subjugation within a society predominantly governed by masculine ideals. It manages to distil these complex social dynamics into a narrative that is both engaging and thought-provoking. It makes viewers acutely aware of the gender inequalities that were so deeply ingrained, and in doing so, becomes a significant cultural artefact that preserves the memory of that difficult period for women. It stands as a testament to the struggle for equality

that was just beginning to take shape, highlighting the long road that lay ahead.

Figure 3.1 *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960)

In the film, despite Xiaoqian's captivating allure that renders her an object of sexual desire for the male scholar Caichen, Caichen exhibits a profound longing to be in her presence while steadfastly refusing to engage in overnight companionship, even when confronted with persistent and tempting advances from Xiaoqian. The portrayal of a female ghost expressing sexual desires towards a human being, specifically a male scholar, is a prevalent narrative motif known as 'human-ghost romance' (人鬼情) within Chinese female ghost stories. This phenomenon is rooted in the cultural and historical significance of the male scholar archetype in traditional Chinese culture.

The literati, also known as scholars, occupied esteemed and privileged positions in ancient China due to their education and involvement in governance. Consequently, these scholars played significant roles in the literary field, particularly in the genre of female ghost stories. The plot device wherein female ghosts express sexual desires toward male scholars serves as a critical mechanism for their subsequent

demonisation. Through their interactions, female ghosts are portrayed as extracting the life force and vitality from male scholars, leading to their ultimate transformation into demons. In *The Enchanting Shadow*, Caichen demonstrates measured resistance against further stigmatising Xiaoqian. His self-control over his physical impulses not only ensures his own integrity but also prevents Xiaoqian from being demonised, thereby helping her become a harmless female ghost. This self-restraint facilitates Xiaoqian's eventual reintegration into human society. With Caichen's assistance, Xiaoqian undergoes a profound transformation, evolving from a malevolent spectral entity into a harmless and exemplary female ghost, effectively completing her process of identity transformation. In this film adaptation, director Li opted to exclude the latter half of the original novel, wherein Xiaoqian returns home with Caichen and gives birth to their child.

In the original literary work, Xiaoqian's transformation from a ghost into a human carries significant dual implications. Firstly, it signifies her psychological rehabilitation as she transitions from being an immoral fox demon who manipulates and extracts male scholars' life force through her sexuality to become a virtuous and ideal woman adhering to traditional Chinese ethical standards. Secondly, it symbolises her physical rehabilitation as she undergoes a metamorphosis from a spectral entity to a fully embodied human being. This transformative process is realised through her arrival at Caichen's residence and her fulfilment of the responsibilities associated with her gender role.

The reversion process is observed progressively; this is evidenced by Xiaoqian's initial acceptance by Caichen and his family, followed by their marriage after the passing of Caichen's wife. These instances collectively illustrate Xiaoqian's steady transition towards embracing her human nature and moral values. Following her marriage, she gives birth to a son for Caichen's family, thereby achieving reintegration into the realm of humans. The comprehensive process of transitioning

from a spectral entity to a human being is intricately linked with an accompanying moral change towards virtuousness.

Director Li's decision to exclude the segment depicting Xiaoqian's reintegration into human society in the director's cut can be attributed, to some extent, to his relatively progressive perspective on female autonomy and self-reliance. By emphasising Xiaoqian's experiences and choices within the supernatural realm rather than her assimilation into human society, the director shifts the narrative focus away from conventional societal expectations and norms. This technique may be interpreted as a feminist enhancement, as it allows Xiaoqian's character to exist and be evaluated beyond traditional societal constraints imposed on women. Director Li's edit of the film enables the protagonist, Xiaoqian, to preserve her independence and freedom from conventional patriarchal systems. Unlike the original literary work, which depicts her conforming to societal expectations, this adaptation allows Xiaoqian to resist the typical portrayal of female protagonists as ideal domestic wives defined by traditional femininity.

Simultaneously, Xiaoqian's dual personas - namely the malevolent female apparition and the compliant spouse adhering to societal expectations - serve as manifestations of the challenges faced by women in their quest for survival within the patriarchal framework prevalent in China. This reflects a Chinese perspective on women, wherein morality functions as a mechanism to regulate and maintain a limited yet acceptable range of freedom for them. The oscillation of Xiaoqian's condition, alternating between her ghostly and human states, underscores the complexity of her persona and mirrors society's nuanced viewpoint on women in China. This attitude is characterised by a dualistic mindset that encompasses both trepidation and anxiety towards women, particularly those who challenge traditional gender norms, and an accompanying desire to assert male dominance and control over them.

This phenomenon can be elucidated through two Western frameworks: the 'femme fatale' archetype and Barbara Creed's concept of the 'monstrous-feminine'. The 'femme fatale' archetype, prevalent in Western literature and film, symbolises an alluring, enchanting, and enigmatic woman whose charm captivates her romantic partners, often leading them into compromising and perilous situations. In Western culture, this archetype is frequently depicted as a multifaceted character embodying various traits such as power, desire, femininity, self-determination, and deception within a patriarchal framework.

The dual nature of Xiaoqian reveals notable parallels with this archetype, particularly in her malevolent female ghost persona. She exerts influence over those around her through her charm and cunning, thereby subverting traditional social hierarchies. While the 'femme fatale' serves as an archetypal figure in Western narratives, Xiaoqian's character also reflects universal challenges faced by women across diverse cultural contexts. Whether in Western societies or China, women pursue self-determination and freedom while simultaneously grappling with the constraints and expectations imposed by patriarchal structures. Analysing Xiaoqian's character through the lens of the Western 'femme fatale' enhances the understanding of women's lived experiences and challenges across different cultures.

Moreover, Creed's concept of the 'monstrous-feminine' subverts traditional gender norms in horror films by depicting women as powerful entities rather than mere victims; this representation often emphasises their sexuality. Barbara Creed's notion of the 'monstrous-feminine' underscores the phenomenon of women's monstrosity within film and cultural studies. This idea of monstrosity frequently reflects societal fears and anxieties surrounding women while simultaneously serving as a form of challenge and resistance against patriarchal structures. The malevolent female ghost embodied by Xiaoqian can be interpreted as an expression of this monstrosity; her presence elicits social unease and fear, mirroring society's reactions to women's

challenges to conventional norms.

Creed's work not only explores the interplay between non-human animals and human beings but also scrutinises the position of women within that context. This thematic element is closely and elaborately intertwined with the intricacy of Xiaoqian's character. Her multifaceted personality manifestations can be regarded as adaptive reactions to distinct social settings, much like the way in which animals display a wide range of behaviours in different survival scenarios. Such parallels have the potential to enhance and broaden our comprehension of women's experiences and the obstacles they encounter within society.

Upon analysing Xiaoqian's character in *The Enchanting Shadow*, we observe parallels with both the Western 'femme fatale' archetype and Creed's concept of the 'monstrous-feminine'. Her depiction oscillates between strength (the alluring power she exerts over male scholars) and vulnerability (her entrapment as represented by Grandma), conformity (the necessity for Caichen's assistance to reclaim her 'true body'), alongside questioning conventional societal expectations (as evidenced by director Li's decision to exclude the segment depicting Xiaoqian's reintegration into human society).

Xiaoqian's spectral manifestation and supernatural power allow her to transcend conventional limitations imposed on women regarding behaviour and sexual desires. However, it is crucial to recognise that Xiaoqian's portrayal still retains traditional feminine ghostly characteristics (the harmless 'literati female ghost') deeply rooted in Asian culture. Her character integrates elements of romance, tragedy, and morality found in classic Chinese ghost stories while presenting a modern and complex depiction of female autonomy and authority. The exclusion of her reintegration into human society in director Li's version reinforces this contemporary portrayal. By emphasising her spectral nature, the story avoids confining her to traditional gender

roles typically assigned to women. Instead, it positions her in a realm where she embodies both the alluring and dangerous qualities associated with archetypes like the 'femme fatale' and 'monstrous-feminine,' while remaining firmly grounded in the cultural context of Asian folklore.

Consequently, Xiaoqian's portrayal in the 1960 film adaptation can be seen as a synthesis of Eastern and Western tropes. In this film, Xiaoqian embodies the traditional principles and symbols of Asian ghost tales while also reflecting themes of female empowerment and complexity found in Western portrayals of the 'femme fatale' and 'monstrous-feminine.' This amalgamation offers a nuanced perspective on her character, providing both a critical examination and homage to the evolving societal roles of women.

The portrayal of female ghosts actively seeking romantic and sexual encounters with men vividly reflects this masculocentric bias. A masculocentric perspective, also known as masculocentrism, constitutes a particular worldview that situates male experiences, aspirations, and viewpoints at its core. It often leads to the marginalisation or objectification of other genders, particularly women. As Klaber (2014) noted, this depiction is deeply rooted in traditional masculine psychology and sexual desires. By having female characters pursue male characters, the story centres male desires and satisfaction. The female ghosts are effectively reduced to mere objects of male fantasy and pleasure, indicating that the narrative is constructed around what are typically considered 'masculine' sexual and romantic longings. This could be a result of the male narrator's internal struggle with his sexual identity, as he yearns for an idealised feminine partner.

In the film, the male-centred perspective and male dominance over women are clearly evident in Caichen's initial perception of Xiaoqian. At the start of the film, Caichen sees Xiaoqian as nothing more than a 'visual spectacle'. In the context of a patriarchal

culture, he reduces her to an object for visual pleasure. While Yan Chixia is also part of the 'landscape' that Caichen observes, the two characters have distinct roles. Xiaoqian's position is defined by her desirability to men, while Yan Chixia, as a male, likely has more agency and a different set of narrative functions. His presence may serve other plot-related purposes, such as providing a contrast to Caichen or contributing to the action in a way that Xiaoqian, due to her objectified status, cannot.

The male scholar Caichen, unable to suppress his curiosity and admiration for the chivalrous figure of Chixia, finds himself captivated. Director Li employs various photographic techniques, including elevated shots captured from low angles and wide apertures, to illustrate feudal society's reverence for Chixia, a male character who embodies essential masculine attributes. This approach effectively highlights Chixia's presence within the frame while positioning him in relation to prominent light sources.

In the final sequence, a confrontation arises between Grandma and Caichen, symbolising the dichotomy between supernatural beings and mortals. Unexpectedly, Chixia emerges as the saviour intervening in this conflict. However, it is important to note that Chixia's original location is not near the forest where this battle unfolds; thus, he must undertake an extensive carriage journey lasting an entire day to reach this wooded area. This climactic incident deviates from established settings but successfully portrays visually striking scenes that depict mutual assistance among individuals.

Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that in the film, Chixia repeatedly tests Caichen's encounters with a female ghost while playfully alluding to Caichen's hesitancy in revealing the truth. This behaviour can be interpreted as a manifestation of a more subdued form of masculinity, as embodied by Caichen, reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics of 1960s Hong Kong. Furthermore, this scenario plays a crucial role in the

film and mirrors the broader socio-cultural dynamics of that era, particularly concerning gender roles and societal expectations. The interactions between Chixia and Caichen serve as a nuanced and powerful indictment of prevailing gender conventions during this period.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong society experienced significant transformations as traditional Confucian principles increasingly intertwined with modern Western ideas. During this time, there was a gradual yet noticeable shift in perceptions of gender roles, leading to a reassessment of old conceptions of masculinity. Caichen is depicted as somewhat cautious and timid in his interactions with Xiaoqian; he embodies a muted version of masculinity that contrasts sharply with the aggressive and dominating masculine persona commonly found in Chinese literature and films, exemplified by Yan Chixia within this narrative, during that period. Chixia's behaviour - repeatedly testing Caichen's encounters with a female ghost - highlights Caichen's reluctance to publicly discuss his supernatural experiences, thereby emphasising the distinction between them. The juxtaposition between Chixia's lively and assertive demeanour against Caichen's more traditional and repressed masculinity indicates an evolution away from conventional gender relations and dynamics.

It is important to note that, in addition to being initially perceived as the 'landscape', Li's portrayal of Xiaoqian in this film adaptation provides a nuanced and sophisticated perspective on the representation of women. Xiaoqian's character embodies an enigmatic and ethereal essence, both conforming to and challenging traditional feminine stereotypes. The interactions between her and Caichen are characterised by a strong sense of personal agency and complexity, which was notably progressive for the context of 1960s Hong Kong. Rather than being merely a passive supernatural entity, Xiaoqian's character is developed with profound emotional depth, reflecting evolving perspectives on femininity and the societal roles assigned to women. This depiction can be interpreted as a response to the socio-cultural environment of 1960s

177

Hong Kong, where women began asserting greater autonomy and influence in both public and private spheres.

Overall, Li's version presents a microcosm of changing gender dynamics and cultural standards during this period in Hong Kong through its portrayal of relationships among Chixia, Caichen, and Xiaoqian. These vibrant and insightful interactions underscore broader discussions regarding masculinity, femininity, and shifting societal expectations for men and women throughout mid-20th century Hong Kong. Through its intricate character portrayals and interactions, Li's film not only entertains but also offers a subtle analysis that reflects its contemporary socio-cultural milieu.

3.2.2 *A Chinese Ghost Story*: The Dual Deduction of Femininity and Maternal Traits

In the 1960 version, Nie Xiaoqian is positioned in a relatively subordinate position within the 'landscape' perceived by the male protagonist, Ning Caichen. This suggests that Xiaoqian exists primarily as an element from Caichen's perspective, with her subjectivity and complexity not being fully realised. The audience's perception of her largely depends on Caichen's observations and reactions.

Conversely, in Siu-Tung Ching's 1987 adaptation, Nie Xiaoqian gradually emerges as the central focus of visual consumption for the audience. This transformation is profoundly significant, reflecting a visually oriented creative ideology aimed at satisfying aesthetic pleasure or evoking sensual delights among viewers. Such changes align closely with the concept of 'male gaze'.

In the 1987 version, Nie Xiaoqian's portrayal distinctly embodies this concept ('male gaze'). From her attire and makeup to her behavioural mannerisms, every aspect is designed to captivate audiences, particularly male viewers, transforming her into a visually enchanting symbol. For instance, she may wear sheer and flowing garments that accentuate her feminine grace; her makeup emphasises charming eyes and alluring lips to enhance sensual traits. Additionally, unique lighting effects and camera angles are utilised in cinematography to accentuate her bodily curves and enchanting postures. This characterisation renders Nie Xiaoqian an object fulfilling visual desires and fantasies for male viewers, conforming to established models of female representation within Mulvey's framework.

The 1960 version of Nie Xiaoqian exemplifies an introverted demeanour rooted in Asian cultural norms, while simultaneously embodying characteristics typical of a classic female ghost. This portrayal aligns with traditional expectations regarding women's demureness and gentleness within Asian culture. Her representation as a

female ghost adheres to conventional perceptions. With each gesture and movement, she radiates a restrained beauty, reminiscent of an ethereal being emerging from ancient legends, encapsulating the aesthetic ideals for women prevalent during that era.

In contrast, the image of Nie Xiaoqian in the 1987 version presents a markedly different style. This iteration is significantly influenced by Japanese comics and contemporary cinematic aesthetics, boldly departing from traditional depictions of feminine beauty to embrace a more alluring 'femme fatale' archetype.

During the 1980s, Japanese comics and modern film aesthetics showcased a distinctive style that profoundly impacted global film and television culture. Renowned for their exaggerated character designs, rich emotional expressions, and distinct delineation between characters, Japanese comics often emphasise large expressive eyes to convey deep emotions and personality traits. This meticulous focus on eye portrayal enhances character gazes' expressiveness, effectively capturing the audience's attention. In terms of cinematic aesthetics, there is an emphasis on creating unique visual styles and atmospheres that shape emotions while expressing themes through careful manipulation of scenes, lighting, and colour palettes.

The 1987 version of Nie Xiaoqian skilfully integrates these elements into her characterisation. Visually striking with long hair cascading like a waterfall, this not only amplifies her allure but also subconsciously evokes associations with feminine tenderness among viewers. This characteristic resembles the hairstyles commonly found in female characters within Japanese manga, where the ethereal quality of long hair showcases feminine beauty and agility. Xiaoqian's crimson lips serve as a symbol of sensuality, conveying strong implications of desire as if narrating endless temptation. In Japanese manga and film, vibrant lip colours are often employed to emphasise the maturity and sexiness of female characters, becoming one of the key

elements that attract viewers' attention. Moreover, Xiaoqian's captivating eyes seem to harbour countless stories; with just a glance, the eyes can deeply enthral onlookers as if possessing an enchanting power (see Figure 3.2). These eyes draw inspiration from the exaggerated depictions found in Japanese manga, by enlarging their proportions and intensifying their expressiveness, resulting in Nie Xiaoqian's gaze being imbued with both mystery and seduction. It appears capable of penetrating one's heart while simultaneously inviting others into its depths.

Furthermore, the film incorporates scenes adorned with sheer fabrics and misty atmospheres to create an ethereal ambiance that closely resonates with the modern concept of 'femme fatale'. In Western cinema, the archetype of the 'femme fatale' is frequently positioned within suggestive scenes that enhance her mysterious and seductive qualities through atmospheric elements. The ethereal and captivating ambience of this 1987 adaptation not only amplifies the emotional resonance of Nie Xiaoqian's character but also immerses the audience in a surreal experience that blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, thereby reinforcing her representation as a 'dangerous beauty'. The lightweight fabrics fluttering in the wind evoke an elusive sensation, symbolising Nie Xiaoqian's mystery and elusiveness; concurrently, the hazy mist introduces an enigmatic layer to the entire scene, seemingly concealing numerous secrets awaiting discovery by viewers.

Historically, Chinese ghost stories depicted female apparitions as possessing distinctly restrained demeanours and traditional feminine characteristics deeply ingrained in Asian society. However, contemporary visual interpretations such as Ching's film adaptation have transformed this paradigm. The combination of elements associated with Japanese comics and modern film aesthetics, Western 'femme fatale' alongside traditional Chinese female ghosts signifies an intriguing convergence of cultural narratives and evolving artistic styles. This visual shift transcends original literary works, exemplifying a broader trend in representing female characters, especially

those endowed with supernatural attributes such as demon foxes, in contemporary culture.

Academics interpret this phenomenon as a fusion of cultural patterns, wherein traditional Asian concepts intersect with contemporary creative influences. This convergence results in a novel and intricate representation of feminine charm and authority. Such a shift in portrayal also mirrors the evolving perspectives on female autonomy and sensuality within modern culture, where heroines like Nie Xiaoqian are no longer confined to submissive roles; instead, they are depicted as multifaceted and influential individuals driven by their motivations and passions.
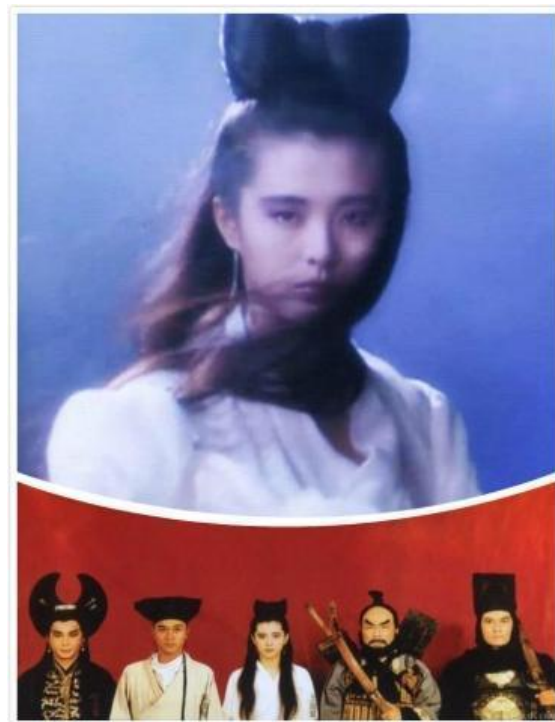

Figure 3.2 *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987)

Nonetheless, this narrative approach may inadvertently sacrifice the depth of character development and the intricacies of storytelling in favour of visually captivating moments that emphasise femininity. For instance, the relationship between Xiaoqian and Caichen could have benefited from a more gradual and nuanced

exploration. Rather than allowing their burgeoning affection to unfold naturally, it might be overshadowed by the visual spectacle of their interactions, such as scenes where Xiaoqian's ethereal beauty is accentuated through innovative lighting and dynamic camera angles. Consequently, this emphasis on visual aesthetics could detract from the overall complexity and engagement of the story.

The film's portrayals of Xiaoqian transcend mere aesthetic considerations, serving as a revealing portal into the cultural tapestry of mid-20th century Hong Kong. During this period, traditional gender roles were firmly entrenched, exerting a profound influence on how women were perceived and represented within visual media.

The pronounced emphasis on Xiaoqian's femininity and attractiveness, at times overshadowing her character development, reflects the dominant cultural paradigms of the era. In a society where traditional gender norms prevailed, women's physical appearance was frequently spotlighted as the quintessential symbol of femininity. This formed an essential part of the cultural construct that defined women's roles, with their desirability intricately linked to specific visual ideals. For instance, a demure and delicate demeanour was highly esteemed; films complied with this by presenting female characters like Xiaoqian in ways that accentuated these very traits.

These cultural norms significantly shaped the on-screen representation of female characters. Xiaoqian's portrayal, which heavily relied on visual elements to convey femininity, emerged directly from the cultural milieu in which the film was crafted. It mirrored a male-centric perspective on female attractiveness, wherein women were often objectified and predominantly viewed through the lens of male desire. Furthermore, it underscored the limited scope through which women were perceived in society at that time; their worth was largely gauged by their appearance rather than their intrinsic qualities or capabilities.

However, cinema possesses a unique dual nature. While it initially adhered to these prevailing cultural norms, it also held the potential for subversion. By attempting to narrate a story while still conforming to established visual standards associated with femininity, the film reveals complex relationships between cinema and cultural values.

On the other hand, Siu-Tung Ching's adaptation not only reconfigures the representation of the female ghost Xiaoqian as a seductive figure but also reflects the evolving discourse surrounding gender representation. In addition to depicting Xiaoqian as a visual spectacle, this cinematic interpretation undergoes a narrative transformation in which Xiaoqian shifts from being a passive object of observation, under the gaze of male lead Caichen, to an active observer herself. This change is particularly pronounced when she surreptitiously documents Caichen's nocturnal activities.

The analysis of this transformation can be approached and expanded through theories of gaze and visual pleasure, as articulated by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. These concepts examine how visual perception (or staring) within cinema often adheres to gender-based patterns, with males typically occupying the role of active observers while women are relegated to passive objects of observation. Mulvey's theory asserts that mainstream film frequently employs a 'male gaze' when the camera adopts the perspective of a heterosexual male, portraying female characters as objects of male desire and imagination. This phenomenon perpetuates traditional power hierarchies concerning gender dynamics, wherein males assume active roles while women are confined to passive positions as objects.

Nevertheless, this film adaptation exhibits a significant departure from the conventional dynamic typically observed in such narratives. The film subverts the

traditional masculine perspective by depicting the female ghost Xiaoqian as an observer of the male scholar Caichen. This modification facilitates a novel form of visual gratification that is not predicated on the passive objectification of women's bodies and sexual allure but rather emphasises the active empowerment of female characters.

Xiaoqian's role as an observer in this version affords her a certain level of authority and influence over the storyline, marking a notable deviation from the original conventional literary depiction as well as the 1960 film adaptation, where she is predominantly confined to being the one observed. This shift in viewpoint can be understood as a manifestation of evolving societal perspectives on gender roles.

The film disrupts conventional depictions of female characters in cinema by presenting Xiaoqian, a female ghost, as an active spectator. This indicates an acknowledgement of women's agency and a movement towards more nuanced and equitable portrayals of gender interactions. Furthermore, this narrative decision can be interpreted as empowering the female character, aligning with broader cultural trends that aim to rethink women's roles in film and society. By challenging and subverting traditional perspectives, the film presents a nuanced and diverse depiction of femininity that acknowledges and celebrates women as proactive contributors to their narratives. In this adaptation, the transition from male observation and female passivity to female active observation signifies a significant departure from conventional cinematic depictions influenced by the male gaze. It aligns with current debates on gender portrayal and provides a novel viewpoint on the dynamics of observing and being observed in films.

Additionally, throughout this rendition, Xiaoqian demonstrates a heightened sense of struggle and rebellion compared to the previous 1960 version. In Ching's 1987 film adaptation, Xiaoqian is coerced into an arranged marriage with an elderly demon

known as 'Black Mountain' by her grandmother, with their wedding ceremony scheduled to occur within three days. This coerced betrothal catalyses Xiaoqian's decision to seek assistance from the male scholar Caichen to escape, thereby providing her with an opportunity for rebellion and resistance against societal norms. Director Ching's interpretation accentuates the formidable opposition posed by the villainous grandmother while highlighting the opposing force and counterbalancing power of Xiaoqian's desires.

During the climactic confrontation with the malevolent grandmother, Xiaoqian fearlessly engages in a struggle driven by love. She exhibits unwavering determination to rescue her lover Caichen, even when confronted with forcible separation from him. In this narrative, it is not Yan Chixia, the male character, but rather the female ghost Xiaoqian who assumes the role of the saviour figure. The final scene, where the pale-faced intellectual Caichen falls into the arms of the female ghost Xiaoqian and finds salvation through her intervention, can be interpreted as symbolising his surrender to maternal protection and reflecting his attachment to motherhood. Endowed with inherent maternal qualities and representing redemption and a sense of belonging, Xiaoqian ultimately takes on multifaceted roles such as confidante, spouse, and maternal figure.

The 1987 adaptation artfully integrated elements of maternal illumination and primordial matriarchal veneration, thereby erecting a compelling theoretical framework for reinterpreting the character of Xiaoqian, the female ghost, in a role conventionally reserved for males, that of the rescuer. This notable transformation in character dynamics can be more comprehensively understood within the context of Hong Kong's socio-cultural landscape during the 1980s.

During this era, marked by rapid economic expansion and an influx of Western influences, there emerged a growing awareness and discourse surrounding gender

equality, partially driven by the global feminist movement. These societal shifts initiated a challenge to deeply entrenched traditional gender roles that were firmly rooted in Confucian values emphasising male dominance and female subservience.

In the 1980s, Hong Kong underwent a transformation into an international financial centre and a vibrant trade hub, attracting substantial domestic and foreign investment. This economic prosperity catalysed social transformations that enhanced living standards for many individuals and prompted shifts in their values. The status of women within the labour market gradually improved as an increasing number of women entered the workforce, transcending traditional domestic roles to assume pivotal positions in society. This development established a robust foundation for discussions on gender equality.

Simultaneously, as globalisation accelerated, Hong Kong's interactions with the international community intensified. The region experienced an influx of Western cultural and ideological influences; feminist ideas and artistic expressions from the West began to profoundly affect its social fabric and cultural landscape. Western feminism, centred on women's rights and equality, challenged traditional gender roles and discrimination, igniting local discussions on gender equality and prompting individuals to reevaluate long-standing stereotypes related to gender.

Moreover, during the peak of the global feminist movement, extensive discussions surrounding gender equality were stimulated. Feminism heightened societal awareness in Hong Kong, prompting a critical examination of women's status and rights across social, political, and economic domains. This shift provided a foundation for the transformation of Xiaoqian's character in various adaptations.

In traditional Hong Kong culture, Confucian values emphasised male dominance and female subordination, significantly influencing societal thoughts and behaviours.

However, since the 1980s, social changes have challenged these entrenched views, leading to a reevaluation of gender roles and an increased focus on women's positions within society. In this context, Xiaoqian's evolution from a damsel in distress to a saviour represents an important cultural milestone in narrative adaptations. By assuming roles typically reserved for male protagonists as rescuers, Xiaoqian embodies evolving perceptions of women's societal roles. This transformation reflects Hong Kong's ongoing pursuit of gender equality while offering an opportunity to reconsider established gender norms.

Furthermore, the incorporation of elements such as maternal light and references to matriarchal worship reinforces this theme by drawing upon cultural motifs that evoke a sense of feminine strength and authority. These components position Xiaoqian as a central figure within the narrative, symbolising an ancient and profound form of female power, namely, maternal influence. By emphasising Xiaoqian's yearnings, desires, and the challenges she encounters, the 1987 adaptation infuses feminist undertones into the film. This focus represents a significant departure from earlier portrayals in both literary contexts and the 1960 cinematic version. By placing Xiaoqian at the centre of the narrative, this film contests traditional cinematic storylines while providing a more nuanced and empowered representation of female characters.

The synthesis of accentuating femininity through visual representation and the portrayal of a formidable maternal figure, as exemplified by Nie Xiaoqian in the 1987 adaptation of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, results in a richly nuanced and multi-dimensional female character. This approach not only aligns with specific visual and cultural paradigms associated with femininity but also subverts traditional gender roles by presenting a strong and empowered female presence.

3.2.3 *A Chinese Fairy Tale*: Empowerment Illusion and Cultural Connotation

The 2011 version of *A Chinese Fairy Tale* conducts a comprehensive and multi-dimensional examination of characters, gender dynamics, and cultural elements. It provides far-reaching perspectives not only on the film's storyline but also on the wider social landscapes within which it is situated. The incorporation of the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' into this analysis injects a subtle and intellectually stimulating dimension, thereby enriching the comprehension of the film's intricate narrative structure.

Directors Li and Ching were determined to shatter the long-standing stereotype that pigeonholed female ghosts as violent entities. They meticulously focused on the numerous hardships and challenges that the female ghost Xiaoqian endured throughout her life, endowing her with kindness and virtue.

In this new version, Xiaoqian is presented in a strikingly different light. From the perspective of a 'post-feminist masquerade', Xiaoqian's newly developed portrayal can be interpreted as a strategic performance. She emanates childlike innocence, exudes an endearing charm, and possesses a captivating allure. This seemingly innocent and enchanting exterior may serve as a masquerade that conceals her latent strength and agency. The film skilfully softens her demonic traits while reimagining her as a symbol of pure love, all the while remaining aware of her past transgressions. The narrative arc in which she plays a pivotal role in apprehending her grandmother exemplifies her multifaceted nature.

In accordance with the theory of 'post-feminist masquerade', women may strategically adopt certain feminine stereotypes as a means of empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). Xiaoqian's exhibition of childlike innocence and allure could be seen as a calculated masquerade. By outwardly conforming to these ostensibly submissive feminine traits, she may subtly subvert traditional power dynamics from

within. This approach to character development transcends the simplistic binary of good versus evil, enriching the character's psychological depth and enhancing her authenticity. Furthermore, it reflects an increasing inclusivity and progressiveness among filmmakers in their treatment of female characters who embody non-conforming characteristics.

Fundamentally, the evolution of Xiaoqian challenges both traditional literary archetypes that depict female ghosts as uniformly malevolent and the overly idealised portrayals found in earlier films. This transformation dismantles one-dimensional perceptions and encourages the audience to engage with the character from a multiplicity of perspectives. Through such a nuanced representation, the film evokes profound emotional resonance, prompting viewers to reflect on the inherent complexity and multidimensionality of human nature. The 'post-feminist masquerade' embodied in Xiaoqian's character invites the audience to interrogate the very nature of gender roles and how they can be strategically manipulated for purposes of empowerment.

The film's narrative structure positions Yan Chixia and Ning Caichen as Xiaoqian's former and current lovers, ostensibly granting her the autonomy to choose her partner independently. At first glance, this may appear to be a significant advancement toward female empowerment. However, a more nuanced examination reveals a complex web of gender-related issues that are deeply embedded within the film.

Feminist theory emphasises the importance of female-centred narratives in challenging traditional gender roles. In this film, Xiaoqian's dilemma of choosing between two lovers can be interpreted as an effort to construct a female-centred romantic arc. Drawing on the theory of performativity (Bulter, 2017), it is proposed that gender is not an inherent biological trait; instead, it is a social construct that materialises through repeated acts and performances. Xiaoqian's act of making a

choice embodies a form of gender performativity that contests the passive female stereotype prevalent in conventional love stories.

When examined through the lens of 'post-feminist masquerade', Xiaoqian's decision-making process reveals a new layer of complexity. Her seemingly empowered choice to select a lover may, in fact, be a façade. The curse placed upon her by her grandmother, which renders her dependent on Ning Caichen's life force for survival, reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs that women require male rescue. However, this apparent dependence could also serve as a strategic guise. Xiaoqian might be leveraging this situation to gain power in alternative ways, perhaps by skilfully manipulating the emotions of the male characters or utilising their assistance to achieve her own unspoken objectives.

Beauvoir's concept of 'the second sex' is particularly pertinent in this context. Xiaoqian's reliance on Ning Caichen's life force relegates her to the status of 'the second sex', thereby undermining her self-awareness and agency as a female character. Nevertheless, from a 'post-feminist masquerade' perspective, she may be employing this submissive position as a means to exert influence surreptitiously.

Xiaoqian's helplessness following her curse and her reliance on male characters for redemption reinforce the stereotype that women are inherently weak and continuously reliant on male support. Conversely, Yan Chixia, the emotionally detached demon hunter, embodies traditional masculine traits such as physical strength, courage, and protective capability. His primary objective of eradicating all alluring female ghosts can be interpreted as a form of 'patriarchal policing', wherein he enforces a gender-based power structure. The tension between his infatuation with Xiaoqian and his masculine duty creates a conflict that ultimately fails to subvert conventional gender roles.

During the encounter at Lanruo Temple, Chixia's heroic act of protecting Xiaoqian - despite the potential cost to his own life - and Xiaoqian's decision to vanish with Chixia rather than leave with Caichen suggest an inclination towards masculinity (embodied by Yan Chixia) over femininity (represented by Ning Caichen) within the director's narrative.

From a gender-conscious perspective, Wilson Yip's interpretation may reflect an inclination towards masculinity. However, this tendency warrants examination within the broader context of Hong Kong's social attitudes, traditional gender norms, and cinematic representations. Hong Kong society has been shaped by conservative gender roles and standards, where masculinity is associated with attributes such as physical power, strength, and the ability to provide protection. These attributes have been consistently reinforced by mainstream media, particularly in film, over the past several decades. Consequently, the prominence of these traditional male characteristics in Wilson Yip's work can be seen as a reflection of deeply ingrained societal perspectives. Given its rich history of action and martial arts films, Hong Kong cinema often emphasises traditional male attributes through its portrayals of male characters. This emphasis stems from historical representations of intricate societal gender interactions, which influence directors' creative choices. Directors like Wilson Yip may be subconsciously influenced by these cinematic traditions when replicating prevailing gender standards in their work (Chen, 2012). This preference for Chixia over Caichen can be critiqued from a gender theory standpoint for reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies by privileging masculine traits over their feminine counterparts.

By prioritising the masculine attributes personified by Chixia over the feminine attributes symbolised by Caichen, Yip may be reflecting societal perceptions of what qualities are considered essential or attractive in romantic partners. These social assumptions about gender roles typically associate masculinity with traits such as

strength, protection, and the ability to provide for one's family, which have historically been deemed desirable. From a gender theory perspective, this narrative decision can be critiqued for reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies by privileging masculine traits over feminine ones (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). In the film, the female ghost Xiaoqian requires rescue by the male scholar Caichen, who, when compared to the warrior Chixia, appears comparatively weaker. This juxtaposition reinforces the perception that women are physically weaker than men and that effeminate men are less potent than traditionally masculine men, thereby highlighting the director's portrayal and preference for a progressive gender hierarchy. This approach could be seen as a missed opportunity to challenge these norms and present a more balanced view of gender attributes.

This gender dynamic reinforces traditional gender power structures and has drawn significant attention and criticism from contemporary audiences and critics regarding the gender stereotypes portrayed in the film. The evaluation of the director's handling of gender issues greatly influences this film's overall perception, demonstrating the impact of societal norms and expectations on the arts and entertainment industry.

The 2011 adaptation of *A Chinese Fairy Tale* stands as a remarkable testament to the collaborative efforts between the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong. With the mainland assuming the role of the principal financier, this joint venture has inevitably led to a rich amalgamation of social and cinematic elements from both regions. The backdrop of this creative collaboration is the significant transformation that the Chinese mainland underwent during the latter half of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, marked by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and modernisation. These sweeping changes brought about substantial shifts in the social characteristics and prevailing values of Chinese society.

A Chinese Fairy Tale serves as a poignant cinematic canvas that captures the inherent

conflict between the deeply ingrained traditional Chinese principles rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and the allure of a contemporary consumer-driven society. In a rapidly evolving social landscape, the film resonates with the broader discourse on the decline of moral and ethical principles.

As China transitioned from a pre-modern era, characterised by rural societies and traditional values, to a modern, urbanised, and globalised one, the allure and enigma of contemporary life became more pronounced. Xiaoqian's character mirrors these complex cultural shifts. In this adaptation, her multifaceted persona transcends simplistic angel-demon dichotomies and can be interpreted as a form of masquerade. She embodies the blurred lines between good and evil in contemporary society; her employment of traditional feminine traits, while simultaneously subverting the, can be viewed as a response to evolving cultural values.

Beyond its exploration of the traditional-modern value conflict, *A Chinese Fairy Tale* also examines the intricate relationship between classic horror storytelling and the evolving gender dynamics within Hong Kong's socio-cultural context. The film skilfully integrates elements of the Western femme fatale archetype into the framework of traditional Chinese horror. In a 'post-feminist masquerade' context, this archetype can be understood as a type of disguise. The female ghosts, including Xiaoqian, are not merely sources of terror; they are complex characters whose allure and apparent power serve as a challenge to conventional gender power structures.

Rather than depicting female ghosts solely as embodiments of fear, the film humanises them by emphasising their tragic circumstances, endearing appearances, and courageous pursuits of love. This approach offers a more empathetic portrayal that contrasts with typical Western depictions of femme fatale and is enriched by cultural nuances relevant to post-feminist discourse. The female characters in Hong Kong films - identified by a remarkable blend of Eastern and Western influences - can

be understood as a response to an evolving comprehension of gender roles. These female characters utilise their cultural and gender-based disguises to assert their identities while simultaneously challenging traditional perspectives on femininity.

Hong Kong's cinematic output has long been shaped by its unique socio-cultural milieu, which is influenced by its colonial history and rapid urbanisation. This context has resulted in a distinctive fusion of Eastern and Western narrative elements, giving rise to a vibrant film industry that effectively captures the essence of Hong Kong's cultural evolution. *A Chinese Fairy Tale* represents a standout example of this particular phenomenon. The film adeptly blends these diverse elements within the framework of 'post-feminist masquerade', illustrating how gender and cultural identities can be manipulated and re-imagined. It encapsulates the transition from traditional Confucian principles to a more globally interconnected and modern perspective, with female characters employing masquerades as tools for empowerment amid this shifting cultural landscape.

Set against the backdrop of China's transformation from a predominantly rural society to an urbanised culture, the 2011 joint production *A Chinese Fairy Tale* offers profound insights into the internal challenges engendered by such change. It delves into the complexities arising from the collision between traditional values and an increasingly modernising world, thereby capturing the essence of contemporary China's cultural transformation. The concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' enriches this exploration by highlighting how gender and cultural norms can be both challenged and reaffirmed throughout processes of cultural change.

Moreover, by exploring the Chinese contemporary new magic genre, the film represents a significant advancement. It seamlessly combines conventional thematic components with current cinematic techniques to construct a narrative structure that mirrors the intricacies of modern Chinese culture. This innovative approach breathes

new life into conventional folklore and horror stories. The 'post-feminist masquerade' in the film serves as a powerful cultural critique, commenting on the changing gender roles and socio-economic shifts within Hong Kong's rapidly evolving environment and the broader mainland Chinese context. In essence, the 2011 version of *A Chinese Fairy Tale* is not just a film; it is a cultural artefact that reflects the changing times and the evolving sensibilities of society, with the 'post-feminist masquerade' being an integral aspect of this reflection.

In conclusion, the in-depth exploration of the 'literati female ghost' archetype within the corpus of Chinese cinema has unearthed a cultural phenomenon that is both intricate and dynamic. Through a meticulous and hermeneutic analysis of *The Enchanting Shadow*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and *A Chinese Fairy Tale*, it becomes patently clear that this archetype functions as a potent medium for the articulation of a panoply of theme. These themes span a vast spectrum, ranging from the complex intersections of sexuality and gender to the nuanced terrains of cultural identity and the ever-shifting landscape of social change.

The metamorphosis of the female ghost character, most notably Xiaoqian, across these cinematic adaptations serves as a microcosmic reflection of the broader historical and cultural tectonic shifts that have transpired within Chinese society. In *The Enchanting Shadow*, we bear witness to the nascent stirrings of resistance against the entrenched structures of patriarchal oppression. Here, Xiaoqian's arduous struggle for autonomy and self-actualisation is symbolically encoded within the narrative, serving as a cipher for the burgeoning desires for individual freedom and self-determination that were emerging within the social fabric of the time.

A Chinese Ghost Story propels the discourse on gender forward with remarkable force. The portrayal of Xiaoqian in this film is that of a multi-dimensional and complex figure. She is simultaneously alluring, drawing the viewer in with her ethereal charm,

and empowered, actively challenging the long-standing traditional gender roles. This is achieved through her exercise of agency, as she takes control of her own narrative and challenges the male gaze, which has consistently exerted a dominant impact on the visual representation of women in the cinematic medium. By doing so, she disrupts the established power dynamics and forces a re-evaluation of the traditional roles assigned to women in both filmic and societal contexts.

A Chinese Fairy Tale plunges even more profoundly into the cultural and theoretical dimensions, exploring the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade'. In this film, Xiaoqian's character is a masterful embodiment of a strategic performativity. She deftly blurs the dichotomous lines between innocence and strength, confounding the simplistic and binary notions of good and evil. This film also illuminates the intricate and often fraught interplay between the deeply-rooted traditional Chinese values and the inexorable forces of modernisation. It also showcases the palpable influence of Western cultural elements on the representation of female characters, highlighting the process of cultural hybridisation that has been occurring in the globalised era.

The exploration of films centred around the 'literati female ghost' archetype constitutes a multifaceted and intellectually fertile domain of academic inquiry, with far-reaching implications that resonate across multiple academic disciplines.

From a film studies perspective, these films offer a unique and privileged vantage point from which to deconstruct and analyse the complex architecture of narrative construction, the subtle nuances of visual aesthetics, and the evolutionary trajectory of cinematic language. For example, the meticulous use of lighting, which may range from the soft, diffused glow that enhances her otherworldly aura to the harsh, contrasty light that accentuates her emotional turmoil; the carefully chosen costumes that not only reflect her ghostly or human identity but also symbolise her inner state; and the strategic employment of camera angles, whether it be the low-angle shot that

197

elevates her to a position of power or the high-angle shot that conveys her vulnerability, can all be subjected to semiotic analysis. This analysis can reveal how filmmakers artfully convey her otherworldly nature, the labyrinthine complexity of her emotions, and the rich symbolic significance that she embodies. In the context of narrative, the arcs of these characters often deviate from the linear and formulaic storytelling traditions, introducing elements of the supernatural and the psychological. These elements not only add a layer of depth and complexity to the narrative but also challenge the established norms and conventions of film narrative structure, forcing a re-evaluation of what is possible within the realm of cinematic storytelling.

In the realm of cultural studies, the literati female ghost serves as a potent and evocative symbol that encapsulates the core values, deeply held beliefs, and collective historical memories of Chinese society. Rooted in the rich tapestry of traditional Chinese mythology, folklore, and literature, this archetype has undergone a continuous process of reimagining and reinterpretation over time. This evolution mirrors the dynamic and ever-changing nature of Chinese culture. For instance, the transformation of the female ghost from a one-dimensional figure of pure malevolence in early literary works to a more complex, multi-faceted, and sympathetic character in modern films is a testament to the shifting cultural attitudes towards gender, morality, and the supernatural. This metamorphosis can be attributed to the extensive social upheavals that have swept across China, such as the impact of modernisation, which has brought about new ways of life and thinking; globalisation, which has exposed Chinese culture to a diverse range of international influences; and the rise of feminist movements, which have challenged the traditional gender hierarchies and forced a re-evaluation of traditional cultural narratives.

Gender studies find a rich and fertile ground for research in the portrayal of the 'literati female ghost'. The character often defies the traditional gender roles that have been imposed upon women for centuries. She does this either by directly challenging

the male-dominated power structures that have long oppressed women or by embodying a unique blend of masculine and feminine traits, thus transcending the binary limitations of gender. This presents a significant contrast to the conventional depiction of women as passive and docile entities, who are often reduced to being mere objects of male desire and domination. Such a portrayal not only furnishes a platform for an in-depth and sophisticated discourse on the formation of gender identities within Chinese cinema but also serves as a prism through which one can examine how these portrayals can be utilised to question and undermine the established gender power structures and gender hierarchies, both within the cinematic landscape and in the wider social context.

3.3 Chinese New Magic Films: Transforming the Painted Skin Narrative - Cultural Hybridity, Feminist Subversions, and Global Comparisons

3.3.1 Chinese New Magic Films

In the long-standing evolution of film art, the Western fantasy film genre[53] has flourished, propelled by continuous innovation in visual representation. Hollywood masterpieces such as the enigmatic *The Mummy* series, the wizard-laden *Harry Potter* franchise, the epic *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and the enchanting *The Chronicles of Narnia* have achieved remarkable global box office success. These films, characterised by their unique narrative structures, impactful visual styles, and distinct symbolic systems, have not only garnered worldwide acclaim but also transformed traditional cinematic narratives, providing audiences with novel audio-visual experiences and narrative sensations.

Amidst this backdrop of global cinematic development, a new genre has emerged within the Chinese film industry: Chinese new magic[54] films. This emergence represents a harmonious fusion of cultural heritage, technological advancement, and contemporary sensibilities.

Rooted in contemporary cinema, Chinese new magic films serve as a canvas for traditional Chinese culture. Ancient creation myths, such as Pangu separating heaven from earth and Hou Yi shooting down nine suns, imbue these stories with millennia-old cultural significance. Folklore like that of the White Snake's tale enriches these narratives with human-like emotions and moral lessons. Furthermore, Taoist and Buddhist philosophies including concepts such as Yin-Yang harmony and karma cycles, elevate these films to a philosophical level.

In an era marked by rapid technological advancements, Chinese new magic films are keeping pace with developments in filmmaking techniques. Filmmakers employ advanced special effects technologies like computer-generated imagery (CGI) to craft

breathtaking magical scenes while integrating modern multi-linear storytelling methods. Rather than merely replicating Western fantasy cinema conventions; they leverage increasing financial support alongside progressive filmmaking technology to create distinctive narratives that resonate on both local and global scales.

There are notable similarities between contemporary Chinese new magic films, such as *Painted Skin* and *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, and Western fantasy cinema in terms of visual representation, narrative development, character design, and the adaptation of classical texts. However, these Chinese new magic films infuse these elements with distinct cultural nuances that render them unique.

Both *A Chinese Fairy Tale* and *Painted Skin*[55], adapted from Pu Songling's literary works, feature fictional female heroines that embody different archetypes. The female ghost Xiaoqian in *A Chinese Fairy Tale*, often associated with classic horror films, represents traditional Chinese moral and aesthetic values. As a 'literati female ghost', she epitomises refined morality and virtue, exemplifying the artistic and ethical principles inherent in traditional Chinese culture. In contrast, the female spirit in *Painted Skin* presents a more sinister and terrifying image. The revelation of her true face shatters her previously alluring representation, exposing a fearsome visage. This depiction sharply contrasts with the delicate portrayals of female ghosts commonly found within traditional Chinese mythology and classic horror films.

This transformation from benevolent to malevolent reflects the evolution of gender norm discourses in contemporary culture. The seamless integration of ancient folklore with modern cinematic techniques within new magic films provides a fresh perspective for articulating post-feminist discourse within the film domain. Through the theoretical lens of 'post-feminist masquerade', an exploration into the intricate relationships among gender dynamics, cultural identities, and global trends in film development reveals how narrative structures shape and reflect social paradigms

while also highlighting their inherent transformative potential.

The progression from the film adaptation of Pu's *A Chinese Ghost Story* to that of *Painted Skin* illustrates how different film genres can effectively cater to various archetypes, thereby offering more inclusive and nuanced portrayals of female characters. The multifaceted exploration of 'post-feminist masquerade' within the new magic film genre challenges traditional assumptions about femininity. It transcends conventional preconceived notions, representing a significant milestone in the evolution of this film genre while simultaneously aligning with broader socio-cultural transformations that are reshaping the roles of female characters in contemporary Chinese cinema.

Chinese new magic films not only constitute a fresh addition to the global cinematic landscape but also serve as a celebration of Chinese culture, a demonstration of technological innovation, and a platform for examining contemporary gender and cultural issues. As these films continue to evolve, they are poised to leave an enduring impact on the world of cinema, particularly in redefining the roles and representations of female spirits within an increasingly globalised and culturally diverse film industry.

3.3.2 *The Painted Skin* Narrative and Its Initial Film Adaptation

The *Painted Skin* narrative, deeply rooted in the rich soil of traditional Chinese literary heritage, has traversed a remarkable trajectory of transformation in the realm of cinema. These film adaptations are not merely commercial entertainments but rather complex cultural artefacts that serve as a prism through which the evolving values, social structures, and aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese society can be discerned. This research embarks on a comprehensive exploration, aiming to analyse the narrative architecture, character development, genre metamorphosis, and cultural resonances of the *Painted Skin* films.

The original literary rendition of *Painted Skin* exhibits a narrative structure that, while seemingly straightforward, is replete with layers of moral and cultural significance. Broadly divisible into two primary segments, the first part centres on the character of Wang Sheng. Wang Sheng's chance encounter with a beguiling woman, who is later revealed to be a female demon, sets the stage for a narrative arc that explores themes of human weakness, moral turpitude, and the perils of succumbing to carnal desires. Despite explicit warnings from both a Taoist priest, who represents the wisdom of traditional spiritual knowledge, and his wife, who embodies the virtue of marital loyalty, Wang Sheng becomes ensnared in an intimate relationship with the female demon. This liaison is ultimately cut short when the female ghost, in a sudden and unexpected act, extracts Wang Sheng's heart, resulting in his untimely demise.

The second section of the story pivots to Wang Sheng's wife, Chen Shi. In the throes of despair and a desperate longing to resurrect her husband, Chen Shi turns to the Taoist priest for assistance. The priest agrees to help, but his remedy involves a series of esoteric and morally challenging tasks, including the consumption of human saliva. Chen Shi's earnest efforts, however, end in failure, plunging her into a profound abyss of guilt and humiliation. In a surreal and symbolically charged turn of events, the saliva she expels transforms into a new heart within her abdomen, which then

miraculously enters Wang Sheng's body, facilitating his rebirth. This narrative trajectory not only delves into the motifs of self-sacrifice, redemption, and the potency of love but also functions as a miniature mirror of conventional Chinese values as filial devotion, loyalty, and the intricate connection between the human realm and the supernatural domain.

Among the pantheon of *Painted Skin* film adaptations, is the 1966 version directed by Paw Fong (see Figures 3.3 & 3.4) which stands out as the most faithful to the original literary work. This cinematic interpretation serves as a bridge between the literary and the visual, effectively preserving the core ethical and moral themes of the source material. The film delves deep into the satirical elements present in Pu Songling's original work, using them as a lens through which to critique the prevalent patriarchal practices of feudal Chinese culture. The character of Chongwen, a variation of the archetypal male figure Wang Sheng, is portrayed as a morally degenerate scholar, whose insatiable desires for fame, fortune, and sexual conquests lead him astray. In contrast, his wife is depicted as a paragon of virtue, embodying unwavering loyalty and inherent goodness.

However, the film's portrayal of the fox demon is somewhat one-dimensional, lacking the depth and complexity that would later be explored in subsequent adaptations. The female demon is presented as a straightforward embodiment of evil, a femme fatale whose sole purpose is to seek out and consume the hearts of men, particularly Chongwen. This simplistic binary framework, while emblematic of the 'classic horror' genre of that time period, limits the film's ability to explore the more nuanced aspects of the female demon's character. The film's narrative structure, with its clear-cut delineation between good and evil, serves as a vehicle for satirically examining broader societal issues, such as the moral decay within the male-centric intellectual elite class and the dehumanising objectification of women, reducing them to mere commodities. Feminist theory provides valuable insights into the film's portrayal of

gender dynamics, highlighting how the male-dominated power structures of feudal society are upheld through the manipulation and dehumanisation of women's bodies. The female demon, in this context, becomes a symbol of male anxiety and the threat posed by female sexuality.

The 1966 film, representing the 'classic horror' genre, highlights inherent issues that are readily identifiable and resolvable in a straightforward manner, emblematic of the prevalent storytelling style during that era. The portrayal of the female demon in this movie exemplifies the conceptual concerns distinctive to the genre, embodying nefarious ideas and temptations pervasive in contemporary society while displaying distinct qualities that set her apart from ordinary individuals. The depiction of this female demon in an unsettling manner elicits a potent and instinctive reaction from modern audiences, evoking profound dread and repulsion. Consequently, the term 'painted skin' became a recurring motif in Chinese horror films, particularly those from Hong Kong. This representation aligns with the notions of femme fatale and monstrous-feminine concepts within cinema studies.

The femme fatale, commonly depicted as a cunning and dangerous woman, has captivated audiences and evoked fear in movie narratives. Scholarly investigations on the femme fatale, particularly within 1940s film noir, have prioritised the portrayal of hostility and apprehension rather than admiration and desire (Zhang, 2023). This emphasis often overshadowed the complexities and nuances of the femme fatale persona, reducing her to a simplistic representation of male anxieties (Zhang, 2023). Nevertheless, feminist critique since the 1970s has aimed to transcend this critical caricature by recognising her as a symbol that disrupts conventional gender norms and male-dominated systems instead of merely personifying them (Zhai, 2022). This reassessment aligns with the monstrous-feminine thesis, which suggests that the horror genre frequently reflects societal concerns about femininity and defiance against traditional gender norms through characters like female demons.

Figures 3.3 & 3.4 *The Painted Skin* (1966)

3.3.3 The Cinematic Evolution of *Painted Skin*: A Multifaceted Analysis of Narrative, Gender, and Cultural Hybridity

The subsequent section conducts a thorough and profound examination of the 2008 and 2012 film renditions of *Painted Skin*. By integrating perspectives from genre studies, gender theory, and cultural analysis, it reveals how these adaptations depart from the original literary work and the previous film versions. The research also explores how they redefine narrative structures, embody feminist and post-feminist perspectives through character development, and engage with traditional Chinese culture while incorporating global cinematic elements. A comparative analysis with Western ghost films further illuminates the unique cultural, historical, and aesthetic features of the Chinese female ghost film subgenre, highlighting its significance in understanding the complex relationship among cinema, culture, and identity.

The 2008 film adaptation of *Painted Skin* represents a radical departure from both the original literary work and the 1966 film. This cinematic masterpiece transcends the boundaries of time and space, exploring the profound emotional dilemmas that plague contemporary individuals. It transforms the age-old narrative of *Painted Skin* from a simple moral cautionary tale with elements of horror into a multi-dimensional, enchanting love story. At the heart of this transformation is the character of Xiaowei, a fox spirit[56] who undergoes a remarkable process of deconstruction and subversion on-screen.

Xiaowei's character undergoes a significant transformation, evolving from a malevolent demon driven by an insatiable desire for human hearts to a multifaceted and sympathetic figure who is prepared to sacrifice everything for the sake of love. Her initial allure, rooted in her unparalleled physical beauty, allows her to seamlessly integrate into human society, captivating the hearts of men, including General Wang Sheng. However, as the film progresses, her character is revealed to be much more than a simple seductress. Her love for Wang Sheng, while initially expressed as a

possessive and obsessive passion, eventually transforms into a selfless and sacrificial love. This transformation is not only a testament to the power of love but also a subversion of the female demons in the previous *Painted Skin* narrative as purely evil/malevolent.

Unlike the nameless avenging ghost in the original literary narrative, Xiaowei in this version can be considered a modern 'feminist hero' to some extent. As Kwon points out, the emergence of the avenging female ghost is due to an unjust death, which means that if a person dies unexpectedly and unfairly, her soul is unable to transition into the afterlife; thus, it transforms into a wronged soul seeking revenge from other victims (Kwon, 2006, p. 85), implying the concept of 'victimisation of females'. Females are often perceived as weak, fragile, and passive, making them frequent victims of tragedies. Additionally, it is commonly believed that beautiful women pose a danger to male morality as they are seen as narrow-minded by nature and skilled at scheming (Kwon, 2005, p. 529). The alleged moral deterioration of males is frequently ascribed to adverse influences exerted by these females. As Allan Barr argues, the female ghost in Pu's *Painted Skin* embodies typical 'sinister' and 'threatening' characteristics, reinforcing negative and demonic stereotypes associated with femininity (Barr, 1989, pp. 515-516). In this regard, it reflects misogynistic beliefs held by males as well as the devaluation of females.

In contrast, in the film, Xiaowei demonstrates a remarkable level of modern female individuality and independence. Firstly, rather than being passively subjugated by others, like in the novella, Xiaowei has agency in pursuing her desired love and becomes an active 'subject' who willingly sacrifices her life for her lover. Secondly, the revelation of Xiaowei's 'true appearance (demon face)' occurs through Peirong's discovery rather than through Wang Sheng, the male lead. Xiaowei is asked to undress for inspection for any demonic signs on her body, and it is a female (Peirong) who views Xiaowei's body, symbolising how women gaze upon each other instead of

being objectified by men. Thirdly, Xiaowei's subversion of the male-dominated world is a remarkable facet of her feminist persona (Li, 2015, pp. 220-223). Xiaowei demonstrates remarkable prowess in her treatment of male characters, deceiving and even eliminating soldiers who are enamoured with her, assuming a superior attitude towards Xiaoyi akin to that of a servant, and skilfully manipulating Wang Sheng into perceiving her as an innocent damsel. These actions showcase her dominance and reveal her astute understanding of gender dynamics (Li, 2015, pp. 223-224).

Xiaowei, despite her inherent strength and competence, engages in a conscious and strategic act of self-presentation. She deliberately conceals her true potential by adopting a façade of feeble femininity, a phenomenon that can be understood as a calculated 'post-feminist masquerade'. This masquerade is executed through what Judith Butler terms 'performative femininity'. Xiaowei's enactment of femininity serves as a prime illustration of this theoretical framework in a practical context.

On a fundamental level, Xiaowei's physical appearance is a carefully crafted performance. Her long, lustrous hair, cascading in soft waves, has long been a symbol of traditional feminine beauty. The delicate contours of her face, subtly enhanced by makeup, align with the aesthetic ideals that have been culturally ingrained as feminine over centuries. Her choice of wardrobe, consisting of flowing, diaphanous gowns, not only accentuates her physical form but also functions as a visual cue, suggesting vulnerability and delicacy. This visual display is far from merely decorative. It represents a strategic deployment of cultural symbols that are immediately recognizable as feminine within the cultural context of the film. By embodying these symbols, Xiaowei is not just conforming to gender norms but using them as a means to an end. She manipulates these symbols to navigate the male-dominated world around her, subverting traditional power dynamics while maintaining the appearance of compliance.

On a behavioural level, Xiaowei's actions are a meticulously choreographed display of performative femininity. Her gait is measured and graceful, each step a calculated movement that exudes an air of elegance. When she speaks, her voice is soft-toned, with a melodic quality that is both soothing and alluring. In her interactions with male characters, particularly General Wang Sheng, she adopts a deferential posture. Her eyes often lower demurely, and her body language conveys a sense of submissiveness, as if she is the quintessential passive female subject within a patriarchal social order.

However, Xiaowei's performative femininity is far from a simple act of compliance with gender norms; it is a sophisticated strategy of subversion. In a society dominated by male-centred power structures, she uses the very trappings of femininity as a means to gain agency and power. When encountering the soldiers who are captivated by her beauty, Xiaowei's performance of femininity becomes a lethal weapon. She plays the role of the innocent, vulnerable woman, luring these men into a false sense of security. Her flirtatious smiles and coy glances are calculated to disarm them, making them easy prey for her supernatural powers. This subversion of the traditional power dynamic, where the supposed 'weak' female turns the tables on the 'strong' male, challenges the very foundation of patriarchal assumptions about gender and power.

In her relationship with Wang Sheng, Xiaowei's performative femininity is equally strategic. She manipulates his emotions by presenting herself as a damsel in distress, awakening his protective instincts. This not only allows her to gain access to his inner circle but also enables her to influence his decisions. By feigning dependence on him, she is exerting a form of control over him, subverting the traditional gender roles where the man is the protector and the woman is protected.

The revelation of Xiaowei's true identity as a fox spirit through the female gaze of Peirong, Wang Sheng's wife, is a crucial moment in understanding her performative

subversion. In a traditional cinematic and cultural context, the male gaze is often the dominant force that objectifies and reveals female characters. However, in this instance, it is a woman who sees through Xiaowei's performative facade. This shift in the gaze disrupts the traditional power dynamic, suggesting that women are not merely passive objects of male scrutiny but active subjects who can uncover the hidden truths behind gender performances.

Xiaowei's use of performative femininity in the 2008 *Painted Skin* has far-reaching implications for understanding gender dynamics, identity, and the post-feminist landscape. Her character challenges the binary understanding of gender, where masculinity and femininity are seen as fixed, opposing poles. Instead, Xiaowei's ability to oscillate between her true, powerful self as a fox spirit and her performative identity as a feminine human woman highlights the constructed nature and fluidity of gender.

From an identity perspective, Xiaowei's masquerade prompts inquiries regarding the connection between one's self-identity and social enactment. Her performative femininity is not an authentic expression of her 'true' self but a strategic adoption of a social role. This indicates that identity is not a fixed, internal core but an entity that is perpetually being negotiated and re-constructed, influenced by cultural, political, and social factors.

In the context of post-feminism, Xiaowei's character represents a complex process of reconciling gender equality with the persistent influence of patriarchal frameworks. On one hand, her subversion of male-dominated power through performative femininity can be interpreted as an act of female empowerment, a means of claiming agency within a patriarchal society. On the other hand, her reliance on traditional feminine tropes also reveals the continued influence of patriarchal norms, even in the context of post-feminist discourses.

The portrayal of Xiaowei in this movie exemplifies the core concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade', a crucial term explored extensively throughout this thesis. The intricate layers and complexities of Xiaowei's relationships and behaviour embody this masquerade. This subversion does not directly challenge the existing gender standards; instead, it involves strategically exploiting these conventions to her advantage. Xiaowei strategically employs conventional aspects of femininity to navigate and manipulate patriarchal systems that would otherwise oppress her. The 'post-feminist masquerade' concept is pivotal in understanding Xiaowei's persona within this context, offering a nuanced and sophisticated perspective on gender roles and power dynamics in the post-feminist era. This approach acknowledges the progress towards gender equality while simultaneously recognising persistent disparities and preconceived notions that women must negotiate. Xiaowei's masquerade is more than just an external facade; it represents a strategic engagement with and analysis of the complexities surrounding female empowerment and gender dynamics in contemporary society. This underscores the notion that power can be exerted through various means, where sometimes working from within established systems to undermine them gradually proves to be the most impactful approach.

The film also explores modern themes such as the nature of love, marriage, and marital morality. Set against the backdrop of traditional Chinese culture, the characters embody timeless romantic values with grace and elegance. However, what sets this film apart is its bold exploration of contemporary themes through a modern lens, addressing issues that remain relevant today. According to Dai Hui, there are two distinct genres of typical Chinese romantic dramas: the 'modern romantic drama' and the 'classical romantic drama' (Dai, 2012, p. 26). The latter depicts individuals who are loyal and devoted while glorifying love's transcendent power, a common theme not only seen in Chinese cinema but also depicted in *Painted Skin* (as has been discussed already). This film is a profound exploration of modern themes that

distinguish it, particularly delving into the intricate relationship between marriage in modern times and marital morality. Director Chan aptly describes this film as an enchanting tale of a 'large triangular romance' involving Wang Sheng, Peirong, and Xiaowei, which sparks off various complicated 'small triangular romances' (Liang, 2008, pp. 55-56). This captivating portrayal of complex relationships provides audiences with an invaluable opportunity to reflect on profound topics such as the essence of love itself, how it should be expressed authentically, the intrinsic connection between love and intimacy, as well as the delicate interplay between marriage and moral principles (Sun, 2014, p. 165).

It is noteworthy that comprehending the intricate conflicts within marriages in this film requires a modern perspective. In pre-modern China, polygamy was prevalent, particularly among the social and political elite. However, the general Wang Sheng embodies a 'modern husband' living in a monogamous society, despite the story being set in pre-modern China. In contemporary China, it is deemed socially unacceptable to develop romantic sentiments for someone other than one's spouse, as this goes against the values of marital faithfulness and dedication. Here, Wang Sheng represents a modern husband struggling with the conflicting emotions of remaining loyal to his wife or succumbing to love for another woman. In contrast to the original short story in *Strang Stories*, where male lead Wang Sheng solely takes centre stage in the narrative, this film places particular emphasis on female characters Xiaowei and Peirong. Regarding Peirong, she is portrayed as an embodiment of the ideal traditional Chinese woman who exemplifies passivity, submissiveness, and selfless devotion towards men (Tian, 2009, p. 44). Despite feeling upset due to Wang Sheng's affection for Xiaowei, Peirong suggests that he should marry Xiaowei as his concubine. It is Wang Sheng who refuses Peirong's proposal. On the other hand, Xiaowei represents a modern-day 'mistress' figure who falls in love with a married man and strives to win over Wang Sheng's heart. Furthermore, Wang deliberately exhibits soft and feminine qualities to some extent; for instance, his dream sequences depict him adorned with

feminine makeup, wearing silky attire, and letting down his hair (Pang, 2011, p. 473), symbolising contemporary male anxiety towards women's increasing autonomy and status.

Subsequently, on June 28, 2012, *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* was officially released, and it achieved unprecedented box-office success. By July 26, its box-office earnings had soared past $700 million, smashing a consecutive set of twelve records. These included the first-day box-office record (around $70 million) and the single-day box-office record (about $90 million). This commercial triumph not only solidified the *Painted Skin* franchise's popularity but also marked a new era of success for Chinese-made magic films.

The character of the fox spirit Xiaowei remained a constant throughout the *Painted Skin* series. In the first film, five hundred years before the events of *The Resurrection*, Xiaowei was consumed by love, relentlessly pursuing Wang Sheng's affection and striving to secure the title of Ms Wang. However, in *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, she has transformed into a heartless and detached being. Rarely showing her emotions, she yearns for an impassioned heart to free her from the torment that plagues her existence. This significant character development sets the stage for the film's exploration of destiny, as it delves deeper into the dialectic of good and evil, human nature, and the dichotomy between appearances and truth.

At the beginning of *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, Xiaowei, who was banished to a frigid hell for defying demon-world rules by saving mortal lives in the first film, escapes with the help of the little demon Birdie and is reborn in the nest of Nirvana five centuries later. Her singular goal is to achieve full-moon reincarnation and become human. To this end, she bewitches Huoxin and manipulates Princess Jing, who is disfigured, by exploiting the princess's love for Huoxin and persuading her to sacrifice her heart for Xiaowei's flawless skin.

The film's central theme is 'confusion', which encompasses three key aspects: confusion about life, love, and one's heart. This theme further expands into the 'five calamities': the calamity of life, death, love, desire or sexuality, and one's heart. These elements all revolve around the disastrous consequences of the confusion between matters of the heart, sexuality, and eternal love. The three main characters - Xiaowei, Princess Jing, and Huoxin - drive the plot forward as they grapple with their states of perplexity. Xiaowei must decide between being a human or a demon, Princess Jing is in turmoil due to her confused love for Huoxin, and Huoxin is plagued by inner turmoil caused by his past failure to protect Princess Jing and their disparate social status.

The appeal of *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* to contemporary audiences, as a successful box office guarantee, lies not only in its innovative content setting and character reconstruction based on the original literary work but also in its skilful deconstruction of the female spirit figure and the integration of authentic ethnic and cultural elements within the new magic film genre. Chinese new magic films exhibit a vital element of 'intertextual deconstruction[57]', which involves the relationship between texts through imitation, transformation, and re-creative imagination, leading to new meanings derived from inherent patterns. This intertextuality, both within textual elements and in relation to cultural contexts outside the text, serves as the basis for associative meaning in these films (Orr, 2010).

China possesses a rich traditional culture with abundant myths, legends, tales of wonderment, and deep Buddhist and Taoist traditions that provide an inexhaustible source for subject matter, imagery, and meanings in creating new magic films. For instance, *The Book of Mountains and Seas* from the pre-Qin period is replete with grotesque myths and exotic creatures that have been deconstructed and reconstructed across subsequent generations and in film adaptations. Therefore, Chinese new magic

films can assimilate essential aspects of classic texts and traditional culture.

However, since significant elements have already been identified while critical discourses have long been expressed in previous works, it becomes necessary for post-texts to disarm previous traditions by entering them while opening up space for their creative imagination through revisionary displacement and reconstruction of former texts. At its spiritual core, 'deconstruction' embodies anti-authoritarianism; it affirms the opposition and dismantling of central principles and established orders (Norris, 2003). The process of borrowing, recycling, and reconstructing previous texts by post-texts is a creative and dynamic endeavour that deconstructs prior aesthetic norms to transcend the pre-existing text (Taylor, 1986). Importantly, it should be noted that a film remake based on previous works is not merely a replication of the original literature. Rather than being a replica, remaking a film can be better understood as a form of translation that transforms or rejuvenates the source material (Heinze & Krämer, 2015). To ensure economic viability, remakes must consider variations and deviations compared to their originals to incorporate societal changes (Verevis, 2006).

For instance, within both *Painted Skin* and *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, a conspicuous adaptation occurs wherein the female apparitions as depicted in the novels are transformed into fox spirits. This metamorphosis is not simply a superficial alteration; rather, it represents a calculated stratagem having profound and far-reaching implications. It effectively attenuates the horror elements that were prominently featured in the 1966 horror version, with a deliberate and calculated intention of establishing these new adaptations as contemporary classics.

Stephen Teo, in his incisive analysis, has noted that the amalgamation of ghost stories and the horror genre enjoys significant popularity in Hong Kong. However, the scenario in mainland China diverges markedly. Here, this genre has been proscribed

(Teo, 2008, pp. 345-346), an occurrence whose roots lie in the severe ban enforced on the earliest 1966 film, *The Painted Skin*, directed by Paw Fong. This ban is not an isolated incident but rather a manifestation of a more comprehensive regulatory framework within the Chinese film industry.

In mainland China, regulations against the horror genre are mainly due to the promotion of socialist core values and the need to eliminate feudal superstition. Films must adhere to a materialist worldview. Also, without a film-rating system, horror films need to consider the psychological endurance of all age groups, especially minors, so excessive blood, violence, and terrifying elements are restricted. In Hong Kong, after its return, co-produced films need to comply with mainland regulations. For films only released in Hong Kong, there are relatively fewer restrictions on themes, allowing more ghost and spirit elements. However, market factors and cultural trends still require filmmakers to consider audience acceptability and social impact.

These regulations have different effects on films. In mainland China, filmmakers often set the story background in 'safe zones' like mental hospitals or psyche's dreams, or use science to explain away supernatural phenomena at the end. This narrows the theme selection. Also, with the increasing audience demand, innovation is difficult as the regulatory space restricts the creation of unique horror films. Some directors try to draw from folklore and social hotspots and integrate suspense and reasoning, but the innovation scope remains limited.

Interestingly, it is suggested by Pang that 'female ghost stories' can still exist if there is an absence of actual female ghosts or if they are merely illusions created by protagonists who may suffer from delusions or psychopathy. Alternatively, ghosts could be transformed into spirits (Pang, 2011, p. 472). Some critics have pointed out that individuals residing in rural areas with limited education tend to believe more

strongly in ghosts rather than spirits (Wong, 2016). In Chinese culture, ghosts are commonly seen as the disembodied spirits of deceased individuals. The belief in ghosts is commonly linked to ancestor veneration and the notion that the souls of the departed persist and possess the ability to impact the realm of the living.

Nevertheless, ghosts are commonly seen as agitated or disquieted spirits, perhaps with a negative implication (Poo, 2004). In Chinese culture, the notion of spirits is more expansive and can include a diverse range of incorporeal entities, extending beyond just the souls of the departed. Spirits encompass deities, nature spirits, and other supernatural creatures. They are commonly perceived as integral components of the natural hierarchy, each with distinct roles and purposes within the universe (Teiser, 1986). Spirits can exhibit good, malicious, or neutral characteristics and are commonly venerated or held in high regard under traditional religious customs.

In order to gain access to the mainland Chinese film market, the female apparitions mentioned in the original text have been transformed into mystical fox spirits or entities, and some aspects of terror have been mitigated. In *Painted Skin*, the special effects briefly display the million-dollar shot of painting skin, and the depiction of the demon is not intended to be terrifying (Wong, 2016). Instead, it resembles an extraterrestrial alien being rather than a menacing and fearsome ghost. The scene of the fox spirit Xiaowei killing and eating men's hearts is implicit. Xiaowei pulls her sleeves up to hide the footage when she swallows the human heart that Xiaoyi gives her; and the camera only captures the barbarian chief's facial expression with sound effects when Xiaowei murders him. These shots detract from the adaptation's feeling of dread, which makes it less likely to draw the censors' unfavourable notice from the mainland and easier for the movie to go past censorship and into the mainland Chinese market (Wong, 2016).

The regulatory stance adopted in China towards the ghost-horror genre is deeply

rooted in the country's cultural and ideological landscape. In the framework of contemporary Chinese society, there is a concerted effort to promote a rational, scientific, and forward-looking worldview. The perception that 'modernity is assumed to have cleansed any superstitious elements from society' (Pang 2011, cited by Wong 2016) serves as a cornerstone of this regulatory approach. Ghosts, particularly female ghosts, are regarded as highly allegorical figures that have the potential to trigger unforeseen and uncontrollable interpretations. In a socialist society that places a premium on ideological coherence and the dissemination of positive values, the regulatory system acts as a safeguard against the potential negative impacts of such ambiguous and potentially subversive representations. For example, a traditional ghost story could be misconstrued as promoting feudal superstition, which runs counter to the principles of modernity and scientific thinking that the state endeavours to instil in its citizens. Moreover, the regulatory system aims to prevent any hidden political or ideological messages that could be smuggled into cultural products through the guise of ghost-horror narratives.

From a market and industry perspective, the regulatory system significantly influences the creative and commercial decisions of filmmakers and investors. The transformation of female apparitions into fox spirits in the *Painted Skin* films is a prime example of how regulatory requirements can reshape a film's creative direction. Filmmakers, aiming to tap into the large and profitable mainland Chinese market, must adapt their content to meet regulatory standards. This has given rise to a new sub-genre that skilfully combines elements of fantasy, romance, and the supernatural while avoiding regulatory pitfalls.

The ban on the 1966 *Painted Skin* in mainland China has dampened investor confidence. As Haiyan Lee astutely noted, investors are understandably cautious about financing projects within the prohibited horror ghost genre due to the risk of being shut out of the mainland market. This has, in turn, compelled the film industry

to be more discerning in content selection, steering it towards more compliant and market-friendly genres (Lee, 2014).

Certain romantic subplots in the *Painted Skin* series, as director Gordon Chan suggested, enable viewers to 'dream' rather than have a nightmare after watching the film. Romance is indeed a market-appealing element, and one common feature in commercially successful romantic films is the presence of sophisticated and memorable dialogue. Moreover, *Painted Skin* incorporates more sexual symbols and erotic scenes. The film opens with a breathtaking panoramic shot of the desert and features intense battle scenes, such as Wang's army fighting barbarians. Another notable battle scene is the flashback of Pang Yong single-handedly defeating the enemy before leaving the troop. These additional scenes help transform *Painted Skin* from a traditional horror-ghost story into a historical epic. By integrating elements from various genres, including historical epics, martial arts, supernatural phenomena, and romance, this deconstructed new-age magic film is more hybridised compared to its literary source material by Pu Songling (Wong, 2016).

The regulatory system also has far-reaching implications for society and the audience. On one hand, it serves as a form of cultural education, guiding the audience towards more approved forms of cultural expression. By limiting the exposure to traditional horror-ghost stories, the system shapes the way younger generations perceive the supernatural. For example, the portrayal of fox spirits in the *Painted Skin* films in a more romantic or heroic light can redefine the audience's understanding of these mythical creatures, aligning it with the values promoted by the regulatory authorities. On the other hand, the regulatory framework encompasses not only prohibitive measures but also the adaptation and preservation of cultural heritage. The transformation of the *Painted Skin* story from a traditional horror-ghost narrative to a more hybrid and acceptable form enables the continuation of its cultural legacy. It represents a delicate balance between safeguarding cultural traditions and ensuring

that they are presented in a manner that is congruent with the broader social and ideological objectives of the country. This dynamic of adaptation and preservation is important for maintaining the vibrancy and pertinence of cultural heritage within a contemporary, regulatory-circumscribed context.

Under the aesthetics of intertextuality and deconstruction, Chinese new magic films have established their independence and uniqueness in the transplanting, borrowing, dismantling and reconstructing of mythological and classical texts. In addition to the intertextualisation and deconstruction of traditional Chinese culture, the incorporation of foreign 'concept design[58]', commonly seen in Western fantasy films, plays a crucial role in distinguishing the *Painted Skin* series and contributing substantially to its commercial success. 'Concept design' is an essential pre-production task for many Hollywood fantasy films. However, this term was not widely adopted in the Chinese film industry until the emergence of the *Painted Skin* series, which laid a solid aesthetic foundation for creating the new Chinese magic genre (Wyatt, 1994). After extensively studying his collection of 18 DVDs of *The Lord of the Rings*, director Urshan observed that almost all Western fantasy films have a clear aesthetic basis rooted in Western traditions, such as Christian history and Greek and Norse mythology. Simultaneously, Urshan aimed to infuse a distinct Eastern flavour into the conceptual design of *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* by selecting magical imagery from Eastern religions that align with Eastern aesthetics (Jackson et al., 2001). This aesthetic is explicitly described as a mysterious world populated by demons, gods, and Buddha.

In the two big battle scenes, the big scene with the army rocketing and the shot of a hundred birds charging is a two-dimensional caricature. In cinema, a two-dimensional caricature often denotes the depiction of characters or components exaggeratedly or simplified, generally employed to create a particular impact or convey a specific message. Visual elements, such as character design and animation, as well as the

composition and presentation of scenes, may be utilised to achieve this. The film's biggest highlight, the skin swap change process, is a dazzling and gorgeous special effect. The place where Xiaowei and Princess Jing change their skins twice and hearts once is underwater. Water, in itself, implies transformation and a wealth of female emotions. Each shot in the water is perfect for showing the difficult-to-explain triangle between Xiaowei, Princess Jing and Huoxin, that is, the confusion after the skin change, thus arguing a theme that belongs exclusively to *Painted Skin: The Resurrection*, which not only subverts the perception of the world but also tries to rebel against Chinese cinema traditions.

The film challenges the traditional Chinese horror cinematic tradition and subverts global norms. It effectively portrays characters who grapple with the conflicting demands of personal desires and societal expectations, reflecting the evolving social landscape. Drawing heavily from Chinese folklore and mythology, particularly Pu Songling's renowned supernatural narrative *Painted Skin* in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, this film aligns with China's rich cultural legacy. Furthermore, it showcases advancements in visual effects, cinematography, and storytelling techniques, exemplifying the increasing complexity of early 21st-century Chinese filmmaking. The commercial success of this film surpassed previous box office records in China, highlighting its growing domestic and global dominance. This success signifies a significant transformation within the worldwide film industry as Chinese cinema gains greater recognition and appeal. By exploring themes such as love, loyalty, and sacrifice through the romantic challenges faced by its characters, *Painted Skin* offers audiences a lens to examine shifting relationship dynamics and personal values in contemporary China.

Conclusion

The exploration of the transgressive female ghost and spirit figure in Chinese literature and film has revealed a complex and dynamic cultural phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with the historical, social, and psychological evolution of Chinese society. These figures have served as a powerful means of subverting traditional gender roles, challenging moral and cultural norms, and giving voice to the suppressed desires and experiences of women.

In the literary realm, the transgressive female ghost has been a vehicle for exploring the contradictions and injustices of a patriarchal society. Through her actions, whether it is the pursuit of forbidden love, the taking of revenge, or the assertion of her own identity, the transgressive female ghost has disrupted the established narrative of female passivity and obedience. These literary portrayals have not only provided a form of catharsis for the oppressed but have also inspired critical reflection on the nature of power, gender, and morality.

On the cinematic stage, the transgressive female ghost and spirit have been reimagined with a greater emphasis on visual spectacle and emotional impact. Film adaptations have been able to translate the complex literary characters into vivid, three-dimensional figures that resonate with contemporary audiences. These films have engaged with a broad spectrum of social issues, from gender inequality to the changing nature of relationships in modern society. The evolution of these characters across different film adaptations reflects the changing cultural landscape, as well as the increasing awareness of the necessity for more diverse representations of female agency.

The Chinese new magic film genre, with its unique blend of traditional mythology and modern cinema, has further expanded the possibilities for the portrayal of the transgressive female spirit. By incorporating global cinematic trends and techniques,

these films have created a new cultural hybrid that appeals to a global audience. The characters in these films, such as Xiaowei, represent a new form of transgression that is both rooted in Chinese cultural traditions and responsive to contemporary global concerns.

Within the comprehensive context of global cultural communication and interaction, the transgressive female ghost and spirit figures in Chinese literature and film possess the capacity to enhance a more diverse and inclusive comprehension of gender, power, and identity. These unique cultural artefacts offer a distinct perspective on the human experience, one that is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions but also speaks to universal themes of oppression, resistance, and the search for self-determination.

In conclusion, the study of the transgressive female ghost and spirit figure in Chinese literature and film is not only a fascinating exploration of a rich cultural heritage but also a valuable contribution to the continuous dialogue surrounding gender equality, female empowerment, as well as the transformation of cultural norms. These figures underscore the profound impact of storytelling in challenging the status quo and inspiring social changes, both within China and on the global cultural stage.

Chapter 4: The Empowerment of Women in Contemporary Chinese-Language Crime Films

Introduction

With the gradual relaxation of film censorship in mainland China[59] and the vigorous development of the Chinese film market, a growing number of Chinese filmmakers are turning their attention to the crime genre, deriving inspiration from the aesthetic forms and metaphysical attributes of mysterious and captivating femme fatales in Western action movies and film noirs, as well as vengeful heroines in Japanese mystery films and Korean crime flicks. The emerging cohort of Chinese directors consciously integrates feminist and post-feminist perspectives with crime narratives within their stories that feature female protagonists who often adopt perpetrator roles. A significant portion of these accounts centred around aberrant female leads are based on actual events, thus effectively depicting the plight endured by contemporary Chinese women while assuming an instrumental role in presenting socially pertinent themes through reenactments that reflect prevalent viewpoints regarding gender-related matters.

Films depicting adolescents engaging in criminal behaviour, frequently inspired by real-life incidents, have a profound impact on society. They fuel the 'moral panic' surrounding juvenile delinquency, which in turn reflects broader societal apprehensions. 'Moral panic', as expounded by scholars like Stanley Cohen (1972) and Howard S. Becker (1963), offers a crucial framework for understanding how society reacts to such portrayals and their implications. In particular, it helps us analyse the role of films in shaping public perception and influencing social responses towards youth and their behaviours, both in general and in the context of contemporary China.

Moral panic, as defined by Cohen (1972), arises when a society suddenly becomes gripped by intense feelings of anxiety, fear, or concern regarding a specific group or

issue that is regarded as a challenge to the established social values and order. In this process, the media plays a pivotal role. It tends to amplify and sensationalise the issue at hand, thereby triggering public outcry. This public reaction then prompts calls for action from the authorities, which can result in the stigmatisation and over-policing of the group or behaviour in question. For instance, when it comes to juvenile delinquency, if the media presents it in an exaggerated manner, the public may come to view young offenders as a much more significant threat than they truly are in reality.

Films that centre on the delinquent behaviours of youth, such as crime, violence, or acts of rebellion, can give rise to moral panic. These cinematic creations often have a tendency to sensationalise juvenile delinquency, making it appear far more extreme and prevalent than it actually is in real life. Consider, for example, movies that spotlight gangs of teenagers engaged in violent turf wars or committing serious offences like robberies and assaults. Such portrayals can mislead audiences into believing that these behaviours are commonplace among young people, when in fact, the actual occurrence might be much lower. As a result of this distorted perception, the public becomes increasingly concerned and anxious, and may even push for stricter measures against youth, fearing that they could follow the path of the delinquent characters seen on screen. The theories put forward by Becker (1963) and Cohen (1972) are invaluable in helping us dissect this complex social phenomenon and understand how it impacts public views and social responses related to the youth.

In contemporary China, the proliferation of social media has given rise to a scenario where it can imitate the function of traditional media in sparking moral panics, similar to what Stanley Cohen described. Despite the fact that the specific contexts and issues differ from those examined by Cohen in his studies, the concept of moral panic still serves as a valuable analytical instrument. Social media wields the ability to swiftly spread information and diverse opinions regarding a wide range of behaviours or

groups. There are occasions when it might overstate or distort the actual situation of youth behaviours, just as films tend to do. In this regard, films can play a dual role, acting both as an instigator that stirs up social anxiety by presenting certain behaviours in a sensationalised or exaggerated manner and as a regulator that influences how society perceives and responds to those behaviours. Acknowledging the multifaceted function of films enables us to achieve a more profound understanding of the elaborate relationships between cinematic representations, public sentiment, societal reactions, and even governmental regulation. This understanding empowers us to strive for a more well-informed and balanced approach when handling issues related to transgression and the broader Chinese society.

Another key concept that needs to be considered in this section is the 'post-feminist masquerade', which provides insight into the balance between empowering female characters in contemporary Chinese crime films and the corresponding restrictions imposed by societal moral panic along with government censorship regarding related crime phenomena. The concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade' posits that although women may demonstrate empowerment across various domains of life - such as engaging in forms of violence traditionally associated with men, whether depicted in media representations or reported in real-life news cases - this empowerment is frequently superficial or constrained by prevailing patriarchal norms. This notion critically contends that the freedoms and roles assumed by women are often still influenced by a male-centric perspective on female empowerment, resulting in a subtle form of subjugation.

Nonetheless, the predominant scholarly discourse on the representation of violent females has largely concentrated on prominent actors or stars, acclaimed filmmakers, and films within the martial arts genre in their depiction of deviant and violent women in contemporary Chinese-language cinema. However, there exists a significant gap in research that explores how women are portrayed in other current and emerging genres

of Chinese-language commercial cinema, such as crime films. Given the limited presence in academic inquiry to date, it is imperative to conduct an in-depth analysis of these films. Such an examination would provide valuable insights into the degree of empowerment exhibited by these female characters and illuminate how this empowerment can be contextualised within prevailing gender norms and women's societal status in contemporary China.

4.1 Background

Firstly, it is essential to clarify that crime films do not adhere to the rigid genre definitions typically associated with Westerns or war films. Instead, they encompass a diverse array of subgenres, including caper films, detective and police procedurals, gangster films, prison dramas, murder mysteries, courtroom dramas, and other narratives broadly categorised as crime stories. The genre of crime cinema functions similarly to classifications of drama and romance; it serves as an umbrella term that encompasses these smaller yet cohesive subgenres centred around crime and its consequences (Rafter, 2006, p. 6). While distinguishing between genres and thematic groupings can facilitate the establishment of relationships within film classification systems, what is of paramount importance is to comprehend the complex interplay between society and cinema - how they mutually reflect and influence one another. Crime films consistently mirror real-life scenarios by framing scenes in parallel with reality; thus demonstrating the complex relationship between societal issues and cinematic representations. Therefore, this section will focus on the implications of crime films for culture and society while maintaining an open concept of the genre to allow flexibility in rearranging films, identifying patterns, detecting previously unnoticed issues, and uncovering new meanings.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that the subgenres of courtroom dramas, police procedurals, and prison films exhibit increasing fluidity through their subdivision, recombination, and evolution. This process has given rise to novel configurations within critical crime films such as psychological thrillers and neo-noir crime narratives. These emerging forms can be viewed as extensions or outgrowths of traditional crime subgenres while highlighting themes related to transgression and forbidden pleasures (Rafter, 2006, p .7).

The subsequent analysis of Chinese-language crime films will primarily focus on these innovative configurations within the realm of new crime films. Here, the term

'new' points to the innovative and evolving nature of Chinese crime cinema, characterised by genre hybridisation, emerging narrative forms, new thematic explorations, and innovative creative approaches.[60] Since 2011, with the release of *The Man Behind The Courtyard House* (Fei Xing, 2011, China), billed as the first domestic crime drama blockbuster, a benchmark was set for the resurgence of crime films in mainland China. In the years following 2011, the crime genre in mainland China experienced remarkable growth, ushering in a new era.

It has been 100 years since the first crime film was made in mainland China. The Chinese economy and society have undergone earth-shaking changes in its one hundred years of development. Influenced by politics, economy, culture, and many other aspects, crime film works' story content, plot, and narrative focus vary. Female characters in crime films of different periods have been given different identities. In 1921, the film *Yan Ruisheng* (Ren Pengnian, 1921, China), released in Shanghai, is regarded as the pioneer of crime film in China. Adapted from a real social crime case, it focuses on the display of the criminal process: bank clerk Yan Ruisheng is very distressed because of gambling debts. He accidentally sees the hand ornaments on the infamous high-class courtesan Wang Lianying that are very valuable, so he sets out to kill her by luring her to the wilderness and hiring a helper to kill her. Then, the female characters are generally portrayed in the pre-1949 PRC crime films as victims who experience physical or psychological harm from male counterparts or face mistreatment within a patriarchal or feudal society (Zhu & Rosen, 2010).

Furthermore, in the Maoist era, from 1949–1976, Chinese crime films were mainly made with a clear purpose to serve in support of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political ideology's stipulations. The cinematic representations of 'the woman warrior' served such a requirement. They were then depicted as socialist warriors, builders or soldiers who were liberated or rescued by the CCP, such as *in The Case of Xu Qiuying* (Yu Yanfu, 1956, China), *Secret Post in Canton* (Lu Jue, 1957, China)

and *Visitors On The Icy Mountain* (Zhao Xinshui, 1963, China). In their fights against capitalists, landowners, nationalists, foreign invaders, and other opponents of the Communist revolution, the female socialist fighters were always revolutionary. They displayed a strong sense of class consciousness. This type of female warrior is referred to as the 'ideal woman' in mainland films by Yanru Chen (Chen, 2008, p. 104), who was represented as incredibly resilient and willing to sacrifice themselves to defend their comrades and the revolution. In this sense, mainland movies from this era were made to serve a propagandistic function, and both the artists and the propaganda apparatus were eager participants in this process.

With the deepening of reform and opening up and the ideological emancipation movement, the new period (since the 1980s) is essential for creating mainland crime-themed films. While the economy expanded rapidly during this period, some new social contradictions and problems also emerged, reflected in artistic creation. During this period, more and more crime films that show women committing crimes appeared. *An Actress's Dream* (Zhang Jinbiao, 1985, China) tells the story of a beautiful young actress, Ye Hui, who cannot resist the temptation of fame and fortune, and slides into a crime, finally leading to her death. This film changed the routine of previous crime films, which focused on the bravery of police officers and their determination to reason and investigate. However, it puts the narrative focus on the character's contradictory personalities and their tragic fate. The film explores the female character Ye's ambivalence and emotional changes, presenting her as a fully developed character rather than simply a signifier of criminality. However, the film does not show the gradual psychological change in Ye Hui's thoughts and how that change ultimately led to her crime.

Nevertheless, films of this nature often function as microcosms that encapsulate the complexities surrounding gender roles, social mobility, and cultural expectations. *An Actress's Dream* also offers valuable insights into the evolution of Chinese cinema and

its response to changing societal norms, particularly regarding the aspirations and limitations faced by women in the performing arts sector. The film meticulously explores Ye Hui's conflicting emotions and emotional transformations, portraying her as a multifaceted individual rather than merely a representation of criminal behaviour. This approach exemplifies a significant shift in Chinese cinema, wherein female characters are imbued with complexity and depth, allowing for a more nuanced examination of their motivations and challenges.

However, a notable shortcoming of the film is its failure to depict the progressive psychological metamorphosis experienced by Ye Hui; this omission compels viewers to infer the underlying factors driving her actions. *An Actress's Dream* illustrates the evolving dynamics of gender roles within Chinese culture. Ye Hui's character subverts conventional female stereotypes by assertively pursuing her ambitions. Nonetheless, the film simultaneously underscores the constraints imposed by societal expectations and cultural norms - her aspirations ultimately culminate in her downfall. The duality observed in Ye Hui's character reflects the societal pressures encountered by women, particularly within the performing arts realm where aspirations for success frequently conflict with traditional values.

Another work from the same period, *The Price of Frenzy* (Zhou Xiaowen, 1988, China), addresses the shortcomings in depicting female crimes. The film opens with two sisters, Qingqing and Lanlan, showering in a warm atmosphere, followed by a close-up of a man peeping through a telescope. This juxtaposition immediately establishes themes of sex, voyeurism, and sexual assault, contrasting the serene female world with the turbulent male world. Nurse Qingqing and middle school student Lanlan are sisters. After Lanlan is brutally raped by Sun Dacheng, Qingqing, driven by love for her sister and hatred for the perpetrator, vows revenge. As she pursues Sun Dacheng, Qingqing becomes increasingly radical and unstable. Meanwhile, Lanlan remains trapped in the trauma of the assault, burdened by her

sister's relentless pursuit of vengeance. Ultimately, Qingqing kills Sun but ends up imprisoned herself. Qingqing's transformation from a responsible nurse to a vengeful avenger, driven by emotional trauma and anger, forms the film's focal point. Director Zhou explores deeper psychological dimensions such as female sexual psychology, claustrophobia, sexual mania, family loss, and madness, reflecting societal contradictions at the time. The film transcends simplistic good-versus-evil dichotomies, revealing criminal psychology as a chaotic impulse shaped by human instincts, childhood traumas, and repressions. Despite some male biases, its profound portrayal of the female protagonist's psychological transformation makes it a representative work in female crime films.

However, in 2002, the State Council promulgated the *Film Administration Regulations*[61], in which Article 25[62] of the third chapter of film censorship explicitly stipulates that content that represents obscenity, gambling, violence, or instigating crime is prohibited. The punishment is strengthened compared with the past (*Film Administration Regulations*, 2002). In order to avoid unnecessary troubles brought by censorship, many film creators gave up on creating or shooting crime stories[63], predominantly female crime, and the development of crime films in the mainland was struggling. During this period (2002-2011), compared with genres such as romance, martial arts, comedy, etc., the number of crime films in mainland China was relatively small,[64] and the relative few were co-productions with Hong Kong, mainly themed around men's crime and masculinity during this period.[65] Hong Kong cinemas heavily influence these films, and most of the crime stories show the gunfights between police and bandits that happened in Hong Kong or overseas countries, as well as the internal contradictions within the police force, where females are depicted as the victims of hijacking or as companions or the assistants of the male heroes.

Then, in 2011, *The Man Behind The Courtyard House* under the banner of the first domestic crime drama blockbuster, became the benchmark for the recovery of crime

films in mainland China. The shift in the crime-genre films in mainland China after 2011 is attributed to multiple factors, including changes in audience demand[66], the creative drive of filmmakers[67], and the influence of social contexts[68]. Meanwhile, the film industry regulations have also undergone certain changes[69], which have had a promoting effect on this shift.

Afterwards, the crime genre in mainland China flourished and opened a new era, such as *People Mountain People Sea* (Cai Shangjun, 2012, China), *Slight Witness* (Fei Xing, 2013, China) and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* which have not only won awards internationally but also aroused extensive discussion in society. Since then, starting with *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, more and more films depicting different types of female perpetrators of violence have appeared that collectively constitute a new direction in mainland cinema.[70]

Crime films have been relatively rare in Chinese cinemas due to their association with menace and pessimism. The mainland government and authorities perceive these films as an acknowledgement of the discontents of life within what is intended to be a utopia for the people. However, within this limited genre, female characters - who were traditionally relegated to marginal or passive roles as victims - are increasingly being afforded opportunities to take on active leading roles. Many narratives featuring transgressive and deviant female figures are grounded in actual events occurring in contemporary Chinese society.

In modern China, rapid social and economic changes, coupled with uncertainty and instability, have led to increased personal mobility along with heightened anxiety and stress across various aspects of life. These factors contribute to the emergence of diverse forms of female deviant behaviour, which are prominently depicted in commercial films (Hu, 2021). By exploring themes such as criminality/homicide[71]; mental abnormality/illness[72]; and sexual behaviours[73] that defy convention, these

commercial films engage with pressing societal issues, rendering them both relevant and commercially viable.

The emphasis on criminality can be attributed to its dramatic nature which often resonates deeply with audiences. Criminal acts committed by female characters challenge traditional gender norms and expectations, creating narrative tension that captivates viewers. This focus on the criminality of female perpetrators enhances the film's appeal by allowing for a more profound exploration of the complexities surrounding women's roles in a rapidly evolving contemporary Chinese society.

Moreover, the portrayal of female criminality in films not only reflects but also influences real-life perceptions and discussions surrounding this issue. By depicting female characters, particularly juvenile females engaged in criminal behaviour, these films significantly contribute to broader discourses concerning gender dynamics, morality, and law within contemporary society. In this manner, the cinematic representation of female criminality serves as both a reflection of and commentary on real-life phenomena while being shaped by the societal context in which they are produced and consumed.

Contemporary Chinese-language cinemas, especially commercial films, have notably emphasised extreme cases of female criminality - particularly instances of female homicide - potentially at the expense of more common yet less sensational expressions of deviance (such as mental illness or unconventional sexual behaviours), as well as portrayals of female victims (including those who physically escape or flee from danger or even face suicide or violent death at the hands of men[74]). Nevertheless, less conspicuous forms of female deviance - such as mental illness or unconventional sexual behaviours - and overlooked female victims often find themselves ensnared in overwhelming circumstances that lead them toward involvement in extreme cases like homicide. Ultimately, they become perpetrators of murder, whether consciously or

unconsciously.

In contemporary Chinese-language cinema, 'passive' female perpetrators are frequently depicted engaging in deviant behaviour without being portrayed as conventional antagonists. Instead, they emerge as protagonists with whom audiences can empathise - even when committing questionable acts. This sympathy towards passive perpetrators can be attributed to their backstories, which frequently involve past traumas or injustices. Such narratives lead viewers to comprehend and empathise with their actions. The passive nature of these individuals typically arises as a reaction to being wronged or harmed, rendering their transition into deviance a sympathetic plot point rather than an expression of inherent malevolence (Hu, 2021).

Conversely, 'active' female perpetrators in various crime films are characterised by their initiation of deviant actions without compelling backstories or justifications. These characters consciously choose a path of deviance, often motivated by ambition, greed, or other less sympathetic factors. They are depicted as more traditional antagonists who instigate conflict and engage in deviant behaviours from a position of agency rather than as a response to external circumstances.

The portrayal of young girls in Chinese crime films is notably constrained, reflecting societal concerns about youth involvement in criminal activities and evolving gender norms in contemporary China. Young people are seen as harbingers of the future, eliciting a complex mix of anticipation and apprehension (Kong, 2003). Media depictions of these individuals engaging in transgressive behaviours, especially based on real-life cases, can provoke public anxiety. Female juvenile delinquency signals social instability, harming individuals, families, and societal harmony. This raises concerns about the social environment and educational systems. Excessive public fear can lead to moral panic, fostering one-sided perspectives and hindering rational responses. Such reactions can disrupt social harmony and cause unnecessary conflicts.

These portrayals conflict with the official narrative of a 'harmonious society' (和谐社会)[75], triggering fears of social disorder. This tension highlights the complex interplay between media representation, societal values, and changing gender dynamics in modern China (Yan, 2021).

The evolving depiction of female criminality in contemporary Chinese cinema mirrors broader societal transformations concerning perceptions of women's roles and capabilities. Traditionally, girls in China were raised to embody physical restraint, submissiveness, and dependency; practices such as foot binding serve as a poignant illustration of this physical limitation. Such upbringing frequently resulted in internalised aggression among girls, predisposing them to self-harm and mental health issues from an early age. However, significant changes are underway due to the emancipation and co-education of girls that challenge these entrenched norms. This shift has led to an increased portrayal of women's capacity for physical aggression as well as their expression of sexual desires within cinematic narratives - reflecting wider societal changes.

As a result, when rare cases of girls deviating from societal norms or committing crimes emerge, they often become the focal point of national media attention in China. The media's portrayal of such behaviours frequently frames them as warnings of a loss of control, contributing to a moral panic surrounding juvenile delinquency and female deviance. This panic is more pronounced for girls than for their male counterparts, reflecting deep-rooted gender biases. Consequently, the representation of girls' involvement in crime in Chinese film works becomes a critical area of study. These cinematic portrayals not only mirror the 'moral panic' and societal concerns about female delinquency but also navigate the complexities of strict censorship in mainland China. The films provide a lens through which the evolution of societal attitudes towards female criminality, especially among the youth, can be observed and understood. They also offer insights into the tension between traditional expectations

and contemporary realities for Chinese women. This theme has become increasingly significant in the context of modern Chinese society and its media representations.

This preoccupation with female criminality and homicide in contemporary Chinese-language cinema reflects broader social and cultural dialogues. However, it also risks obscuring other crucial aspects of female experience and agency. By sensationalising women as criminals - particularly as murderers - filmmakers captivate audiences through the allure of deviance. This approach may challenge traditional gender norms that define women as docile or submissive, instead presenting complex, morally ambiguous characters capable of exhibiting malevolence comparable to their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, this cinematic trend raises significant concerns regarding representation. The emphasis on female criminality can overshadow narratives centred on female victimhood. While victim narratives possess their own complexities and pitfalls - including the potential reinforcement of women's roles as helpless or passive - they nonetheless highlight pressing issues such as domestic violence, societal oppression, and systemic sexism. These stories can serve as powerful critiques of the structures that perpetuate female suffering. Neglecting these dimensions might imply that the struggles faced by many women are too mundane for cinematic portrayal, thereby further entrenching societal indifference.

By concentrating primarily on the spectacle of female criminality, there exists a risk of reinforcing harmful stereotypes - even when filmmakers believe they are subverting established norms. The depiction of women as dangerous or unstable can have tangible repercussions in real-world contexts, potentially influencing how they are perceived and treated within a society already rife with gender biases. Therefore, while exploring extreme forms of female deviance in Chinese-language cinema facilitates meaningful discussions about gender roles and societal expectations, it

simultaneously necessitates a critical examination of which stories remain untold - and why they are overlooked.

Utilising an integrated theoretical framework that encompasses criminological, post-feminist, and feminist perspectives, this analysis aims to illuminate the portrayal of female and juvenile female deviance in contemporary Chinese-language crime films, commonly referred to as 'new Chinese Crime Cinema'. This term specifically denotes a recent wave of crime films emerging from China, characterised by their focus on societal issues and often challenging traditional cinematic norms[76].

The analysis will address the following key questions: How are female characters - both adult women and girls - depicted in these crime films? What strategies are employed to present these characters in a manner that, under the guise of empowerment, either reinforces or challenges traditional Chinese values, masculine gender norms, and the contemporary socio-cultural context of China? In this regard, the term 'disguise' is analogous to the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade'. It refers to the subtle ways in which film portrayals of female characters in violent or deviant roles can be both empowering while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender norms. This 'masquerade' may involve depicting women in seemingly empowered positions while perpetuating stereotypical or patriarchal views beneath the surface.

Furthermore, this examination seeks to understand how these cinematic representations of deviant women and girls fit within broader discussions regarding the status of women and girls in contemporary Chinese society. By analysing these portrayals, this study aims to uncover deeper insights into how these films reflect and influence ongoing discourse about gender roles, empowerment, and societal expectations in modern China.

4.2 Powerful or Powerless?: Permission and Punishment on Passive and Active Female Perpetrators of Violence

According to traditional gender ideology, women are often perceived or expected to embody traits such as friendliness, gentleness, maternal care, and submissiveness, while violence has historically been associated with masculinity (Morris, 1989). Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that the proportion of women involved in criminal activities, whether violent or non-violent, is significantly lower than that of men (Blanchette & Brown, 2006, p. 25). Traditional gender ideology posits that women, constrained by societal perceptions of their natural dispositions, are less likely to resort to violence in committing homicidal crimes[77]. Female criminal behaviour is highly variable, but in many common scenarios, non-violent property offences are more prevalent among women. Women who engage in violent crimes are frequently labelled as 'social outliers' or 'deviants', not only for violating legal norms but also for transgressing socially constructed gender roles. This dual violation renders female violent offenders a particularly exceptional group.

Nevertheless, the cinematic depiction of female offenders has undergone substantial transformations (Hu, 2019, 2021). These changes in how female characters are portrayed in crime films offer a valuable opportunity to explore deeper societal attitudes and the role of media. The representation of female perpetrators in visual art within Chinese-language cinemas has increasingly paralleled male criminality. Deviant female characters, often inspired by real-life cases, are now depicted as powerful figures in contemporary Chinese-language crime films. This alteration in portrayal showcases an evolving perception of female roles in such cinematic contexts, suggesting a growing complexity in how female characters are involved in criminal narratives.

In mainland film production, a significant number of violent female characters are presented as 'passive perpetrators' (Hu, 2019; 2021). They are not shown as

monstrous killers but rather as unfortunate victims who turn to violence as a means of self-protection or revenge after experiencing betrayal or harm. This portrayal reflects a particular understanding of female violence within the mainland's cinematic framework, where external factors play a crucial role in motivating their actions.

On the other hand, 'active female perpetrators of violence', those who commit crimes for motives like personal desires for wealth or power rather than self-defence or revenge, are relatively scarce in Chinese-language crime films, especially in mainland productions.[78] When these characters do appear, the films employ more subtle tactics in their portrayal. Their aggression and deviance are often intertwined with their personalities and desires, and their storylines usually end in tragedy or seem somewhat meaningless. This kind of depiction further highlights the complexity and nuanced nature of how female deviance is presented in these films.

Unlike Tingting Hu's work which mainly centres on the 'post-feminist masquerade' concept within the domain of Hong Kong crime films, this study adopts a broader and more comprehensive theoretical approach. It incorporates sociological theories related to gender roles across diverse social contexts, exploring how gender roles are constructed and manifested in different cultural settings on the Chinese mainland. With its unique social structures and historical backgrounds, the mainland offers a rich ground for understanding how gender functions differently compared to Hong Kong. For example, the strong emphasis on loyalty, harmony, collectivism, familial values, and motherhood, and the long-standing influence of traditional Chinese culture in mainland society have a profound impact on the construction of gender roles in films. These factors can lead to different manifestations of female characters and the application of the 'post-feminist masquerade' concept.

Additionally, while Hu primarily concentrates on the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade', this research adopts a more comprehensive theoretical framework. It

integrates sociological theories pertaining to gender roles across various social contexts. In doing so, it investigates how gender roles are constructed and manifested within different cultural environments on the Chinese mainland. Furthermore, it incorporates perspectives from cultural studies regarding the construction of violence and femininity in mainland cinema. This multi-theoretical approach facilitates a deeper analysis that extends beyond the scope of Hu's work. For example, it examines how the notion of 'harmony' and 'moral panic' in Chinese culture influences the portrayal of female characters' deviance in films, an aspect not central to Hu's research.

Hu's analysis provides an in-depth exploration of how female characters in Hong Kong crime films employ performative femininity as a 'masquerade' to navigate the intricate power dynamics and feminist ideals inherent to that cinematic landscape. However, this research adopts a broader perspective. It not only scrutinises the performative dimensions but also investigates how the 'post-feminist masquerade' interrelates with the overall narrative structure, character development, and the cultural and social messages conveyed within mainland crime films. For example, it explores the impact of this concept on the audience's interpretation of transgressive female heroines and its fit within the larger context of mainland cinema's portrayal of gender and violence. This approach leads to different interpretations and understandings compared to Hu's work.

The portrayal of both passive and active female perpetrators in contemporary Chinese-language crime films serves as a significant lens for examining society's complex and often conflicting attitudes towards female deviance. These films not only present women as multifaceted characters capable of different forms of violence but also reveal how the contemporary Chinese mass media can respond in various ways to such transgressive behaviours, including tolerating, permitting, or even punishing them. This duality reflects broader societal norms and raises important questions

about the influence of modern media on shaping public perceptions of female deviance. Ultimately, it also has implications for the real-world consequences that Chinese women might face when they deviate from the prescribed social roles, highlighting the powerful role that cinema plays in both reflecting and influencing societal attitudes.

To illustrate the representation of both passive and active female perpetrators of violence in contemporary Chinese-language crime films, as well as the media's varying responses to their deviance, this analysis compares two cases: the passive female perpetrator in the mainland film *Mystery* (Lou Ye, 2012, China), and an active female perpetrator in the Hong Kong production *Dream Home* (Pang Ho-Cheung, 2010, Hong Kong)

Despite being Chinese-language films, mainland and Hong Kong cinemas have often been studied separately within academic literature. This separation is largely due to their unique cultural backgrounds. However, given the strong cultural integration and interconnectedness between these two regions, particularly evident in the development of crime movies[79], it is logical to investigate them collectively while also acknowledging their contexts. Furthermore, Hong Kong's film industry offers a distinct and alternative viewpoint that operates outside mainland censorship, allowing for a more nuanced assessment of representations of female transgression and deviance.

4.2.1 *Mystery*: Female Deviance, Social Pressures, and Gender Narratives in Mainland Chinese Cinema

The mainland production *Mystery* narrates the story of a housewife named Lu Jie who inadvertently teams up with her husband's mistress Sangqi to kill Lu's husband's other lover Wenzi without premeditation. In contrast, *Dream Home* centres on an active female perpetrator - a Hong Kong employee named Sheung - who murders twelve individuals in a desperate attempt to lower housing prices amid immense pressure from the competitive Hong Kong real estate market. The former film emphasises themes related to familial relationships and revenge following betrayal, whereas the latter focuses on personal desires shaped by social pressures and conflicts.

Additionally, this analysis will explore how geographical factors specific to Wuhan and Hong Kong, as well as stylistic differences attributed to directors Lou Ye and Pang Ho-Cheung, contribute to divergent portrayals of female perpetrators across these cinematic works.

At the beginning of *Mystery*, a drone shot glides across the sky. As the atmosphere brightens with Li Zhi's pop song *Day*, the aircraft piloted by the male lead, Qiao Yongzhao, gradually ascends and emerges from the horizon, revealing an increasingly vivid blue sky. A wealthy middle-aged man, Qiao, reclines in his seat while gazing out of the window. At first glance, everything appears harmonious and stable. However, through Qiao's phone call aboard the plane, viewers can infer that his company has secured substantial orders and is experiencing significant business success.

Nevertheless, a fast-paced and dynamic guitar solo accompanying the soundtrack unveils a concealed tension beneath this veneer of tranquillity. The dishevelled state of Qiao's hair, his tousled brown jacket, and his wandering gaze, along with the overall darkness of the scene allude to an underlying buoyancy and restlessness that

244

contradicts his calm exterior.

Upon disembarking from the plane, Qiao drives across the Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge (refer to Figure 4.1 below). The camera follows his vehicle from above to capture a blurred depiction of Wuhan at this moment: in the distance under muted sunlight stand one or two tall chimneys emitting steam languidly; various buildings of differing heights are interspersed throughout; flocks of birds occasionally circle overhead; nearby vehicles traverse on the bridge while boats glide over sparkling waters below. Collectively, these visuals evoke a melancholic ambience characteristic of inland Wuhan, an ancient city enveloped in smog that seems precariously adrift amidst humanity's industrial aspirations.
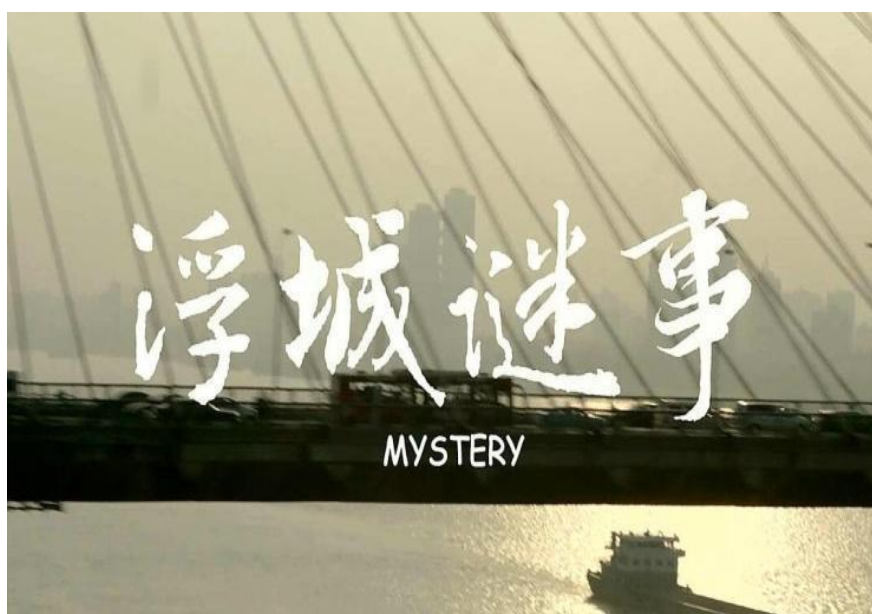
Figure 4.1 Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge in *Mystery*

The male protagonist, Qiao, enjoys a seemingly idyllic family life that garners admiration from others. He is married to a considerate and beautiful wife, Lu Jie, and they have a lovely and intelligent daughter. Their lifestyle reflects the characteristics of the new Chinese middle class, complete with spacious homes and nannies. However, one evening their intimate moment is abruptly interrupted by a phone call.

Lu expresses her anxiety to Qiao about receiving mysterious silent calls; he dismisses her concerns as trivial. Unbeknownst to him, these calls will later serve as the catalyst for upheaval in his otherwise tranquil existence.

Qiao's marriage to Lu Jie has facilitated his ascent into the upper middle class. After their marriage, Lu decides to leave her job in order to care for their daughter and embraces her role as a middle-class housewife. Initially envied by others for this choice, she finds contentment in it over time. Through an unexpected connection with another child's mother named Sangqi, who becomes acquainted with them through their children's friendship, Lu's life takes an unforeseen turn.

In one poignant scene set against heavy rain, Sangqi walks along the street with her son clad only in coats for protection from the elements. In contrast, Lu and her daughter eagerly offer them a ride home in their car, a gesture of kindness that inadvertently sets off events leading to betrayal. This encounter prompts Sangqi, who we ultimately learn is Qiao's mistress, to devise a plan for revenge.

Later on, Sangqi confides in Lu about her suspicions regarding her husband's infidelity and invites Lu to accompany her on an outing intended to catch him red-handed. As they pass by the second-floor window of a coffee shop during this excursion, Lu unexpectedly witnesses Qiao entering a hotel with Wenzi, a college student dressed in white attire; they share an intimate kiss outside on the street - a sight that nearly shatters Lu emotionally. The recent strange phone calls suddenly make sense to her; she concludes that they must be connected to this female college student clad in white.

One night, driven by grief and anger, Lu follows Wenzi. Unable to suppress her inner turmoil, she raises a stone in the heavy rain and strikes Wenzi. Unbeknownst to Lu, Sangqi is behind her. Due to Sangqi's push, Wenzi falls down the hillside and is

subsequently struck by a speeding car, resulting in her death (see Figure 4.2 below). Without fully understanding the events that transpired, Lu descends the mountain in a daze and is picked up by a friend who takes her home. Upon arrival, accompanied by her husband, daughter, and nanny, Lu goes directly upstairs to the bathroom to clean herself and vomit. Noticing Lu's unusual behaviour, Qiao approaches to inquire about her well-being. In response, Lu initiates an intense and emotionally charged kiss; she actively seeks sexual intimacy while even asking Qiao to feel the 'pain.'

In traditional Chinese male cognitive frameworks, the concept of 'sex' is often intertwined with notions of possession and control (Yu et al., 2022). It is not merely seen as a mutual act of intimacy but as a means of asserting dominance and ownership over the female partner. This perspective positions sexual activity as a declaration of power, where the male partner asserts control. Furthermore, this viewpoint sometimes extends to perceiving sex as a method of punishment or humiliation, reflecting a deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset that views women as objects to be possessed or controlled.

For instance, in one scene of the film, after Qiao learns that Sangqi has deliberately harassed his wife, Lu Jie, he becomes violent and angrily beats Sangqi. He then forces her into aggressive sex, intending to humiliate her. Although Sangqi experiences no pleasure during the entire process, she endures both psychological and physical abuse from Qiao.

Director Lou grafts a similar male cognitive framework onto the female protagonist, Lu, prompting her to discover the mistress, punish the mistress, and ultimately declare possession through the active initiation of sexual behaviour with her unfaithful husband. Following this sequence, she punishes the mistress, thereby reasserting control or seeking retribution. The culmination of this series of actions is particularly striking: Lu actively initiates sexual behaviour with her unfaithful husband,

symbolising a declaration of possession. This act, often seen as a male-dominated assertion of ownership in traditional narratives, is subverted by being placed in the hands of a female character. Viewed through the prism of traditional gender ideology, these behaviours starkly contrast with those expected of a typical Chinese woman, who is traditionally portrayed as gentle, passive, introverted, and stoic.[80]

Moreover, under traditional Chinese moral constraints, women's sexual needs are typically portrayed as pure and exclusive, reserved solely for their legal husbands (Yu et al., 2022). Consequently, the initial reaction of many Chinese women upon discovering their husband's infidelity is often to feel repulsed by his 'dirtiness' and refuse further sexual contact. In the film, Lu Jie was once a quintessential traditional housewife but has now embraced unconventional and transgressive sexual impulses - initiating rough and emotionally charged encounters with her unfaithful husband. This departure from traditional Chinese gender norms and expectations is vividly illustrated in the bathroom scene between Lu and Qiao. The scene poignantly conveys Lu's complex grief following betrayal, offering a more nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of her emotions compared to mere silence and tears. Lu's violent behaviour towards Wenzi reflects her inner turmoil and fear, prompting her to seek an outlet for these intense feelings through sex as a means of temporary relief.

In this context, Lu is allowed to exhibit masculinised and moderately aggressive behaviour, transcending the limitations imposed by fixed gender roles related to sex and traditional ideas of fidelity. This corresponds to Angela McRobbie's (2009, p. 135) concept of 'the phallic girl', who challenges patriarchal regulation and authority by adopting masculine behaviours or becoming a symbolic phallus. The concept of 'the phallic girl' is relevant to that of 'post-feminist masquerade'. Both entail mimicry: 'the phallic girl' mimics masculine behaviours as a means of contesting gender norms, while the 'post-feminist masquerade' involves mimicking feminist-like appearances or discourses. 'The phallic girl' is more centred on the individual adoption of

masculine behaviours as a form of resistance, whereas the 'post-feminist masquerade' is more concerned with the broader cultural and social presentation of gender equality, which may be more symbolic than substantial.

In light of this, this thesis proposes designating Lu as 'the phallic woman'. As a housewife, Lu expresses her resentment over her husband's betrayal by imitating his violent behaviour, thus challenging dominant conceptions of femininity that associate women with weakness and subordination within the domestic realm.

Nevertheless, the empowerment of this seemingly independent and strong female figure (Lu Jie) can be regarded as a form of faux-feminist empowerment, functioning as an ironic, quasi-feminist gesture. Whether the female adopts masculine violence or achieves success, these newly found liberties do not genuinely critique the regulatory forces that uphold hegemonic masculinity. Through mimicry-based discourses, this form of female empowerment has been theorised as a transient formation that does not fundamentally disrupt the symbolic order, in which females remain perpetually marginalized as the 'Other' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 734).

In this case, Lu Jie's ostensibly transgressive behaviour neither achieves her true goal of punishing her unfaithful husband nor prevents her from remaining a victim of masculine aggression or violence. Instead, it serves primarily as a means of venting her emotions and fears.

At the same time, it is often observed that women who exhibit a radical sense of struggle later become unwitting accomplices to patriarchal authority. They may even actively ward off potential threats from other women in order to support the agency of patriarchal power through what has been termed 'intra-female aggression' (McRobbie, 2009, p.127). More specifically, this phenomenon manifests as a rivalry among different women, leading to the emergence of those with a heightened sense of

struggle who act as defenders of male power. Within the contemporary post-feminist context, 'intra-female aggression' becomes emblematic; women engage in a more 'modern' set of behaviours characterised by competitiveness and verbal or physical violence directed towards one another (McRobbie, 2009, p. 127).

The narrative illustrates female competition among various characters. For instance, Lu Jie perceives Wenzi, a female college student, as her adversary within her marriage. Conversely, mistress Sangqi views Qiao's wife Lu Jie as her rival. After discovering her husband's infidelity, Lu's initial response is not to confront him directly but rather to direct her anger towards his lover - Wenzi. This reaction suggests that she subconsciously attributes blame for the disruption of her previously stable marriage to Wenzi's alleged seduction of her husband.

Moreover, when Sangqi seeks to establish herself as Qiao's legal wife, she does not approach Qiao directly with this intention. Instead, she covertly initiates harassing calls to Qiao's legal wife, Lu Jie, and orchestrates a scheme for Lu Jie to discover Qiao's other mistress in an effort to undermine Qiao's marriage.

Figure 4.2 The killed female college student Wenzi in *Mystery*

Nevertheless, in the film, early in one of Lu Jie's abortions, Qiao engages in an illicit sexual affair with Sangqi, resulting in Sangqi's pregnancy. Most shockingly, Qiao's mother, who is also Lu Jie's mother-in-law, desires a grandson so intensely that she tacitly acknowledges the forbidden relationship between Qiao and Sangqi and even names the grandson Qiao Jiabao, which translates to the most cherished apple of Qiao's eyes. After giving birth to a son, Sangqi perceives herself as too humble and yearns for more gradual companionship from Qiao. Consequently, Qiao leads a 'twin city' existence: on one side lies the harmonious family he has constructed with Lu; on the other resides his family formed with his 'concubine', Sangqi.

A pivotal scene occurs when Sangqi confronts Lu after it becomes evident that she is her husband's mistress. Lu picks up Anan (Lu and Qiao's daughter) along with Yuhang (Sangqi and Qiao's son; Yuhang serves as a nickname for Qiao Jiabao) from kindergarten before taking both children out to play. As Lu gazes into Yuhang's eyes, her expression reveals complex emotions tinged with hatred. The narrative progresses to depict Lu Jie transporting both children via cable car, a moment that leaves viewers speculating about her potential intentions towards Yuhang. Later scenes unfold in an attic where kites soar freely; here, Yuhang climbs onto a fence alone while facing the precipice below. Rather than exhibiting caution or concern, Lu regards this mischievous boy through a lens of animosity. It becomes apparent that she deliberately overlooks Yuhang's perilous actions while harbouring hopes that this illegitimate child might inadvertently fall off the cliff and vanish.

Instead of further pursuing this unsettling moment through camera work, director Lou transitions seamlessly into the next scene where Sangqi assists Yuhang out of the car. Despite her disdain for this illegitimate child, Lu refrains from inflicting harm upon innocent lives - this choice underscores that her violent inclinations are not innate but rather reactions shaped by stress and trauma stemming from betrayal. Her hesitation to inflict harm serves to characterise her as a passive perpetrator.

Subsequently, both women brought their children to Sangqi's residence, where the children engaged in play while the two women confided in one another. Lu embarks on an entrepreneurial venture with Qiao, exerting immense effort to attain their current affluent lifestyle; she even endures two miscarriages for Qiao's sake. In contrast, Sangqi indulges in a brief romantic encounter with Qiao that results in her pregnancy with a son, thereby sharing the same husband as Qiao's legal wife. When Qiao arrives at Sangqi's home, Lu tells her daughter Anan, 'Dad is here to pick you up', whereas Sangqi informs her son, 'Dad is back home'. This entire scenario is both absurd and captivating, serving as an allegory for the challenges faced by contemporary Chinese women.

Lu Jie exemplifies the archetype of a highly educated professional woman who voluntarily resigns from her job to prioritise familial responsibilities. In contemporary China, women pursuing professional careers are compelled to obtain advanced academic qualifications; however, societal expectations dictate that they marry early and establish families by their mid-twenties. This coincides with a pivotal period for educational and career advancements. Consequently, Chinese women frequently grapple with striking a delicate balance between their aspirations for academic achievement and traditional family expectations. Moreover, within the context of marriage, if women possess higher education or hold superior occupational positions[81] compared to their husbands, it may lead to apprehension among husbands regarding potential threats to their status as heads of households due to perceived dominance from their wives. Furthermore, when both partners engage in employment without grandparents available for childcare support, it often compels women to resign from their jobs after giving birth (Pan & Sun, 2022). Additionally, certain husbands exert additional pressure on their wives to cease working after marriage, enforcing adherence to traditional family roles rooted in patriarchal societal norms that dictate women should abandon their careers and focus exclusively on familial responsibilities.

The decision regarding which parent remains at home for child-rearing versus pursuing a career is profoundly influenced by gender dynamics within typical Chinese families. It has historically been and continues to be perceived as 'normal' for women to prioritise family commitments.

Alongside the assumption of the majority of unpaid domestic labour, a married woman's value is significantly influenced by her spousal relationship and her unwavering commitment and loyalty to her husband (Ebrey, 1990; Gao, 2003). Consequently, disloyal women face severe repercussions in Chinese patriarchal society, including ostracism, ridicule, or even marginalisation (Gao, 2003).

In the film, Lu Jie, a middle-class woman with privilege and education, has her self-worth shaped by relationships, sobriety, and resilience rooted in her background. Initially sacrificing her career to focus on family life, she ultimately finds the courage to divorce Qiao and reclaim control of the company. However, in one poignant scene, tears well up in her eyes as she observes Qiao, Sangqi, and Yuhang loading their purchases into a car from a distance. This shot suggests that Lu's transition from willingly embracing domesticity to reclaiming her professional identity may have been a reluctant choice. Losing her husband signifies not only the loss of an important figure in her life but also an erosion of sexual identity; thus leaving her femininity undefined. A married woman's gender identification and sexuality are predominantly characterised by how they are manipulated and directed by male characters around them; without their presence or involvement in shaping these aspects further renders them ambiguous or nonexistent. In this context, a woman cannot revert to previous roles since she is no longer defined as a mother or daughter, or wife - all positions that traditionally require a male counterpart according to conventional gender theory (Tsai, 2004). The inability to seamlessly reintegrate into traditional gender roles within the domestic sphere can be interpreted as a form of punishment for Lu, who courageously opts to divorce Qiao, in contrast to Sangqi's more submissive demeanour.

Sangqi can be regarded as the contemporary equivalent of a concubine. In ancient China, a concubine held a legally recognised but subordinate marital status compared to the principal wife (Cartwright, 2017). The primary motivations for husbands taking concubines often stemmed from their capriciousness or the infertility of the principal wife. However, upon giving birth to several sons (rather than daughters), a concubine's status within the family structure would improve, although she would still maintain an affiliated position (Ebrey, 2003). In a contemporary setting, Sangqi's relationship with Qiao lacks legal protection; her son Yuhang is considered illegitimate. Ultimately, Sangqi consents to enter into a legal marriage, which suggests that the film director favours traditional and submissive female archetypes exemplified by Sangqi.

The three women surrounding Qiao can be likened to the three fundamental desires of contemporary Chinese men. Lu Jie, the original wife, symbolises power, wealth, and social status; mistress Sangqi represents the perpetuation of lineage through offspring; and the deceased college student Wenzi embodies primal physiological impulses in males. Qiao's ultimate choice of Sangqi signifies that when confronted with diverse male desires, a traditional Chinese man's decision is ultimately influenced by his son, who inherits all aspects related to family, including name, reputation, and property (Tang, 1995). The prevailing cultural norm in China emphasises having male descendants for several reasons: firstly, due to the absence of a welfare system supporting elderly individuals apart from their (male) offspring (Bakken, 1993); secondly, the implementation of the 'one-child' policy after 1978 fueled an intensified cult-like obsession with birthing boys. In contemporary China, giving birth to a son is still regarded as more favourable than having a daughter. It is common practice for Chinese families - particularly in rural areas - to expect wives to continue bearing children until they have a boy. With the 'one-child' policy in place, many couples even resort to abandoning baby girls at birth or opting for abortion if they are

expecting a girl.

The film's narrative of marriage infidelity and betrayal draws inspiration from a series of posts on Tianya Community[82] - a renowned online forum widely recognised for its vibrant community discussions covering diverse topics such as personal narratives and societal issues. As an influential platform for sharing and debating real-life experiences and matters of social significance, Tianya Club serves as an invaluable source of creative inspiration for films. The original post resonates with numerous netizens due to its amiable yet thought-provoking nature, while providing a realistic perspective on the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, in contemporary Chinese society. It vividly depicts the emotional turmoil and familial fallout resulting from an extramarital affair.

However, a significant alteration was made in adapting the online posts into film - specifically, the introduction of a criminal element through a murder scene. This inclusion dramatically escalates the narrative's intensity and stakes, transforming what began as a domestic drama into a crime story. While commercial considerations may have played a role in this decision, intending to enhance suspense and appeal to a wider audience, it simultaneously reflects the director's intentional choice to delve into deeper themes.

The depiction of Wenzi's demise in the film, which diverges from the original account presented in Tianya Club, serves not only as a narrative device but also as a commentary on the social status of women in China. It symbolises the severe repercussions of societal pressures and underscores the often unspoken struggles that women face while navigating marital and familial expectations. The adaptation from an actual online forum post to a cinematic narrative infused with elements of crime facilitates a more profound exploration of themes such as gender roles, consequences arising from infidelity, and representations of female agency within contemporary

Chinese society. Through this creative reinterpretation, the film addresses broader issues related to female empowerment, societal judgment, and complex dynamics within marital relationships in modern China.

Director Lou meticulously orchestrates an extended sequence depicting Wenzi rolling down a hillside, colliding with the ground, struggling to stand independently, and ultimately being struck by a car. Her body becomes drenched in blood and rain as she lies motionless on the ground. Slow-motion shots and close-ups focus explicitly on Wenzi's bloodied face. The death of victim Wenzi results from multiple contributing factors: Lu Jie's forceful stone strike to her head; Sangqi's ruthless pushing; and an accidental collision with a male driver's vehicle. Wenzi's sudden demise appears abrupt yet resembles a natural outcome stemming from the simultaneous convergence of various forces.

Each murder involved in the event can be attributed to characters acting in accordance with their interests. While no one initially intends to become a murderer, each individual ultimately plays a crucial part during the process, collectively contributing to the completion of the entire criminal procedure. This depiction tends to portray female perpetrators (Lu and Sangqi) as indirect executors of violence thereby diminishing the acknowledgement of women's capacity for perpetrating acts of violence.

In Western murder mystery narratives, three primary characters typically emerge: the victim, the perpetrator of the crime, and the investigator who diligently seeks to apprehend the offender and restore social order disrupted by this transgression (Rafter, 2006). It is important to recognise that Rafter's discussion pertains to crime narratives within a Western context. When this theoretical framework is employed to analyse a Chinese-language film, it uncovers a complex dynamic between cultural commonalities and disparities.

In Western crime narratives, as Rafter has indicated, the clear demarcation of the victim, the perpetrator, and the investigator constitutes a fundamental narrative structure. This structure often mirrors Western individualistic values and the preeminence of the legal system in conflict resolution. Conversely, Chinese-language crime films are firmly grounded in Chinese cultural traditions.

For example, in the film under analysis, the characters' motivations and actions are influenced by Confucian values such as filial piety and family cohesion. Lu's dual status as both a criminal and a victim within her marriage represents not merely a psychological exploration but also an expression of the conflict between personal desires and family responsibilities within Chinese society. Wenzi's extramarital affairs, which violate the traditional Chinese moral principle of marital fidelity, introduce an additional layer of complexity that exceeds the simplistic categorisations found in Western crime narratives. Detective Sangqi's involvement in the crime and her own victimisation resulting from an affair further demonstrate how Chinese cultural norms regarding relationships and morality can shape the narrative in ways that Rafter's Western model may not adequately account for.

Although Rafter's analysis offers a useful starting point for discerning the basic narrative components, it is imperative to take into consideration the unique cultural context of Chinese-language films in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their themes, characters, and social implications. The roles within the realm of Chinese-language crime film *Mystery* could hardly be more clear-cut, yet they frequently intertwine and seamlessly blend. Such arrangement appears to be driven by a deliberate intention to undermine or blur the boundaries between different character archetypes in murder mysteries.

Apart from the requirement for narrative and plot complexity, such an arrangement

also considers both the appeal of murder mystery films and the need to rationalise female crime under censorship in mainland Chinese cinema. The allure of murder mystery films lies in their ability to challenge moral boundaries, exposing and unravelling contradictions in the audience's fantasies of identification by integrating elements from these three distinct perspectives. Murder mystery films fundamentally revolve around the constant breakdown and reestablishment of boundaries between criminals, crime solvers, and victims, which forms the essence of this genre (Rafter, 2006).

While murder mystery films typically conclude by affirming the moral absolutes embodied by the three main characters, they also serve a crucial function: actively exploring and questioning these figures and the moral certainties that drive them. The shift from the broader crime film genre to a more specific focus on murder mystery films represents a reconfiguration within the spectrum of crime cinema. This change is significant because murder mystery films typically offer a more nuanced exploration of characters and moral complexities compared to the general crime genre.

Within the crime genre, the plot may revolve around various aspects of criminality, including but not limited to heists, gang activities, or general law-breaking. The focus is often on the crime itself and its immediate repercussions. However, a murder mystery film narrows this focus to a specific type of crime - a murder - and dedicates its narrative to unravelling the mystery surrounding this act. This allows for a deeper exploration of the characters involved, especially the three main archetypal figures: the perpetrator, the victim, and the investigator.

These films do more than just conclude with the resolution of the mystery; they actively engage in exploring and questioning the moral certainties and complexities of these key figures. Through this exploration, murder mystery films often challenge the

viewer's understanding of right and wrong, guilt and innocence, and the reasons behind human actions. This genre delves into the psychological and moral dimensions of crime, offering a richer and more nuanced portrayal of the human condition.

Therefore, the transition to murder mystery films within the context of crime cinema signifies an evolution toward more character-driven, morally complex narratives. This shift marks a move from portraying crime as an external event to examining it as a catalyst for unveiling deeper human truths, motivations, and ethical dilemmas.

This new configuration of crime film provides a platform for a more profound exploration of societal norms, human psychology, and the moral fabric that underpins our understanding of justice and morality. Through presenting arguments for the heroic or pitiful status of criminals, interrogating the ethical authority of the justice system, or introducing seemingly innocent yet guilty individuals, these films challenge conventional perspectives. Even when murder mystery films ultimately affirm an absolutist perspective on crime and punishment, their middle sections engage audiences in doubts and reservations about absolute categories such as heroism, authority figures, innocence, guilt, victimhood, criminality, and vengeance. By doing so, they render these labels suitable subjects for both mass entertainment and moral deliberation.

In this context, a series of moral arguments lead viewers to attribute the actual killer in *Mystery* to the interpersonal relationships underlying the incident. These moral debates and mixed character identifications serve to weaken or downplay the culpability of female criminals, thereby increasing the audience's tolerance for violent female perpetrators to some extent. The trailer for *Mystery* conveys the following message: 'It was an accident, but it was predestined; it was love, but within a conspiracy; it was murder, but without an actual murderer. None of us can escape relationships because they are an integral part of our daily lives'. It appears that no

single individual had an absolute intention to murder the girl in *Mystery*. Wenzi's death does not result from an intricate scheme but rather emerges as a consequence of the complex interpersonal dynamics inherent in the incident.

The film incorporates numerous religious references, particularly focusing on the female victim, Wenzi. *The Ode to Joy*, a religious musical piece, is incorporated into the soundtrack at three pivotal moments: the beginning, middle, and end of the film. Its initial appearance accompanies an overhead shot of Wenzi (lasting only about a second, immediately followed by her being struck by a car). Towards the end of the film, when Wenzi's mother visits the scene of the incident to perform a ritualistic act of burning paper in honour of her deceased daughter, this song plays again as an image of Wenzi (depicted as a transcendent angel) reemerges. Subsequently, this ethereal figure turns around and begins running while juxtaposed with another shot showcasing Wuhan's vast urban landscape, with endless cars traversing the Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge. The female victim, Wenzi, assumes a prominent position within the narrative, as her temporal and spatial presence is distinctly separated from other characters; she experiences death at the beginning and is subsequently dissolved into the urban city torrent upon rebirth at the film's conclusion. Her demise and subsequent 'rebirth' subtly stitch together the framework of this film. However, director Lou intentionally leaves Wenzi's ultimate destination ambiguous, aiming to depict a broader context: a predetermined existence in which contemporary victimised Chinese women like Lu, Sangqi, and Wenzi find themselves trapped in perpetual struggles for progress, endurance, and survival (analogous to the ceaseless flow of cars on the bridge).

The inland city of Wuhan serves as the backdrop, showcasing Lou Ye's consistent integration of urban imagery with film narrative. In his previous work *Suzhou River*, viewers are taken on a visual journey witnessing the sight of garbage floating along the Suzhou River, abandoned factories being dismantled, men, women, and children

toiling on ships, and smoke billowing from chimneys. These youths migrate from rural areas to the city in search of wealth but find their hearts empty amidst the hustle and bustle. This juxtaposition between expansive cityscapes and intimate daily life resonates deeply. In *Mystery*, Wuhan is chosen for its ever-changing urban streetscape. According to Lou Ye, Wuhan is not simply a singularly structured city but rather a fusion of three cities divided by two rivers, indicating the relationship between Sangqi, Lu Jie, and Qiao Yongzhao. The city's landscape pattern intertwines with the story's internal structure, creating both microcosmic echoes and macrocosmic conflicts. Such a complex urban environment makes it easier to lose oneself while resembling an ideal 'floating city' where personal desires temporarily solidify social relations. The college student Wenzi can be enticed to become Qiao's mistress in exchange for material possessions; the scavenger[83] can be influenced with monetary bribes to maintain silence regarding the witnessed murder process; the police officer, swayed by financial incentives from the affluent perpetrator's family, can hastily close the murder case; Wenzi's mother, offered a house by the wealthy culprit, relinquishes her right to investigate her daughter's death.

However, as desires intensify within each party, these ostensibly stable social relationships rapidly deteriorate. Consequently, viewers witness the insatiable pursuit of vested interests by Sangqi, Qiao's mistress, who aspires to attain legal wife status. In contrast, Wenzi, another mistress, suffers victimisation as a consequence of her affair with Qiao. Furthermore, discontented with merely receiving hush money, the scavenger demands additional funds and is tragically beaten to death by Qiao on a rainy night.

Lou Ye skilfully captures the social reality of contemporary China by presenting both the city's macroscopic streetscape and the microscopic landscape of the family. He emphasises that family tragedies and crimes committed by Chinese women are not isolated incidents but deeply rooted in the social structure of modern China. The city

acts as a metaphorical mother body, representing the focal point of modern civilisation from which societal issues radiate. This perspective shifts focus away from individual female crimes and instead highlights how they are influenced by broader societal factors, including the social status obstacles faced by contemporary Chinese women.

To achieve a more profound comprehension of the interplay between the urban environment and female residents in crime stories, it is crucial to recognise that cities are often portrayed as more than mere physical settings. These narratives depict cities as symbolic representations of the 'metaphorical matrix', a core entity that encapsulates the intricacies and demands of contemporary society. This portrayal views cities as dynamic and influential entities impacting residents' lives, particularly women. In this paradigm, cities serve as perspectives to observe and analyse contemporary China's socioeconomic structure and cultural processes. The setting no longer plays a passive role but actively shapes the female characters' experiences and choices in the story.

Depicting cities in this way implies that family tragedies and female crimes are not isolated incidents but are linked to intricate social structures within urban areas. This perspective partially reduces the emphasis on specific female criminal behaviours while highlighting how broader cultural influences shape these behaviours. Stories shift from viewing these women solely as perpetrators to understanding them as products of their environment. This perspective explores issues faced by contemporary Chinese women, including obstacles related to social status, gender disparity, and the pressures brought about by increasing urbanisation and industrialisation.

Female characters like Lu Jie and Sangqi engage in criminal activities mainly due to unfulfilled desires related to competing for a man rather than ambitions for power,

wealth, or resistance against broader unfairness. They initially show tolerance and patience but resort to violent revenge when the accumulated sense of infringement becomes unbearable. Their violence is often portrayed as a result of internal emotional build-up within the context of personal relationship issues. Interestingly, their revenge is often directed towards other women, which positions them more as 'passive perpetrators' – victims pushed to violence rather than proactive agents of crime.

The concept of 'post-victim' significantly contributes to the comprehension of the portrayal of female characters, particularly those like Lu Jie and Sangqi, as 'passive perpetrators' in films. By comparing its manifestation in Western and Chinese cinematic contexts, specifically in Western rape-revenge films and Chinese 'post-victim' crime films, we can gain valuable insights into how cultural and cinematic differences shape the representation of female characters and their responses to victimisation. Additionally, the contrast between Chinese male and female violence in *Mystery* further highlights these distinctions.

The 'post-victim' concept, as put forward by Coulthard and Bill (2007), refers to a genre where women engage in violent acts mainly in self-defence or retaliation after being victimised. In the Western context, this genre is characterised by various discourses. It encompasses elements such as heterosexuality, victimhood, idealised femininity, maternal devotion, and sacrificial purity. Moreover, there are aspects of exhibitionistic eroticism and sexual availability linked to the vulnerability and invulnerability of victimised women. Films like *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003, the United States) and *Hard Candy* (David Salde, 2005, the United States) exemplify this genre, often featuring a female rape avenger or presenting a problematic association between violence, eroticism, vulnerability, and invulnerability among victimised women.

In Western rape-revenge films within the 'post-victim' genre, female perpetrators

typically engage in extreme violence. Their actions are depicted as a direct and forceful reaction to the specific trauma they endured, whether it be rape or other forms of victimisation, and are aimed at the specific men who caused them harm. This portrayal of female characters is seen as more assertive and can be considered as challenging the power dynamics between men and women by taking extreme action against their oppressors.

In Chinese 'post-victim' crime films, the female perpetrators, such as those in *Mystery*, are often depicted as more 'passive'. Their violence is usually a result of internal emotional build-up within the context of personal relationship issues, rather than a direct response to a specific external trauma like in Western films. For example, their actions might stem from unfulfilled desires in competing for a man. The violence is presented through a loosely structured narrative that rationalises and justifies revenge based on female victimisation and social background. Notably, these 'post-victim' female perpetrators in Chinese films tend to direct their actions towards other female figures.

Unlike in Western films, the female characters in Chinese 'post-victim' crime films do not challenge the traditional stereotypes of women being tolerant, obedient, and sacrificial under male dominance in power, violence, and masculinity. Instead, when they attempt to defy these norms, they often face tragic consequences such as losing loved ones, facing death, or imprisonment.

The contrast between Western and Chinese 'post-victim' films is evident in how female characters are depicted. Western films show female perpetrators as more assertive and direct in their response to victimisation, while Chinese films present them as more passive and bound by traditional gender roles and relationship dynamics.

Furthermore, compared to murders committed by women driven by jealousy in *Mystery*, male violence appears more normalised and gratuitous. Apart from Qiao's aggressive sexual assault and altercation with Sangqi, there is also the fact that the wealthy young man is obsessed with the female stranger Wenzi, who lies on the ground following an automobile crash. His relentless kicking directly leads to Wenzi's demise. In another scene, Qiao beats the homeless person to death with a stick. The emotions pushed to extremes reach a state of disgust, and the bloated corpse of the homeless person adds another layer of horror. The vulgar brutality displayed by male characters in *Mystery* appears natural to them. Indeed, they do not require justifiable explanations (such as women's jealousy and victimisation and complex interpersonal relationships) nor the prevailing contemporary social context to provide a suitable or comprehensible rationale for engaging in criminal activities.

Moreover, Qiao's act of violence towards the homeless individual is intended to safeguard both Lu and Sangqi (as their killing of Wenzi is witnessed by the homeless person), thereby perpetuating the notion that women still necessitate male protection and that 'noble' male aggression can be deemed justified. Consequently, female violence (exemplified by Lu and Sangqi), in contrast to Qiao's aggression, is consistently portrayed as imprudently employed with adverse consequences, implying its inferiority when compared to acts of violence committed by men. In this regard, women's failure (the crime process being observed by a homeless person) further reinforces male privilege since it metaphorically becomes an accomplishment and triumph attributed to the male figure (Qiao). In other words, male violence for the sake of saving females is glorified as a higher power, while female violence for revenge or self-defence is suppressed (Coulthard, 2007).

Nevertheless, *Mystery* presents a compelling exploration of intricate female characters within a narrative that aligns with broader concerns and cultural dialogues in Chinese society. The film effectively challenges certain stereotypical depictions of women,

offering instead a more nuanced yet sombre portrayal of female agency, deviance, and victimhood. Its portrayals resonate with the dual nature of women's roles in contemporary China - simultaneously empowering and constraining. The characters in *Mystery* subvert traditional representations of women in Chinese cinema by depicting them as multifaceted individuals, neither glorified nor demonised, but with aspirations, fears, and moral complexities. By placing women at the forefront of a crime narrative, the film defies conventional gender norms that often confine female characters to passive or victimised roles. This approach reflects the increasingly visible shifts in women's roles in contemporary Chinese society, where women actively participate in all sectors and exhibit diverse ranges of behaviour and thought. However, these characters are also immersed in tragedy and suffering, highlighting the societal constraints still faced by many women in contemporary China. This underscores the limitations of the liberation and empowerment purportedly brought about by economic development and modernisation.

The notion of 'post-feminist masquerade' plays a significant role in ongoing discussions surrounding feminism, particularly within the realms of media and cultural studies. This research critically examines how female empowerment is portrayed in the era of post-feminism by exploring the intersection between post-feminist theory and the concept of 'masquerade' (McRobbie, 2007). It implies that what seems like empowerment might also be a way to mask the ongoing patriarchal systems that exist beneath the surface. The term 'masquerade' in this context refers to a theatrical display in which women assume influential positions and personas that conform to cultural norms. However, these roles are typically superficial and do not substantially challenge the prevailing gender hierarchy. This concept emphasises the contradiction in post-feminist media portrayals, wherein women are shown as powerful, autonomous, and self-sufficient. However, these portrayals are frequently intertwined with conventional femininity and consumerist values, subtly reinforcing rather than challenging societal expectations regarding gender (Gournelos,

2014). The concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' serves as a valuable method for examining how modern media mirrors and influences public views on female empowerment. It prompts us to question the sincerity and genuineness of these depictions, particularly in light of persistent gender disparities.

Despite the appearance of liberation and upward mobility, women continue to navigate within a social framework that frequently objectifies or subjugates them. This observation reflects a society grappling with materialism, moral ambiguity, and social inequality. The film delves into the obscure realms of human behaviour that society often chooses to overlook or oversimplify rather than merely portraying its female characters as deviants. Instead, it goes deeper by examining the societal structures that either enable or mitigate such deviance. In doing so, it initiates a discourse on societal perceptions and responses towards deviant women, providing an insightful commentary on broader attitudes that are often rooted in patriarchal notions of female behaviour.

Furthermore, the film's portrayal of media reactions to female deviance aligns with the tendency of mass media in China to sensationalise or moralise instances of misconduct by women. The response to the women's crimes within this film narrative can be interpreted as simultaneously tolerating and punishing female deviance, frequently oscillating and balancing between these two approaches in a manner ('post-feminist masquerade') that reflects societal inconsistencies. The role played by the film serves as a metaphor for how society at large grapples with intricate issues surrounding women, vacillating between leniency and condemnation but seldom adopting a consistent stance. The film *Mystery* presents a penetrating critique of the multifaceted relationship between contemporary Chinese society and its women. It offers a nuanced portrayal that compels the audience to grapple with intricate questions surrounding morality, agency, and societal norms. The female characters in this film embody individual entities driven by their unique motivations and reflections

of broader societal attitudes. This dual representation renders the film an engaging exploration of women's roles, representations, and perceptions in a society still navigating the complexities of their liberation and subjugation.

4.2.2 *Dream Home*: Female Violence, Social Inequality, and Gender Rebellion in Hong Kong Cinema

Compared to the mainland-made film *Mystery*, the Hong Kong-produced *Dream Home*, like many other crime films from Hong Kong, portrays female violence in a bolder and more graphic manner. In contrast to Wuhan, the setting of *Mystery*, Hong Kong, as a massive urban space, shares many similar features and sights but stands out architecturally due to its geographical constraints on growth and development. With limited suitable land for construction on both Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula, this remarkably congested city accommodates various types of shops, residences, and businesses nearby or even within the same building. Additionally, Hong Kong Island's mountainous terrain necessitates vertical expansion rather than horizontal spread (although reclamation is taking place in the northern part of the island to compensate for this restriction). Consequently, Hong Kong is one of the most vertical cities in the world, boasting the highest number of skyscrapers, including landmarks such as the International Finance Centre and the International Commerce Centre.

These expansive structures not only provide space for shopping malls and luxury hotels but also serve as hubs for banks, investment firms, and real estate companies, contributing to Hong Kong's status as one of the world's most significant financial centres. To facilitate residents' movement throughout the city, connecting major financial and shopping areas with universities, Hong Kong boasts a highly efficient public transportation system known as the MTR. This system includes subway lines, bus routes, minibus routes, and various ferries like the Star Ferry that link Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula, and nearby islands. Other modes of transportation include the Mid-Levels Escalator and Sky Bridges in Central Hong Kong, allowing individuals to travel between consumer centres without stepping onto the streets.

Despite the improved physical mobility and connectivity benefits offered by the city's

amenities, development in Hong Kong remains uneven, similar to other global cities. Behind its modern glass-and-steel facades lie neglected housing areas where disabled individuals, along with vulnerable men, women, and children, are often forced into begging activities. Environmental issues such as pollution have severely impacted surrounding waters, while heavily crowded tourist spots like Mongkok on the Kowloon Peninsula attract low-level hustlers and sex workers. These ordinary people, living on the fringes of society at the bottom of the city, are tired and desperate inside. Most of them aspire to put down roots in the city and own a home in Hong Kong, where every inch of land is valuable. However, when society does not provide them with what they deserve, the extreme imbalance forces them to resort to criminal activities as a means of survival (Ng, Mee Kam, et al., 2023, pp. 87-103).

Dream Home, a crime thriller and more specifically a slasher film, depicts a crime driven by the imbalanced housing crisis in Hong Kong. Director Pang Ho-Cheung deviates from his usual comedic, satirical style to directly address the impact of the 2008 global economic recession on Hong Kong's housing market and individual livelihood. Through allegorical graphic violence, he sheds light on this pressing issue. The movie commences by presenting data indicating that the monthly incomes of Hong Kong residents have seen only a 1% increase since 1997, while housing prices surged by 15% in just one year, specifically in 2007. These figures are accompanied on screen by the film's peculiar form of justification for the forthcoming narrative: 'In a crazy city, if one is to survive, one has to be crazier'. What ensues is a sequence of opening credits set against a montage featuring images of Hong Kong apartment buildings, underscored by an ominous musical score. These visuals are interspersed with blueprints showcasing apartment layouts, framed in such a way that the seemingly boundless floors of apartments and the absence of visible sky mirror the mesmerising effect one experiences when traversing through Hong Kong itself. The towering high-rise apartments and skyscrapers dominate attention, effectively blocking out any glimpse of the sky. By initiating the film in this fashion, director

Pang adeptly provides contextual information and establishes the backdrop against which the story unfolds - namely, society's fixation on property ownership that often entails plunging into substantial debt.

In the opening scene, we are introduced to Sheung, the female protagonist. She is observed entering a well-protected residential complex through the surveillance cameras installed in the building. However, due to negligence on the part of the security guard, who is fast asleep, the level of security is compromised. Taking advantage of this situation, Sheung proceeds to infiltrate the control room and incapacitates the guard by employing a plastic zip tie to strangle him. As he slowly suffocates, the security guard reaches into his toolbox and pulls out a knife, attempting to cut the tie around his neck, but it is too tight, and he only manages to slit his own neck. After he dies in a pool of blood, Sheung grabs the security tapes and leaves. The scene is placed in the opening section, which foreshadows the beginning of the massacre and the gruesome nature of the whole process and is also full of symbolic meaning. The scene where the security guard's neck is tightly strangled by the necktie can be interpreted as a metaphor for the lives of the ordinary people of Hong Kong, who are being pinned down by the unbearably high property prices. Unable to resist, perhaps only Sheung's unbelievable way of resisting is fortunate to have a chance of survival.

Then, the next victim, the nanny, is killed by a steel pipe being inserted from the back of her head into her right eye. Such an exaggerated killing technique is used throughout the film. The death of the third victim, a pregnant woman, is particularly novel. Her head is sealed in a vacuum bag, and Sheung inserts a vacuum cleaner hose into the bag, sucking out all the air - a perfect killing technique that requires no further effort from the killer, who simply stands by and watches the victim die of oxygen deprivation. The husband of the pregnant woman, whose death is both convoluted and full of accidental drama, is knocked unconscious by an iron, then falls

and breaks his neck when his jaw gets stuck on the coffee table.

Before the grand finale of the multi-person massacre begins, the director sets the stage with a classic Hitchcock approach to suspense. Firstly, he lets viewers know that Sheung is standing outside the door with a long knife in her hand, waiting for a chance. Then he uses intercut footage to show the raunchy party inside the house, where men and women are taking drugs, engaging in promiscuous sex, and drinking alcohol, leaving the viewers wondering what Sheung's next move will be. Later, the first male victim in the house has his four fingers cut off and his intestines gushing out all over the floor. While he is dying, he still tries to smoke one last hit of marijuana. The next victim, who attempts to fight back against Sheung, has a test tube inserted into her throat. The third victim in the house is a naked woman who is completely unconscious and unaware of the carnage around her. Sheung grabs her head while she is vomiting into the toilet and slams it against the toilet bowl hard.

There is another couple engaged in sexual intercourse: during the act, the man is stabbed four times by Sheung while in a rear-entry position, eliciting a pained moan that the woman mistakes for an orgasmic response. The woman remains unaware that the man she is making love with has been killed. It is not until Sheung throws the severed genitals of the man in front of her that she reacts. In the ensuing struggle between the two, each is wounded: Sheung is stabbed through the ankle, and the female victim is gagged with a wooden board. Just then, two police officers, who have arrived because neighbours complained about the noise, ring the doorbell. The police officers see Sheung's bruises and think she has been beaten. Suddenly, the woman with the plank in her mouth comes at Sheung with a knife, and the two policemen pull out guns in an attempt to subdue the two women. But in the confusion, the woman slashes Police Officer A's throat and falls to the ground, with the plank coming out of the back of her head. Police Officer A, bleeding from the throat, fires several shots randomly and accidentally shoots Police Officer B in the cheek. After

the chaos, Sheung finds the first male victim with intestines all over the floor still alive. In his stubborn resistance, Sheung reaches into his body with her left hand, pulls out his intestine, and finally subdues him by shooting him in the head. Thus, a total of twelve people, including the unborn child inside the pregnant woman, are indirectly or directly slaughtered by Sheung.

Rather than follow a chronological development, Pang spreads out the killings throughout the film while inserting another storyline that reveals how Sheung has become a victim of the Hong Kong property market and carries out the massacre in her dream apartment out of desperation. In this parallel storyline, director Pang uses severe and depressing language to reveal the sorrows of a typical Hong Kong woman (Sheung) who cannot keep up with the city's rapid development. Sheung represents any low-income individual in Hong Kong, a society where property prices have skyrocketed, leaving the underprivileged at the bottom. The film follows Sheung through her formative years - her grandfather, a former seaman, dreams of a room facing the sea; her best friend in childhood is forced to move out; her mother dies prematurely; her father falls ill and needs surgery, but she cannot borrow money from her boyfriend, and the landlord inflates the price of the property. These stark disparities are evident in Victoria First, the name of Sheung's envisioned residence and the setting for her acts of violence. The affluent inhabitants of Victoria First possess physical dwellings but lack a true sense of 'home' - the expectant wife is left isolated, and her spouse engages in extramarital affairs. Meanwhile, young individuals exploit the premises for promiscuity and substance abuse. Those wealthy people killed by Sheung are not entirely innocent. The polarised state of affairs between the rich and the poor fuels the flame of revenge in Sheung's heart until she gradually loses her rationality. Her identification as a serial murderer is a means of revenge for the indifference and discrimination imposed on low-income individuals by society. She uses violence to arm herself, only to hide the weakness inside her emotions.

In this manner, Pang skilfully leads the viewers to experience a dual reaction towards Sheung's brutal and aggressive methods of killing. On the one hand, they are shocked by her actions; on the other hand, they are encouraged to empathise with her as they delve into her uncomfortable circumstances and potential motivations. This manipulation effectively plays with the audience's identification with the complex protagonist. The whole process is similar to 'empathy', as the audiences are given the capacity to place themselves in the criminal's position and understand or feel what the criminal is experiencing from their perspective. This encompasses two related concepts: 'cognitive empathy', simply knowing how the criminal feels and what the criminal may be thinking; and 'affective empathy', which is feeling what the criminal feels as if their emotions were contagious. The justification of female violence has been explored (Neroni, 2012). Consequently, the emphasis often lies on the female perpetrator's inner vulnerability and past misfortunes as a means to rationalise her act of violence (Hu, 2019). By making the audiences sympathise with or even identify with this female perpetrator, the otherwise immoral act becomes a legitimate or compelling means of defending justice to punish the crime, thereby achieving the goal of downplaying or rationalising one specific crime.

In seeking to elicit empathy for his central character, Director Pang offers the audience complex and varied visual pleasures. He employs visually striking cinematography techniques, such as composition, colour palettes, and lighting, to create a captivating and aesthetically pleasing visual experience. The visual allure of these elements captivates the audience, thereby enhancing their receptiveness to the emotional journey of the characters. Moreover, the visual elements of a film possess significant potential for effectively conveying its characters' emotional and psychological states. Through skilfully constructing sequences that visually mirror the protagonist's experiences and emotions, director Pang fosters a deeper emotional connection between the character and the viewer.

Firstly, it enables viewers to identify with the unfair social problems (the unbearable housing prices in Hong Kong) that are usually happening in life and vicariously experience the cathartic release of following Sheung's path without paying a price. It also offers the ancillary joy of watching others suffer. How could Sheung kill so many people by herself and not get caught? By providing a glimpse through an exotic lens, *Dream Home* effectively immerses viewers as discreet observers or voyeurs, clandestinely delving into the personal and intimate lives of the distinctively diverse, tragic, and unconventional female character (Sheung). This movie creates a space where it is deemed acceptable to harbour animosity towards the criminal justice system, the state, and other powerful institutions. For approximately ninety minutes, viewers can feel like heroic rebels. The film employs various rhetorical strategies to elicit sympathy for the female criminal (Sheung) and the desire that her massacre go unnoticed. Her selfish boyfriend and the collapse of her dream (the sudden increase in the price of her dream house - Victoria First - just as she is about to buy it) reinforce this sympathy on the level of character. The shot when Sheung stands on the street surrounded by high-rise buildings, visually reinforcing viewer antagonism toward social injustice, underscores this sentiment.

However, this does not mean that director Pang approves of the indulgence of Sheung's crime. Despite achieving emotional forgiveness through 'empathy', it is clear that the female perpetrator Sheung still faces punishment. At the end of *Dream Home*, Sheung can finally buy the house she desperately wants because the price of the murder house has fallen. However, the room she buys is so narrow that a bed and a closet cannot fit in it simultaneously. This punishment, which occupies a minor role, blurs the line between good and evil to some extent and demonstrates an ambiguous morality. By presenting viewers with ambiguous morality rather than making clear moral judgments, the film seems to convey that Sheung's crime is not necessarily evil due to the many factors contributing to it. Simultaneously, however, director Pang

offers no strong criticism of Hong Kong's unfair housing system or significant punishment for the female criminal Sheung. There is nothing radical within the film that might offend or incite. At the end of the film, the property market suddenly slumps due to the Hong Kong financial crisis, creating a strong sense of irony as Sheung pays such a high price by turning herself into a killer just to live in her dream home. No matter how hard individuals try, they cannot resist the capital market. Under the dual pressures of government policies and market fluctuations, ordinary people cannot stand alone against a callous society.

There are striking parallels between *Dream Home* and certain Korean revenge films[84], as well as with another mainland revenge film, *A Touch of Sin* (Jia Zhangke Jia, 2013, China). All these works involve the struggle and resistance of individuals facing social pressures. In today's fast-paced and highly competitive society, individuals often encounter various forms of pressure such as economic strain and societal status anxiety. Through diverse stories and characters, these films illustrate both the helplessness and resilience exhibited by individuals confronting such pressures while striving to escape difficult circumstances. They convey profound melancholic emotions that manifest through various cinematic elements including imagery, music, character expressions, and behaviours. As viewers engage with these films, they are able to profoundly empathise with the pain and helplessness experienced by the characters, as well as their confusion and despair regarding prospects. Collectively, these narratives reflect pressing social realities and stimulate critical thinking among audiences. Each of these three films addresses existing societal issues from distinct perspectives and through varied storylines, highlighting themes such as the disparity between wealth and poverty, social injustice, and the distortion of human nature.

However, Korean revenge films typically draw upon the historical and social realities of South Korea, addressing issues such as autocratic regimes and ethnic conflicts. Throughout its history, South Korea has undergone significant political turmoil and

social transformation, which have profoundly influenced its society. These films serve to reflect the struggles and resistances of the South Korean populace in challenging circumstances by depicting these historical events and societal conditions. For instance, Park Chan-wook's *Old Boy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003, South Korea), part of his 'Vengeance Trilogy', explores the encounters and resistance faced by an individual under an autocratic regime. In contrast, the backdrop for many contemporary Chinese films is centred on China's modernisation and urbanisation processes, highlighting the challenges that arise from rapid social change. In recent years, China has witnessed swift modernisation and urbanisation; however, this progress has also given rise to numerous social issues including income disparity, environmental degradation, and various societal contradictions. The film *A Touch of Sin* draws inspiration from four widely publicised news events to illustrate a range of problems within Chinese society during this period of transition while portraying individuals' helplessness and struggles in confronting these challenges. The narrative context of *Dream Home* addresses the pressing issue of exorbitant housing prices in Hong Kong. As a global metropolis, Hong Kong consistently faces high real estate costs that exert immense pressure on ordinary citizens' lives. The film presents social dilemmas alongside a gendered perspective on revenge/violence through the deviant actions of its female protagonist, effectively illustrating both her struggle against overwhelming housing pressures as well as broader themes related to vulnerability among everyday people within Hong Kong society.

The protagonists of Korean revenge films are typically men who embody strong masculinity and resilience during their quests for vengeance. These male characters often display unwavering determination, courageous actions, and exceptional skills as they seek justice and reclaim their dignity. For instance, in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Park Chan-wook, 2005, South Korea), while the female protagonist Geum-ja drives the revenge narrative, her actions are significantly supported by male characters. In *A Touch of Sin*, both male and female protagonists exist, but the film

predominantly features male roles. It weaves together four news events to illustrate various characters' encounters and choices amid social change. Male characters play a crucial role in advancing the plot through their decisions and behaviours. Conversely, *Dream Home* centres on a female protagonist whose actions defy traditional gender norms. She commits murder - killing 12 people - for a house, representing both resistance to societal realities and a challenge to conventional views of femininity. Unlike typical portrayals of women as weak or passive, this character exhibits strength, bravery, and decisiveness.

Korean revenge films typically employ a complex revenge structure, meticulously crafted time and space settings, and the portrayal of morally ambiguous characters. These films are replete with bloody, violent, and erotic elements, yet beneath these dark themes, they also explore reflections on human nature, destiny, and social norms. Korean revenge films captivate audiences with their unique narrative styles and visual effects, while simultaneously prompting deep contemplation on human nature and societal issues. For instance, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* uses a convoluted revenge plot and morally ambiguous characters to reveal the complexity of human nature and the harshness of society. *A Touch of Sin* adopts an intertextual structure and documentary aesthetics to intricately connect seemingly disparate characters within the broader context of social issues, thereby offering a critical examination of society. Based on real news events, the film connects different characters and narratives through its intertextual framework, highlighting various issues within mainland Chinese society. The use of documentary aesthetics enhances the audience's sense of realism and impact, making the film's critique more compelling. *Dream Home* initiates its narrative with the deviant behaviour of the female protagonist, introducing a gender dimension to showcase social problems. Through the protagonist's actions, the film prompts reflection on social realities and gender issues. Her behaviour not only resists the issue of high housing prices but also challenges traditional gender roles, offering a nuanced perspective on both social and gender dynamics. What sets

Dream Home apart is its subtle approach, employing a female protagonist who engages in deviant behaviour, thereby introducing a gendered dimension to social problems and revenge/violence.

Sheung's resolute resistance and decisive acts of violence are not only influenced by societal pressures such as housing prices but also reflect the subordinate position of women in contemporary society. Nearly all female characters in the film are objectified. Sheung herself is valued solely for her sexual exploitation by her lover. Her father prefers her brother. The deceased pregnant woman's husband spends the entire night out, either engaging in sexual relations with other sex workers or a mistress. After kissing each other, two mainland female characters successfully stimulate the sexual desires of two Hong Kong men. In this film, it seems that women can only survive if they are attached to and controlled by men.

However, occasionally, the double or even triple image of the heroine (Sheung) appears in the film, symbolising the split of the character's identity or the change in her female consciousness (see Figures 4.6 & 4.7). During the sequence depicting Sheung's massacre, there are multiple high-angle shots, which have a strong sense of judgment and gender perspective (see Figure 4.3). Sheung cuts off the male penis without hesitation, indicating her complete war against female subservience to men. The appearance of the phallus in this context serves as a rejection of the conventions of pornography. In mainstream pornographic media, the phallus is typically presented as an object of desire and control, reinforcing a male-dominated viewing experience. However, in *Dream Home*, the phallus becomes a tool of subversion, representing a decisive breach of porn's usual male viewing mechanism. Instead of being a source of pleasure or power for the male characters, it becomes a symbol of their vulnerability and loss of control. This inversion challenges the viewer's expectations and forces them to reconsider the roles and power structures depicted in such scenarios. A mainland female character dies as a result of a wooden board being pierced through

279

her throat. This character, who was previously involved in a threesome and subjected to intense service for men, met an untimely death due to this violent act, described by the phrase 'deep insertion' into her neck, which is both vulgar and satirical.

Meanwhile, at the end of the film, Sheung breaks up with her boyfriend and places a paper cup on the roof of her boyfriend's car when he shows up again and asks for a one-night stand in a hotel. This paper cup seems to have symbolic significance. When Sheung was a child, she used a paper cup to make a telephone wire to talk to a little boy on the other side of her building. Little Sheung had wrongly pronounced the word 'over' as 'jerk'. At that time, Sheung did not understand the meaning of 'jerk'. The paper cup here denotes the end of their relationship and announces the final awakening of Sheung's feminist sense. After owning a new home in real life and realising her boyfriend is a jerk, she also rebuilds a new home in her spiritual world. Previously, she might have constructed a portion of her spiritual sustenance around her boyfriend. However, nowadays, with the breakdown of the old relationship, she has broken the previous mode of spiritual dependence and is researching for a stable place for herself. Based on the awakening of a completely new feminist consciousness, she is establishing an inner spiritual home that is more independent and autonomous, and no longer constrained by male dominance or unhealthy heterosexual relationships. This enables her spiritual world to regain tranquillity and be full of strength, truly achieving self-growth and transformation.

Figure 4.3 Triple image of Sheung in *Dream Home* (2010)

Figure 4.4 Double image of Sheung in *Dream Home*

Figure 4.5 The overhead view in *Dream Home*

From the perspective of feminist consciousness awakening, Sheung, the protagonist in *Dream Home*, exhibits a unique awakening of female consciousness. It goes beyond the traditional understanding of female objectification, subjectivity, and victimisation under the guidance of feminism (which is more applicable in the case of *Mystery*) and represents a more radical post-feminist consciousness based on personal choice and desires. Despite encountering challenges like skyrocketing housing prices and the heartbreak and harm caused by her ex-boyfriend, Sheung's violent actions are not motivated by revenge or anger (unlike Lu Jie and Sangqi) but originate from her aspiration to own property. She is depicted as an 'active female perpetrator' of violence. Although the portrayal of such an 'active female perpetrator' has received scant attention in contemporary Chinese cinema studies, the concept of the 'female warrior' has long been a subject of discussion as an analogous construct.

Hua Mulan, a renowned fictional character, joins the army in place of her elderly father. Her transgression embodies a sense of national loyalty and filial piety. The traditional portrayal of Hua Mulan-style female warriors involved disguising themselves as men to engage in warfare while suppressing their feminine traits and sexual desires (Berry & Farquhar, 2006). In contrast, Yu Jiaolong in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2000, China) represents another type of female warrior in the martial arts realm. She can maintain her feminine allure while demonstrating outstanding martial arts skills and expressing her own desires, reflecting the contemporary audience's acceptance of diverse female images where beauty and combat prowess can coexist. However, some martial arts films still reinforce patriarchal ideologies by depicting female warriors as vulnerable to male advances, blindly dedicated to their families, and overlooking significant national political advantages (Zhang, 2022). Generally, the female warrior in mainland film production is presented positively as her violence is justified and aimed at achieving social good.

In the context of the crime film, for an active perpetrator of violence like Sheung,

women's self-determination in preserving their femininity is emphasised as a matter of personal choice rather than actions compelled and defined by patriarchal authority. From this vantage point, Sheung can be regarded as a Chinese female warrior depicted in an unconventional or non-classical Chinese context, influenced by liberal feminist critiques regarding freedom, choice, and independence, and within a media environment centred on consumption. In post-feminist discourse, women are often empowered to exhibit a semblance of female power through various means, including violent behaviour. This connection to the classic and contemporary female warrior archetypes through the examples of Mulan and Yu Jiaolong helps to analyse and understand Sheung's character and the significance of *Dream Home* in presenting complex female images and challenging gender stereotypes.

However, for Sheung, all her transgressive behaviours are not aimed at the betterment of the nation or family but solely serve her own interests. In contrast to the virtuous and submissive women exemplified by Hua Mulan and Yu Jiaolong, her active engagement in violent acts problematises and undermines traditional feminine virtues. Furthermore, certain aspects of her empowerment, such as strength, independence, and rebellion, disrupt the pre-existing gender hierarchy and pose a significant threat to patriarchal power and male superiority. In this context, female empowerment is embodied in qualities typically associated with masculinity; however, by placing female characters in situations that defy conventional prejudices, these traits effectively dismantle existing gender hierarchies.

Sheung is portrayed as self-reliant, significantly challenging and weakening entrenched notions of masculinity within the patriarchal system. This subversion is noteworthy because it illustrates that female roles can be equal to or even surpass their male counterparts in domains traditionally dominated by men while simultaneously questioning the foundational authority of the patriarchal system. By embodying resistance, this character actively opposes cultural norms and expectations imposed by

a male-dominated society. Her representation serves as a typical example of progress and change within media narratives that reflect broader cultural shifts toward gender equality while interrogating long-standing traditional notions of leadership, independence, and personal agency constructed by men.

Thus, Sheung's problematic desire necessitates punishment in multiple dimensions. Firstly, although she is portrayed as intelligent and capable of executing her murder tasks, her intelligence does not equip her to foresee the eventual outcome. The tragic conclusion of Sheung's narrative - where a decline in housing prices renders all her efforts futile - ultimately reinforces a sense of dominance or misogyny. This implies that female violence functions as a 'masquerade', wherein the exhibition of intelligence and empowerment by women remains superficial (Hu, 2019). Ultimately, Sheung's failure and inability to transcend male power re-establish and reposition her within traditional gender hierarchies.

While it is crucial to acknowledge and validate female desire, there must be concerted efforts to eliminate the use of violence as a means of empowerment (McRobbie, 2009; Hu, 2019). McRobbie (2009) contends that the 'post-feminist masquerade' operates as a cultural strategy aimed at restoring stability within gender dynamics in heterosexual relationships. In other words, Sheung's violent behaviour serves merely as a façade for advancing female empowerment.

For another, the portrayal of Sheung as a female offender aligns with an individualised discourse on violence, which interprets female aggression as indicative of a woman's illness rather than recognising it as behaviour shaped by societal standards. This approach circumvents collective accountability by attributing blame solely to the woman for her violent actions (Hu, 2019). The representation of Sheung exemplifies a distinctive method employed to depict female violence within this narrative. Unlike other murder mystery or crime genres that often contextualise

violent behaviour within societal norms or group dynamics, this film concentrates exclusively on her acts of violence, suggesting they arise from personal circumstances or psychological conditions.

This narrative technique diverges from the depiction of group crimes typically explored in murder mystery and crime genres. In such cases, violent behaviour is frequently portrayed as stemming from collective dynamics, social conditioning, or group influence - resulting in shared culpability among members or attribution to broader societal issues. The story effectively sidesteps the concept of communal culpability by focusing singularly on Sheung's specific dysfunctions. The analysis does not consider potential socio-economic influences, cultural norms, or group dynamics that may have impacted her behaviour; instead, it places full responsibility for the assault solely upon her character.

The characterisation of the female perpetrator, as both problematic and active, serves to distance her from societal collectives while redirecting any perceived threat away from patriarchal authority. This is accomplished through what appears to be a rational justification: her selfish desires and proactive use of violence. This perspective resonates with Thornham and Feng's (2012) assertion that Chinese women experience discrimination primarily at the hands of their male counterparts; however, they are afforded individual agency through personalised strategies, however, these strategies do not offer any substantial explanation or solution for their social advancement.

Dream Home presents an unflinching portrayal of female deviance through explicit violence, a subject rarely front and centre in Asian cinema. The film revolves around a woman who goes to extreme lengths, including murder, to secure her dream apartment. The protagonist, Cheung, challenges conventional portrayals of women as submissive or victimised by flipping the script to become the aggressor in a horrifying spree. In doing so, the film underscores the constraints and societal expectations that

women face, particularly within a materialistic and high-pressure society. The brutality of her actions emerges as a grotesque form of rebellion against systemic forces that have oppressed her, namely economic hardship, social pressures regarding homeownership and success, as well as broader systemic injustices. Through its explicit depiction of violent female deviance, *Dream Home* compels audiences to confront the dark extremes to which societal pressures can drive individuals. Notably, the film does not seek to moralise or judge its female character for her actions; rather it offers a raw and almost clinical examination of a psyche distorted by unattainable societal norms. The intense focus on violent female deviance serves not only to interrogate individual behaviour but also to critique the societal structures that shape such behaviours. However, by emphasising these more extreme aspects of deviance and struggle faced by women, albeit critical, the film risks overshadowing everyday forms of resistance that are equally significant.

Contrastingly, Lou Ye's *Mystery* explores the realm of female deviance in a less explicit and more subdued manner. Unlike *Dream Home*, the women in *Mystery* engage in forms of deviance that are less shocking but are deeply entrenched in moral ambiguity and emotional complexity. The film depicts women entangled in a web of deceit, extramarital affairs, and intricate family dynamics. Here, the transgressions are predominantly psychological - crimes driven by passion or circumstance rather than calculated acts of graphic violence. While *Dream Home* thrusts the violent potential of its female protagonist into sharp relief, *Mystery* illustrates its female characters operating within the more 'acceptable' boundaries of deviance that society implicitly sanctions for them. The reason why these female characters' behaviours are deemed 'acceptable' may lie in the fact that their transgressions do not overtly challenge core societal values and public morals. They may merely exhibit minor acts of rebellion in relatively private domains, such as expressing subtle criticisms of traditional romantic and marital norms or slightly overstepping boundaries in their professional pursuits. However, these actions do not incite social disorder, unlike more extreme behaviours.

From a social psychology perspective, the public's subconscious tends to be more accommodating toward such behaviours that do not violate fundamental boundaries and possess an element of individual exploration. Consequently, they are perceived as falling within a realm that is still understandable and tacitly accepted, thus leading to a sense of 'acceptability' regarding the actions of female characters within this defined boundary in the film. *Dream Home* reveals the limitations and compromises women must navigate even amidst their rebellions, reflecting how societal norms confine female deviance to less overt and more internalised expressions.

Both films provide compelling insights into the scope and nature of female deviance; however, they function at opposite ends of this spectrum. *Dream Home* compels audiences to confront the explosive and unsettling potential inherent in a woman scorned by society's unattainable standards. In contrast, *Mystery* encapsulates quieter yet equally impactful manifestations of deviance where women operate within imposed limitations, sometimes leading to equally tragic outcomes.

Ultimately, both films challenge viewers to reconsider what constitutes female deviance while prompting reflection on the social conditions that give rise to it. Nevertheless, their divergent approaches - one being explicit and jarring while the other is subdued and nuanced - underscore the diverse forms and expressions that female deviance can assume within Asian cinema.

To summarise, Neroni posits that violence is a fundamental attribute associated with masculinity in the cultural imagination, serving as a primary means of distinguishing men from women (Neroni, 2012). Heimer and Coster (1999) argue that if male aggression is perceived as innate, society may interpret female aggression as a challenge to the established social order. Consequently, to satisfy a male-dominated audience (Neroni, 2012), it becomes essential to rationalise female violence.

Portraying the female perpetrator as someone who has endured past adversities and possesses internal vulnerabilities emerges as an effective strategy for justifying her violent actions. Traditional stereotypes depict women as kind, caring, obedient, and self-sacrificing; thus Lu Jie - the female perpetrator - is often characterised by emotionality and previously held virtuous qualities. By presenting her as a victim of unfortunate experiences that evoke audience sympathy, her rebellious behaviour becomes more comprehensible.

Her misfortune, specifically betrayal by her husband, serves dual purposes: on one hand, it softens her image by suggesting that her violent tendencies do not reflect her true nature (as noted earlier; despite harbouring animosity towards Yuhang, she refrains from harming the innocent boy; although she strikes Wenzi, she does not intend to kill her husband's mistress). This portrayal diminishes the perception of agency in her violent actions. On the other hand, it strengthens her connection with her husband whose ultimate social mission is framed around saving her, thereby privileging his social power while undermining Lu's.

Based on how Lu and Sangqi are depicted throughout the narrative regarding their victimisation, identifying Lu as a perpetrator of violence does not alter her representation as a passive victim. This characterisation aligns with traditional Chinese stereotypes portraying females as weak and submissive. The emphasis on female victimisation coupled with de-emphasising focus on female perpetrators reinforces these conventional narratives.

While *Mystery* focuses on justifying the transgressive behaviours of Lu Jie and Sangqi concerning gender while adeptly preserving their feminine qualities, in the case of *Dream Home*, different strategies are applied. The protagonist Sheung makes a striking entrance as a character who defies the conventional archetype of a vengeful avenger; instead, she emerges as an innovative but unconventional female warrior.

She boldly confronts numerous established conventions surrounding gender, violence, morality, and sexuality, subverting widely held perceptions. As an active female perpetrator of violence, every action taken by Sheung seemingly radiates immense power; she appears to exert control as she pursues her objective, acquiring property, through extreme measures involving violence. However, upon closer examination from a more nuanced perspective, it becomes apparent that she has inadvertently fallen into the trap of the 'post-feminist masquerade'. Under the illusion that self-worth can be attained and liberation from gender constraints achieved through violence, she unwittingly transforms into an object consumed and scrutinised within post-feminist discourse. What may initially appear as radical resistance ultimately reveals itself to be a desperate struggle confined within predetermined societal frameworks and cultural contexts - a farcical performance masquerading as autonomy yet fundamentally constrained.

4.3 Female Juvenile Delinquency, Maternal Factors and the Plight of Girls in Contemporary China

Commentators such as King and Bond have characterised China's cultural emphasis on balance, moderation, and harmony as a 'cult of self-restraint' (King & Bond, 1985, pp. 29-47). While it is evident that the Chinese socialisation style has contributed to relatively low levels of violent crime within the culture, this explanation alone is insufficient. Self-control also hinges on societal opportunities and frameworks for mobility.[85] Since 1979, China has undergone significant reforms that have led to profound changes brought about by modernisation; these shifts have disrupted traditional customs, norms, social institutions, and interpersonal relationships. The youth demographic, particularly geographically mobile individuals, has experienced an increase in crime rates among young people; this rise can be seen as an unintended consequence of societal reform.

In legal systems, the term 'juvenile' typically refers to individuals who have not yet reached the age of majority, which is generally considered to be under eighteen years old in most countries, including China. Chinese legislators have established a minimum age requirement for young offenders, ensuring that children below this threshold are not subjected to criminal penalties. According to Article 14 of the *1979 Criminal Law* in China, individuals become criminally responsible at the age of fourteen. Legal consequences apply to offenders who are sixteen years old or older; however, those aged between fourteen and sixteen will only be held accountable if they commit serious offences such as arson, robbery, murder, or repeated thefts. Chinese authorities commonly categorise crimes committed by individuals under twenty-five as 'youth delinquency', while offences committed by minors aged fourteen to eighteen are referred to as 'juvenile delinquency' (Shen & Hall, 2015).

Since the late 1970s, both Chinese policymakers and scholars have increasingly expressed concerns about juvenile delinquency as a significant societal issue. Several

early studies laid the foundation for addressing this problem (Shen & Antonopoulos, 2013). However, the limited availability of official data and empirical research on juvenile delinquency in China, coupled with the challenges associated with conducting relevant surveys on this topic, renders an accurate evaluation of its scope and nature a difficult endeavour. Moreover, official statistics do not accurately reflect crime in any country; they may underestimate or overestimate crime levels while distorting the nature of crime. Crime data must be aligned with the government's ideology and used for social control (Wong, 2001). This is especially problematic in totalitarian nations like China, where the dissemination of crime statistics is forced to follow the party line to uphold social control and advance the ideology of the ruling regime. Furthermore, considering cultural differences and the unique political ideology of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', little research has been done on Western conceptions of adolescent delinquency in the Chinese setting (Wong, 2001).

Moreover, within this relatively unexplored domain, female juvenile delinquency has garnered insufficient attention. Historically, male adolescents have constituted the majority of juvenile offenders in China. However, over recent decades, there has been a notable and escalating trend in female juvenile delinquency. In contemporary China, the rate of female juvenile delinquency has significantly and alarmingly increased, with younger girls engaging in more serious criminal activities (Bakken, 1993; Wong, 2000; Bao, 2017);

Furthermore, compared to women's involvement in criminology research and discourse, girls have largely been overlooked due to the 'moral panic' surrounding their participation in crime and societal tensions related to shifting gender norms. Notably, female offenders are approximately 2% more prevalent among adolescent offenders than among adult offenders (Bailey, 2006).

As the number of female adolescents entering the court system continues to rise, so

too does public interest in this demographic within contemporary media outlets. Individuals' perceptions of reality are significantly shaped by media portrayals, particularly when they lack personal experience with specific phenomena. Consequently, the public's perception of female adolescent delinquency as a pressing societal issue is heavily influenced by how these troubled females are depicted in the media. While film analysis has been extensively utilised to examine representations of adult female criminals, research focusing on troubled or rebellious young girls has predominantly centred on news coverage related to actual crime cases (Chesney-Lind, 1999). Given the relatively brief history of juvenile delinquency studies[86] and the limited attention afforded to issues surrounding female juvenile delinquency as represented in visual works, investigating how criminal activities among adolescent girls are portrayed through both the entertainment industry and Chinese media provides a unique and unprecedented perspective.

The portrayal of female adolescent delinquents in film, often inspired by actual cases of juvenile crime, provides a critical framework for understanding broader societal perspectives on youth crime and gender roles (Hu, 2021). These cinematic representations not only shed light on the complexities of juvenile delinquency but also shape the messages received by viewers, consciously or unconsciously influencing public opinion and policy discussions. Firstly, films that depict female adolescent delinquents frequently challenge traditional gender norms that have long portrayed women and girls as passive or inherently virtuous. By doing so, they compel audiences to confront the uncomfortable realities concerning the potential for criminal behaviour among young females. This not only disrupts overly simplistic and one-dimensional narratives that typically focus on 'bad boys' and 'innocent girls'[87], but also prompts a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of the complex factors contributing to delinquency in this demographic. Such films encourage viewers to question and reevaluate deeply ingrained societal expectations and stereotypes, thereby fostering a more profound and multi-faceted understanding of the

challenges and issues faced by female adolescents in contemporary society.

However, it is crucial to scrutinise how Chinese-language films frame this issue. Are the female adolescents portrayed as products of a flawed system, or are they vilified as 'bad seeds', thereby absolving society of any responsibility? The distinction holds great importance. In the former case, depicting female adolescents as products of a flawed system encourages empathy and critically examines environmental factors contributing to delinquency. In contrast, depicting them as 'bad seeds' attributes the blame exclusively to individuals, potentially reinforcing punitive attitudes towards juvenile delinquency rather than facilitating rehabilitative approaches. Moreover, regardless of whether these female adolescent characters are depicted as products of a flawed social system or as 'bad seeds', the complex individual differences and social factors must be fully considered. Film, as a medium, amplifies these messages through its emotional impact and visual storytelling techniques. Whether employing gritty realism or stylised dramatisation, narrative presentation significantly influences public perception of this issue.

Films can serve as a catalyst for social change by stimulating discussions on reform in juvenile justice, education, and social services. However, irresponsible or exaggerated portrayals have the potential to perpetuate stereotypes and stigmas, hindering efforts to address the underlying issues that contribute to female youth engaging in criminal behaviour (Hu, 2021). The representation of adolescent delinquents in film extends beyond mere entertainment; it serves as a cultural lens through which societal attitudes and biases are both reflected and shaped. The framing of these narratives and the emphasis placed on specific aspects can significantly influence how society comprehends and tackles juvenile delinquency among females in reality. Consequently, filmmakers are responsible for approaching this issue with nuance and complexity, while viewers should critically engage with these portrayals, acknowledging cinema's power to shape societal attitudes and policies.

Drawing inspiration from an actual criminal case, *Old Town Girl* (Shen Yu, 2020, China) delves into the world of female adolescent delinquents and offers valuable insights into how films shape the discourse surrounding juvenile delinquency among young women. This raises concerns regarding the alignment between cinematic portrayals of female juvenile offenders and those presented by the news media, as well as their potential impact on societal attitudes towards these individuals in China.

In the film, Shui Qing loses her biological mother Qu Ting, as a young child, and her only wish is to reunite with her mother. When Shui Qing turns seventeen, Qu returns and re-enters Shui Qing's life, bringing back warmth and happiness that had long been lost. However, this newfound joy is disrupted by the arrival of a mysterious man named Lao Du, leading Qu Ting and Shui Qing to conspire to commit a crime - the kidnap of Shui Qing's best friend to pay off the debt to Lao Du. Shui Qing's intense love for her mother becomes the driving force behind her involvement in the criminal act (as the kidnap accidentally turns into a murder later).

Within conventional criminological studies, discussions regarding family factors contributing to juvenile delinquency have mainly concentrated on the father's antisocial behaviour (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). The film *Old Town Girl* lays greater stress on the influence of maternal behaviours on a daughter's delinquency, offering a more comprehensive way to assess various aspects of female juvenile delinquency through the medium of film representation. Additionally, Shui Qing serves as a representative case among thousands of problematic Chinese single-parent girls, further exploring how films portray the predicament of this marginalised group that often lacks sufficient attention and considering general solutions. It should also be noted that these examples merely touch the surface of a much broader issue.

However, it is noteworthy that contemporary Chinese-language crime girls have not been fully addressed in existing scholarly literature. This gap is significant, considering that films featuring female juvenile delinquents or criminals can offer profound insights into societal attitudes, norms, and anxieties surrounding gender and criminality. Moreover, this topic becomes particularly compelling given China's rapid modernisation and social transformation, which have led to shifts in gender roles, economic structures, and legal frameworks. Films portraying 'crime girls' serve as cultural artefacts reflecting and shaping societal viewpoints while also challenging traditional Confucian gender roles and expectations (Tang et al., 2002, pp. 968-996). This scholarly discourse, while encompassing a broad spectrum of themes such as generational conflicts and political allegories, has frequently overlooked the intricate depiction of criminality among girls in China. This area, ripe for detailed examination, remains under-explored in academic circles (Montgomery & Zeng, 2016).

The lack of scholarly attention may partly stem from the pervasive patriarchal norms that permeate both the film industry and academic disciplines in mainland China. The genre and the study of crime have historically been male-dominated, encompassing perspectives from both criminals and law enforcement. By incorporating a gendered analysis, it becomes possible to unveil how female criminal characters in Chinese-language films either challenge or reinforce these patriarchal systems. Another contributing factor could be the relatively limited number of mainland Chinese cinema productions that focus on female criminals as their main protagonists, both female adolescents and girls. However, this limitation might reflect a broader societal discomfort or disinterest in acknowledging and dissecting female deviance and criminality (Hu, 2021).

Furthermore, the scarcity of scholarly research in this field not only overlooks but also fails to recognise the potential for interdisciplinary exploration. Analysing the portrayal of 'crime girls' in contemporary Chinese cinema can draw upon legal

studies, psychology, gender studies, and sociology to present a more comprehensive depiction of the intricacies involved (Desser & Hillenbrand, 2017). The dearth of extensive scholarship on this subject matter represents not only an academic oversight but also signifies a missed opportunity for broader societal discourse. Such discussions hold the potential to foster a more holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding gender, crime, and societal norms in contemporary China. This area presents fertile ground for academic inquiry; bridging this gap could significantly contribute to existing literature by offering novel dimensions in our understanding not only of Chinese cinema but also of Chinese society as a whole.

The film *The Old Town Girls* was filmed in Pan Zhihua, Miyi. In an interview, the director acknowledges that she selected Pan Zhihua as the backdrop for her story due to its deceptive appearance of being a mystical city named after a flower (the third syllable means flower in Chinese). However, it is a desolate southern town heavily impacted by previous extensive industrial development and surrounded by majestic mountains. The population has migrated away from this town.

This southernmost city is primarily renowned for its abundant subtropical fruits despite being inland in China. Among these fruits, mangoes are particularly plentiful in the city. Mangoes are succulent, fresh, and sweet, but they also have a tendency to leave indelible stains on clothes; hence, Mangoes hold symbolic significance here. The vibrant green peel represents Shui Qing's character in the film, while the luscious yellow flesh symbolises her mother, Qu Ting.[88]

Throughout the film, Shui Qing's attire frequently incorporates shades of green, particularly cyan, which symbolises sentimentality and youthfulness. Initially, Shui Qing is characterised by her silence, reserve, invisibility, submissiveness, and docility - resembling a mild and non-aggressive rabbit. She remains inconspicuous both at home and in her classroom. Her stepmother harbours a dislike for her, while her

biological father neglects her existence within their restructured family dynamic. The only thing she yearns for is the presence of her biological mother.

Shui Qing meticulously preserves an antique iron box that belonged to her mother during her childhood, filled with delicate trinkets that have faded over time. When she finds herself adrift without a clear destination, she seeks solace by the nearby river, where she engages with the box, finding respite and indulging in reveries consistently featuring her ethereal mother.

Within these dreamlike sequences, her mother appears as an exquisite and tender figure who promises imminent return, eternal coexistence, and everlasting unity. The abstract and experimental nature of these dream sequences conveys a sharp, precarious, and poignant texture reminiscent of the unborn baby's state within its maternal sanctuary. This serves as an emotional metaphor for Shui Qing's profound yearning for maternal love.

As maternal love epitomises Shui Qing's deepest longing in life, upon unexpectedly discovering that her mother is returning home after years of absence, Shui Qing discreetly obtains her mother's mobile phone number and sends a text message with the understated content, 'It is just one meal; I shall not disturb your life'. Furthermore, she presents her most cherished photograph to her mother as an offering in exchange for a keepsake, both gestures exemplifying her humble craving for maternal affection. In the film, even her classmates feel unworthy of the love and attachment that Shui Qing unreservedly delivers to her mother, who left home when Shui Qing was just less than a year old. Jin Xi, Shui Qing's classmate, questions, 'Your mother has neglected you for so many years, and yet a mere phone case (the exchange souvenir) satisfies you'. However, Shui Qing cautiously approaches her mother's realm, fearing that she might inadvertently lose her again.

The colour yellow serves as a perfect symbol of youth and warmth, encapsulating Qu Ting's vibrant vitality and the welcoming atmosphere she brings upon her arrival in Shui Qing. In contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of manipulative Asian mothers often depicted in similar narratives, Qu Ting is characterised by her allure, enigma, and whimsy. She engages with the children as friends, taking them out for drinks and rides. Qu drives Shui Qing and her friends on explorations throughout their unfamiliar small town.

Gradually, not only does Shui Qing become increasingly willing to do anything for Qu Ting, but her friends also express a desire to embrace Qu as one of their own. Qu possesses an exceptional physique and captivating appearance, which are further accentuated by her choice of a vibrant yellow dress and jacket. She envelops herself in a luxurious yellow blanket while driving a sleek yellow car (see Figure 4.6). Even the packaging of the instant noodles she consumes features shades of golden yellow.

Figure 4.6 The bright yellow car of Qu Ting in *The Old Town Girls*

However, yellow also functions as a cautionary hue, symbolising the underlying crises, perils, and vigilance that are often concealed within gentleness and happiness. Qu lacks moral values and exhibits coquettish behaviour - exploiting her beauty to flirt

with her daughter's male classmate - demonstrating traits of selfishness, irresponsibility, and ruthlessness by callously abandoning her infant. As a seasoned professional dancer accustomed to the glitz and glamour of the stage, she struggles to adapt to the mundanity of everyday life. When Shui Qing is barely a year old, Qu escapes from her role as a mother; upon returning not to provide long-lost warmth for Shui Qing but solely to evade her debts. Furthermore, it is this excessive debt stemming from Qu's vanity that directly leads to her daughter's later involvement in the murder.[89]

In one scene of the film, following the reunion between mother and daughter, Qu escorts Shui to her temporary residence. They gracefully pass through a mottled iron gate, with an open lamp illuminating the dark corridor. At the end of this passage lies her living room, bedroom, and stage - the place where her dreams began. Under the warm orange light rests a chaise longue, accompanied by a floor lamp adorned with tassels, intricately carved bedside tables, an embossed fruit bowl, and a carpet underfoot. The areas touched by light are gilded in gold tones and predominantly reflect Rock, Rococo or Bohemian styles. Reclining on the chaise longue, Qu Ting appears lazy yet elegant and aristocratic. Beyond this illuminated space exists a dilapidated stage characterised by dusty seats and a tattered curtain. This juxtaposition accentuates the disparity between Qu's fantasised existence as a graceful dancer on stage and her actual life circumstances. It subtly underscores the essence of Qu Ting's identity - an identity that remains ambiguous and complex.

Then Qu recounts her first experience dancing on stage; beneath the stage, the sparkling eyes of her adolescent daughter, Shui Qing, observe intently. Shui Qing appears to visualise her mother's youthful appearance through the narrative being shared, with her long feathered tailpiece accentuating the contours of her mother's pretty face as she swings exuberantly in the centre of the stage (see Figure 4.7). Shui Qing inquires: 'Was I born then?'. Qu's eyes momentarily brighten as she responds,

'Probably when you were two or three months old. Fortunately, I was still able to resume dancing after giving birth to you and could restart my career after leaving you.' This exchange underscores Qu's lack of comprehension regarding the significance of her child, Shui Qing, and conversely highlights Shui Qing's limited understanding of her mother's role. Such a dynamic illustrates Qu's emotional detachment from motherhood.

Figure 4.7 Qu reflects on her initial experience of dancing following the birth of Shui Qing.

This short dialogue between Qu and Shui reflects Qu's ambivalent feelings as a mother, embodying a complex emotional landscape of both love and resentment towards her child. Such contradicting emotions are socially unsanctioned as modern motherhood has been portrayed utilising various discursive and representational techniques as an advantageous rewarding institution that should be embraced without question in Chinese society. Motherhood is not only a crucial component of female identity but also evolves into a social mechanism under the influence of patriarchal systems. Furthermore, this ambivalence in maternal emotions is stigmatised as taboo because it undermines the idealised image of mothers as selfless individuals. We often see on-screen portrayals of self-sacrificing mothers who act as guardians for their

children and defenders of their families, much like those depicted in films such as *Hi, Mom* (Jia Ling, 2021, China), *All About My Mother* (Zhao Tianyu, 2021, China). These maternal figures are characterised by immense patience and wholehearted dedication, easily touching upon the audience's softer sentiments.

In recent years, characters like Qu Ting have emerged prominently on Chinese cinema screens, representing increasingly non-traditional and subversive images of motherhood. According to Tasker and Negra's perspective: 'Post-feminist culture emphasises educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice regarding work-life balance; parenting options; along with physical and sexual empowerment' (Negra & Tasker, 2007, p. 2). The tension arising from post-feminism stems from the reality that while women are taught they can 'have it all', they ultimately find themselves being told that marriage and motherhood should take precedence over careers (Negra & Tasker, 2007).

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, this maternal contradiction can be traced back to Freud's theories. Mothers play multiple roles during their children's development: initially serving as nurturers providing everything necessary for survival and security while simultaneously becoming potential 'binding forces' when children grow older and seek independence. Children desire ongoing affection from their mothers yet may resist such close ties; similarly, mothers face dilemmas between offering love and hoping for their child's independence. In the film, Qu Ting's prolonged absence during her daughter's upbringing complicates her return to reclaim her role as a mother - her guilt stemming from past neglect intertwines with an urgent need to reconnect now amidst her daughter's complex feelings oscillating between longing for maternal love yet feeling estranged from her mother.

At the sociological level, shifts in maternal imagery reflect changes within social structures. In traditional societies where the family served as women's primary stage

301

for action - the selfless devotion associated with motherhood aligned well with societal needs for stable households conducive to procreation. As time progresses, and women gradually enter workplaces seeking more avenues for self-actualisation, the singularly idealised definition of motherhood fails to encompass the diverse challenges faced by contemporary women today. The emergence of flawed yet multifaceted maternal figures like Qu Ting signifies society's acknowledgement of women's intricate experiences. It dismantles previous stereotypes surrounding perfect motherhood prompting audiences to re-evaluate its essence while contemplating how contemporary mothers might navigate balancing personal aspirations alongside parental responsibilities, and how society could better support women in resolving these dilemmas.

Qu Ting's mother faces a similar dilemma - balancing career aspirations with family responsibilities, ultimately opting for the latter. Through the fragmented recollections of Qu Ting's childhood depicted in the film, we can reconstruct her early experiences. Born in the 1980s, a tumultuous period marked by cultural revival, Qu Ting's upbringing occurs in an old town on the southwestern frontier that remains largely unchanged from the archaic and stereotypical norms of the 1960s and 1970s. Her father is characterised as irritable and abusive, while her mother embodies gentleness. In her youth, Qu Ting's mother harboured a passion for dance; however, to her husband, this pursuit was deemed extravagant and frivolous - an immodest interest at best.

Three decades later, these early memories are but scattered fragments; only two vivid recollections endure. The first involves being quietly taken to a theatre by her mother where light illuminates a dilapidated stage. Under this illumination, Qu's mother dances with grace and elegance. The second memory is far more painful: it is of witnessing her mother's beating at the hands of her father - a consequence of attending that very theatre performance. While such violence may have persisted

beyond what is shown in the film, further details remain unexplained.

In this traditional frontier town, male authority has historically dictated women's destinies. A few years later, young Qu Ting follows in her mother's footsteps; she too develops a love for dance and aspires to become a dancer rather than resigning herself to life as an ordinary factory worker - a fate she wishes to avoid at all costs despite enduring repeated abuse from her father. Ultimately left with no viable options for escape or autonomy within that environment, she compromises by marrying another factory worker and giving birth to their child (Shui Qing).

However, unlike her mother, Qu Ting makes different choices when faced with competing desires between pursuing freedom through dance and fulfilling familial obligations towards her husband and daughter. When presented with an opportunity to relocate to Shenzhen - a chance for liberation - Qu Ting seizes it without hesitation; she abandons both baby and spouse in search of a brighter future beyond the confines of their old town. From this perspective, fleeing from that familiar yet stifling environment represents not merely an act of defiance but also serves as Qu Ting's form of redemption for her childhood and compensation for her mother's repressed dream of dancing.

Ibsen's portrayal of Nora's decisive departure has created ripples throughout literature, establishing the motif of 'Nora's running away' as a reflection of women's fates. From a sociological perspective, in-depth analysis reveals that 'running away' is by no means a simple geographical relocation, that is, a physical escape from the familiar residence or the city on which one depends for survival. It contains a much deeper abstract meaning, symbolising women's bold challenge and resolute escape from the predetermined life trajectories preset by society and restricted by tradition. Under the patriarchal social structure, women have been long confined to the role of the family. Their life paths were often planned as taking care of their husbands and children and

managing household chores, becoming appendages of men and losing the possibility of independent development and self-actualisation. However, the women who 'run away' attempt to break free from these invisible yet rock-solid shackles with a shocking gesture. Judgments about these 'running away' women can be contentious; some view them as selfish or cruel for neglecting family obligations and defying traditional expectations of gentleness and obedience. However, they also represent an awakening - a courageous break from convention in pursuit of freedom and independence. No longer willing to be manipulated dolls within cages labelled 'family' or 'tradition', they embark on their own journeys.

Both Qu, her mother, and Lu Jie (mentioned in the former section) face similar struggles as contemporary Chinese women. Does a woman instantly transform into a mother upon childbirth? Should she be criticised for not fitting into the identity of 'mother'? The framework of masculinisation establishes notions of 'good' and 'bad' femininity, leading to the demonisation of those who deviate from traditional gender norms. Qu, her mother, and Lu Jie exemplify this issue. Their so-called 'running away/escape' behaviours extend beyond mere physical departure; they symbolise resistance against societal expectations. This prompts deep questions about motherhood and gender roles. In contrast, their defiance of gender constraints represents bold efforts to liberate themselves from rigid norms, challenging entrenched definitions of 'good' womanhood while highlighting the complex challenges many women face in balancing personal aspirations with societal pressures.

Furthermore, Shui Qing and Qu Ting, along with their mother-daughter relationship, significantly deviate from the norms of mainstream Chinese culture. In this cultural context, there are well-established societal expectations regarding familial responsibilities and behaviours, particularly within the mother-daughter dynamic. These expectations often prioritise values such as filial piety, reverence for elders, and

strict adherence to traditional family structures and obligations. However, Shui Qing and Qu Ting's actions and behaviours deviate from these cultural norms by prioritising personal pursuits and desires over familial responsibilities or demonstrating self-reliance and freedom in a society that emphasises communal decision-making and reliance on the family unit. Such departures from these norms may signify a broader concept of generational transformation or the consequences of contemporary influences on traditional societies.

In a specific scene from the film (see Figure 4.8), as they drive through a tunnel on a rainy night, Shui Qing discreetly gazes at her biological mother, Qu, in the driver's seat from the back. The outside background is depicted in pure white, while warm and dim shades of yellow light illuminate the interior. Typically, lighting is utilised to establish an environmental atmosphere and achieve the role of auxiliary narrative matched with the environment. However, this dim lighting creates an ambiguous or dreamlike ambience that suggests something beyond a conventional mother-daughter bond; it hints at a potential element of love within their connection. This ambiguity is further intensified by Shui Qing's confession to Qu Ting at the end of the tunnel when she utters, 'I am willing to do anything for you'. It becomes challenging for viewers not to question whether their relationship transcends mere familial ties and encompasses romantic love instead. The affection that Shui Qing believed she had for her mother might have been an idealised love stemming from an incomplete family dynamic - a bond where she clings onto Qu Ting, not merely like any daughter would cling to her mother. Shui Qing is depicted throughout the film as reminiscing with Qu Ting about their childhood memories, that 'when you were little. I remember....'; cherishing the mobile phone case given by Qu Ting as if it were a precious treasure and repeatedly flipping through old photos of Qu Ting until they fade away. Shui Qing relies on fragmented memories from when she was merely one year old to construct an image of Qu Ting in her mind day after day.

Figure 4.8 Qu Ting and Shui Qing drive on a rainy night in the tunnel

The first encounter between Qu and Shui Qing takes place in front of a mutton noodle stall. As Qu Ting boastfully recounts her previous night's encounter with a handsome man to her female friends, Shui Qing coincidentally appears across from her. Surprisingly, the first words Shui Qing utters after more than ten years are 'give my cigarette a light'. The director boldly employs this provocative and ambiguous opening line between mother and daughter. At this moment, Shui Qing resembles a bratty teenager who has mustered the courage to speak to the girl she admires, pretending to be spontaneous and mature in front of Qu Ting.

In another scene, Qu Ting takes Shui Qing home, retrieves the wedding ring, and places it on Shui Qing's ring finger in front of her ex-husband Shui Hao, Shui Qing's biological father. The ring, a symbol of the former sexual and legal marriage between Shui Hao and Qu Ting, is transferred from Shui Hao to Shui Qing. At this point, despite the fact that Qu Ting's marriage to Shui Hao has ended, her legal husband has disappeared. The ring symbolises a new responsibility for Shui Qing as she begins to assume the role of protector, safeguarding Qu Ting.

After that, in the darkened theatre scene, Laodu attempts to harm Qu Ting. Despite

being only 17 and facing a tall male stranger (Laodu), Shui Qing grabs a stick from the stage and charges forward, showcasing her protective instincts. Later, Laodu takes Qu Ting away. In another hotel scene, Qu Ting is depicted in a sexually abusive situation before her daughter. When Shui Qing enters the room and sees two unclothed men followed by Qu Ting with her back turned, she exhibits an extraordinary protective nature for her age. She calmly brings Qu Ting back to their residence where Qu Ting feels embarrassed and numb. Meanwhile, Shui Qing stabilises her trembling mother and devises a plan to help repay their debts by kidnapping classmates within three days.

According to Mahoney, girls and women in abusive situations may develop 'learned helplessness', which hinders rational thinking and leads them to endure abuse silently. This perspective suggests that only those who have experienced chronic abuse are likely to resort to violence against their abusers (Mahoney, 2013). After enduring repeated infringements without relief, these individuals might eventually retaliate violently as an outlet for long-standing resentment. However, contrary to this pattern, the film shows Shui Qing and Qu Ting redirecting their vengeance towards an innocent girl by collaborating on another kidnapping instead of seeking retribution against the male abusers in the hotel or the individual wrongdoer (Lao Du). The portrayal reflects a unique response of women to mistreatment within China's patriarchal system. It deviates from the typical aggressive retaliation against abusers, suggesting a complex interaction between abused women and a culture dominated by male authority.

Shui Qing views her mother, Qu Ting, as the sole source of faith and is willing to go to great lengths for her. However, she refrains from challenging male power, highlighting the constraints on female deviance or violence within Chinese culture. This aligns with the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade,' where women adopt traditional femininity as a strategy. Although Shui Qing exhibits some deviant

behaviour, her reluctance to confront male authority suggests an adherence to traditional gender roles. This masquerade serves as a protective mechanism that allows her to navigate a patriarchal system without confrontation (Gilligan, 2011). Thus, her actions reflect a complex balance between rebellion and conformity shaped by societal expectations (placed upon women) in Chinese culture.

There is another detail in the film: the scene of kissing the forehead of Qu Ting by Shui Qing. The director gave the actor playing Shui Qing a certain freedom of expression, not requiring her to kiss, saying that she could just 'smell', but the final decision was to kiss Qu's forehead in the film. A kiss on the forehead is more appropriate than a sniff. The action of kissing on the forehead is often suitable for the strong (person) to the weak (person), or parents to their children, to show care for them, pamper, and give a sense of security. While the 'sniff' action shows more attachment from the weaker side to the stronger. At this point, Shui Qing sees herself as Qu Ting's loyal guardian, kneeling on one knee, bending down and dropping a kiss on Qu's forehead, with a chivalrous devotion to Qu Ting.

Moreover, the rainy night when they drive into the tunnel marks a pivotal moment in the film, as mother Qu Ting and daughter Shui Qing undergo their first identity swap. Their relationship shifts from that of mother-daughter and friends to something deeper. After opening up to each other in the tunnel, Shui Qing begins to yearn for more maternal love, hoping her mother can be there for her longer. For this long-missing affection over sixteen years, she seems willing to sacrifice anything, even commit a crime.

During this process, Qu Ting gradually comes to appreciate the invaluable nature of familial affection. What she initially sought to escape from ultimately provides her with the warmth she has long been missing. However, both characters are inexperienced in criminal activities and inadvertently cause the death of a hostage

Shui Qing's classmate. The film features a particularly poignant scene that follows: both mother and daughter attempt to take responsibility for their actions while urging one another to extricate themselves from their predicament. This moment becomes even more emotionally charged when Qu confesses to having abandoned her daughter and family.

The second identity swap occurs after the accidental murder; Qu Ting embraces her panicking daughter Shui Qing, who is trembling and unable to stand, and reassures her: 'It is okay; mommy will handle it'. Shui Qing's unconditional love gradually rekindles Qu Ting's sense of motherhood.

During the initial identity swap, the daughter matures into an adult role and strives to protect her mother, much like the peel of a mango safeguards its flesh. In contrast, in the second identity exchange, the mother gives her daughter strong faith and inner spiritual strength, just like the flesh of a mango supporting its skin. The dynamic between Shui Qing and Qu Ting exemplifies the intricate emotional landscape that often characterises the bond between a single parent and her child. In this particular case, the roles of protector and nurture frequently interchange, reflecting the fluidity of their relationship. Initially, Shui Qing assumes a quasi-parental role, demonstrating maturity beyond her years. Her actions are not merely acts of filial duty but represent an intense, almost unconventional form of emotional attachment to her mother. This attachment is rooted in the unique circumstances of their single-parent family structure, where Shui Qing's world revolves solely around Qu Ting. As the narrative progresses, a significant shift occurs in Qu Ting's attitude, catalysed by Shui Qing's unwavering love and dedication. This pivotal transformation signifies Qu Ting's awakening to a more traditional maternal role and reversing their earlier dynamic where Shui Qing was the carer. Now embodying strength and assurance, Qu Ting provides her daughter with much-needed support. Their exchange of roles resembles a process of mutual care and protection, beautifully illustrated by the mango metaphor.

Shui Qing receives care initially serving as the peel that safeguards her mother from reality's harshness. Qu Ting rekindles the essence of motherhood and fortifies her daughter from within, akin to nourishing the soul. This interdependence highlights their profound emotional bond and the dynamic fluctuations in caregiving.

This film is an adaptation of the actual crime case known as the 'Nanjing Nanhu Mother-daughter Kidnapping Case'[90], yet the actual events were far more brutal than depicted in the film. As depicted in the film, the mother and daughter do not share empathy or take responsibility for each other. The true story unfolds as follows: Chen Yan, at the age of 20, gave birth to Xiaoting with her live-in boyfriend, Li Bin. However, due to unbearable poverty within their working-class family, Chen Yan abandoned her newborn daughter five months later. Shortly after, Li Bin remarried and left Xiaoting to be raised by her elderly grandparents. Xiaoting entered primary school and had to plead with her cousin to act as a 'surrogate mother' during parent-teacher meetings. From third grade onwards, Xiaoting began fictionalising happy family scenes in her diary and even drew an imaginary portrait of her mother based solely on imagination. Upon entering Nanhu No. 1 Junior High School, she discovered a culture of intense comparison among students where some classmates would bully her without any intervention or care from her father. Consequently, she placed all hope on reuniting with her long-lost mother. She portrayed Chen Yan as a wealthy woman holding high positions within multinational companies developing assets worth millions of dollars in Australia.

In the second semester of the school year, her long-awaited mother suddenly appeared at home. However, she was solely seeking refuge due to having been married and divorced three times before giving birth to two sons from another marriage, which ultimately led to abandonment once again, leaving Chen Yan distraught. Confronted with her distraught mother, Xiaoting forgave her wholeheartedly. To maintain the facade of her mother as a 'successful and affluent woman', Xiaoting purchased an

inexpensive perfume from a vendor and falsely claimed that it was brought back from France by her mother when presenting it to her classmates. However, Chen Yan displayed complete indifference towards Xiaoting. Later, Chen Yan confessed to Xiaoting about her drug and gambling addiction, as well as her 700,000 RMB debt to a loan shark. To repay the loan shark, she convinced her daughter to kidnap their wealthy classmate Xiaoyan. After being rejected a birthday invitation by Xiaoyan, Xiaoting temporarily changed her target to another classmate, Feng Ruoying. In the restaurant bathroom, Chen Yan and her daughter secretly drugged Ruoying's drink. Chen Yan covered the unconscious Ruoying's mouth with one hand and choked her with the other while Xiaoting held onto Ruying's hands. It did not take long for Ruoying's parents to realise their daughter was missing. Eventually, Xiaoting was found by the police first, and she fabricated a lie that Ruoying had left for Yangzhou to deceive Feng's parents. However, Feng's parents sensed something was amiss and eventually discovered their daughter dead in the car trunk.

The interrogations of the mother and daughter at the police station lasted for six hours and eight-and-a-half hours, respectively. In an effort to prevent her mother from being implicated further, the teenage girl exerted considerable effort in concealing information and protecting her mother. Just as the truth was on the verge of revelation, the mother attempted to shift all blame onto her daughter by claiming that it was she who had a conflict with Ruoying and committed the murder, while asserting that she merely assisted in disposing of the body. Ultimately, Feng and Li reached an agreement to show leniency towards Xiaoting; however, both insisted on imposing a death sentence upon Chen Yan.

During the court trial held on November 11th, 2011, Chen Yan was sentenced to immediate execution due to despicable motives, inciting a juvenile to commit a crime, killing a juvenile, and causing significant negative social impact. Li Xiaoting, who aided her mother in committing murder, received a nine-year prison term.

Contemporary research on the explanations for juvenile delinquency holds significant relevance in crime news reports and related film adaptations, particularly with regard to interpersonal relationships and adjustment. When addressing familial issues, experts frequently argue that dysfunctional families, characterised by strained interactions with parents or permissive parenting, are fundamental contributors to adolescent criminal behaviour. Traditionally, Chinese society has been centred around family life; consequently, considerable attention has been devoted to examining how conventional institutions such as the family contribute to adolescent misbehaviour in China.

The *China Law Yearbook* (1988) indicates that stress and anger collectively heighten the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviours among young individuals. Furthermore, negative relationships within immediate environments, particularly those involving family and school, significantly influence delinquent behaviours through both direct and indirect effects on interpersonal relationships (Bao et al., 2014).

In both the real-life case of Xiaoting and the fictionalised portrayal of Shui Qing in the film adaptation, their fractured families and yearning for warmth and maternal affection serve as direct motivators for their involvement in crime. For Xiaoting, her criminal activities may be indirectly instigated by an atmosphere characterised by comparison and bullying from her classmates during middle school. In a pivotal scene from the film, Jin Xi coerces Shui Qing into publicly apologising while revealing her tragic life story along with details about her vulnerable mother as a form of punishment. This act of bullying reinforces Shui Qing's resolve to execute their plan to kidnap Jin Xi.

When adapting existing juvenile delinquency news reports into entertainment displays

intended for mainland Chinese audiences, one crucial consideration is censorship and finding a balance between the potential 'moral panic' on youth involvement in crime and societal tensions surrounding changing gender norms. The concept of 'moral panic' refers to a pervasive societal apprehension that arises when the public perceives certain issues, individuals, or groups as threats to the social fabric. Often amplified by media narratives, these panics can escalate beyond the risks involved (Bowman, 2015, p. 22-38). In China, where rapid modernisation coexists with deeply ingrained cultural norms, this notion becomes even more intricate, and film representation plays an exceptionally influential role as both a reflector and mediator of these anxieties (Pang, 2011, pp. 461-476).

Chinese-language crime cinema, especially youth crime, is uniquely positioned to act as a powerful catalyst for 'moral panic' due to its emotional resonance and cultural impact, compared with news reports. Films that explore controversial themes such as youth rebellion, crime, or deviations from traditional values can both reflect and magnify public concerns. In this capacity, the visual representation in crime cinema functions as a barometer of societal sentiments, capturing underlying fears and potentially amplifying them through emotionally compelling storytelling and well-developed characters. The anxiety depicted on screen often mirrors societal attitudes and may influence public policy and opinion (Bakken, 2004, pp. 67-89).

However, Chinese-language crime cinema, especially the mainland one, exists in a distinctive regulatory milieu. The country's authoritative governance imposes strict limitations on content through censorship, thereby making the government an active participant in mediating the scope and scale of moral panics (Xiao, 2013). Therefore, filmmakers in China, like director Shen, are ensnared in a complex balance of artistic expression and state-imposed limitations. Director Shen demonstrates varying degrees of success when blending genre movie (crime film) elements with her attempts at sharp social critique throughout this film; however, she faces even more significant

challenges when striving to transform it into a powerful anti-crime message movie. Censorship of films in mainland China substantially impacts the portrayal of sensitive subjects, such as juvenile misbehaviour. The Chinese government frequently engages in content censorship that is seen to threaten societal norms, incite violence, or subvert public morals. Hence, filmmakers addressing subjects related to adolescent criminal behaviour must traverse intricate terrain. They must convey their storylines in a manner that is faithful to the original news report vision and in accordance with legislative laws. This sometimes entails refraining from explicit critiques of societal institutions or government policies and emphasising individual moral quandaries or personal accountability. Many filmmakers frequently utilise nuanced narrative strategies to examine subjects such as adolescent criminal behaviour while adhering to the limitations imposed by censorship. This entails a nuanced equilibrium, depicting the actuality of delinquency and its fundamental societal origins while evading frontal opposition from censors (Xiao, 2013). For instance, a movie may focus on the individual challenges and ethical decisions faced by its youthful protagonists rather than directly criticising the societal or governmental structures that lead to juvenile delinquency.

In this film, this struggle is underscored by the inclusion of a typical title card at its conclusion that informs viewers about severe punishments inflicted upon all involved parties and calls for vigilance from the populace. State censorship can potentially suppress emerging 'moral panics' by controlling portrayals deemed detrimental to social or political stability. However, this approach can unintentionally intensify underlying tensions. The restriction on content often leads to oversimplified representations of complex issues (Pang, 2011).

The dual role of crime cinema - both as an instigator and a regulator of societal anxiety - adds intricate layers to the concept of 'moral panic' regarding juvenile delinquency issues in China. While crime movies can perpetuate stereotypes and

deepen existing stigmas, they can also serve an educative function. Responsible, nuanced filmmaking can challenge societal norms, presenting alternative viewpoints and fostering critical dialogue. For instance, a film that carefully dissects the roots of youth rebellion or gender nonconformity, such as *Old Town Girl*, can lead audiences to question pre-existing biases, steering public opinion towards a more nuanced, informed perspective. The negotiation between these opposing forces reflects the broader struggle within Chinese society to reconcile its future with its past.

As the country modernises and globalises, its traditional norms are being reconsidered, redefined, and sometimes outright challenged. Crime cinema serves as a battleground where these tensions are visible, explored, and sometimes even resolved. It can be said that the concept of 'moral panic' in China is deeply entwined with the country's cinematic output, forming a complex relationship that both shapes and is shaped by broader societal dynamics (Xiao, 2013, pp. 109-130). Through its power to elicit emotion and provoke thought, Chinese-language crime cinema can either fan the flames of 'moral panic' or encourage a more nuanced, informed public discourse. It is a potent tool in the cultural arsenal, significantly influencing China's evolving moral and social landscape. With its profound capacity to elicit emotions and stimulate critical thinking, Chinese crime cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and discourse. This genre possesses the potential to either amplify 'moral panic' or foster a more sophisticated and informed public debate, particularly within the context of evolving feminist and gender dynamics in contemporary Chinese society (Hu, 2019). As these films mirror and critique societal norms, they become instrumental in highlighting and questioning traditional gender roles and inequalities. They frequently challenge patriarchal structures while offering innovative perspectives on women's empowerment and gender equality, reflecting the ongoing shifts in feminist thought and gender relations in China. Consequently, crime cinema emerges as a potent vehicle for influencing and mirroring China's changing moral and social landscape, especially concerning issues of gender and feminism.

As Amato argues, anti-heroes often employ coping mechanisms that current members of society are either unable or unwilling to adopt due to the associated risks with their radical approaches (Amato, 2016). She further contends that audiences or readers might possess similar flaws and forbidden desires as these anti-heroes and consequently embrace these qualities while living vicariously through these entertainment visual products that tap into their subconscious longings (Amato, 2016). Living vicariously through fictional characters presented in the media undoubtedly brings about both positive and negative consequences. For example, an ordinary person who leads a rather mundane and law-abiding life may have few similarities with a psychopath or sociopath. Such a person's values, moral orientation, and emotional responses are likely to be fundamentally distinct from those of individuals with extreme personality disorders. Furthermore, they might not show sufficient sympathy towards those who commit violent acts, as their sense of justice and empathy is based on conventional social norms and moral benchmarks. This lack of sympathy could result from a deeply rooted belief in the significance of personal responsibility and the upholding of the law, or simply from an inability to relate to or understand the motives and mindset behind such atrocious actions. However, consuming entertainment media has the potential to alter this perspective. In this case, by altering the conclusion of the confession (in the actual case, it is the mother who solely blames her daughter), the director compels both the mother-daughter duo to assume responsibility for their actions and empathise with each other. Such a modification enhances audience empathy while also considering the potential trivialisation of juvenile crime seriousness.

Furthermore, compared to real crime news reported stories, this film delves beyond just kidnapping and murder crimes by narrating a tale about girls' upbringing and survival circumstances in China. That is to say, Shui Qing and her friends all face their challenges. Jin Xi, a wealthy girl, bears self-harm scars on her arms and stands

out at school by not wearing a uniform. With her affluent parents working in the city, Jin Xi is often left alone, feeling abandoned and fearful like Shui Qing but also harbouring resentful anger. On the other hand, Ma Yueyue feels trapped by her controlling and abusive father. Raised by wealthier relatives until her father's return, Yueyue yearns for freedom from him; however, he refuses to let go of her despite the relatives' eagerness to adopt her and provide a more comfortable life with better opportunities compared to impoverished Ma's household. A mournful pop song on the radio echoes that 'everyone is searching for an untroubled paradise', which certainly holds true for all three girls and Qu Ting, each longing for something more without being entirely sure of what it entails or how to attain it. While Shui Qing craves maternal approval but ends up assuming a motherly role herself, Qu Ting ultimately accepts the corrupted nature of maternity only through the most tragic sacrifice in attempting to shield her daughter from the pervasive darkness that has engulfed her life since returning. The girls cheerfully proclaim in the film, 'It does not matter if our dreams sink; they will become floating bottles', yet each finds themselves adrift, yearning for parental affection and reliability while being largely left quasi-orphaned due to the demands and contradictions of modern China. Shen's melancholic neo-noir presents a stark coming-of-age narrative that leaves little room for innocence within contemporary society, relegating it solely to memory as collateral damage resulting from parental detachment and adolescent futility. In conclusion, Shen's melancholic neo-noir paints a stark picture of contemporary society, where the innocence of youth becomes collateral damage in a world marred by parental detachment and the complexities of modern China.

Conclusion

This section examines crime films as a lens, highlighting the solid realistic significance of crime films and their growing popularity in the Chinese-language film market, leading to a unique performance system, by thoroughly examining two distinct types of female perpetrators portrayed in these films – one driven to violence by desperate revenge and the other employing violence for personal desires rather than self-defence – this section argues that while portraying female violence as a dramatised manifestation of phallic power may create an illusion of female empowerment, it ultimately upholds strict traditional gender hierarchies within Chinese culture through the punishment and repression inflicted upon women by men.

Within the domain of Chinese-language crime cinema, the depiction of adolescent criminal behaviour presents an analytical perspective for scrutinising present-day societal concerns. These provide entertainment and a platform for examining and contemplating the intricacies and subtleties of adolescent delinquency. These narratives offer a comprehensive exploration of the lives and motives of juvenile delinquents, shedding light on the various elements that contribute to their behaviour, including societal pressure, parental dysfunction, and the challenges of establishing identity in a quickly changing society. This investigation has great importance in light of the swift socio-economic transformations in China, which have introduced fresh obstacles and stresses for its younger generation. Crime film in China serves as a potent means of social self-reflection by depicting juvenile delinquents, providing valuable observations on the evolving dynamics of adolescent culture and the broader consequences for Chinese society.

In conclusion, the power of crime cinema in China extends beyond mere entertainment; it is a cultural instrument that reflects, magnifies, and sometimes challenges societal anxieties. The role of filmmakers in navigating this terrain is pivotal, as they contribute to the narrative of a rapidly changing nation, offering

glimpses into the complex interplay between tradition and modernity and the tensions that arise as China defines its future while respecting its past. As we reflect on the intricate dance between Chinese crime cinema and 'moral panic', we can appreciate how this relationship goes beyond the screen. It resonates in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people, influencing perceptions, driving conversations, and sometimes even shaping the course of societal progress. The power of crime cinema as a tool for reflection and change is unmistakable, and its role in China's ongoing transformation remains a fascinating and evolving narrative. In this journey, cinema is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in China's social and cultural discourse. It is a mirror that reflects society's deepest fears and aspirations and a platform that encourages dialogue and introspection. As China continues its march into the future, cinema will continue to evolve, playing a pivotal role in shaping the narratives that define a nation in transition. The story of crime cinema in China is far from over; it is an ongoing saga that reflects the complexity and richness of a society in constant flux.

Conclusion Chapter

This thesis conducts a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted and evolving representations of female transgression and deviance within contemporary Chinese-language cinema. Through an extensive analysis across various film genres, it elucidates how these films challenge and reconfigure traditional gender norms, thereby contributing to the intersecting domains of film, gender, and cultural studies.

A significant contribution of this research is its exploration of newly emerging film sub-genres within the unique Chinese context. In-depth analyses of big heroine dramas, horror films, new magic narratives, and crime stories provide perspectives that diverge from prior studies. By focusing on these distinct genres, the thesis reveals the cultural and social determinants that influence the representation of female transgression and deviance in Chinese-language cinema. This approach not only clarifies the specific characteristics but also highlights the symbolic significance embedded within these films, thereby enhancing our understanding of the underlying cultural and social subtexts.

The thesis employs two pivotal analytical frameworks to trace the evolution of representations of female transgression and deviance. The vertical, time-based axis charts the development of transgressive and deviant female characters across various films, encompassing both historical and contemporary contexts within each genre. This approach delineates a clear chronological progression and underscores the evolving patterns of representation. Consequently, it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how historical, cultural, and social contexts have shaped the portrayal of female transgression and deviance over time.

Concurrently, the horizontal axis of regional comparison examines the portrayals of female transgression and deviance in films from various regions within China, including both mainland and Hong Kong productions, while contrasting these

representations with those found in Western cinema. This comparative analysis elucidates the distinctive features and cultural variances that influence the depiction of female characters. It offers a more inclusive and globally-oriented perspective, emphasising the importance of considering regional and cultural differences when analysing the representation of female transgression and deviance in cinematic works.

Another aspect of this thesis is its application of Western theories within the Chinese context. China, with its unique cultural and historical heritage, presents a distinct set of challenges and opportunities for the analysis of gender and feminism. This thesis integrates gender theory, post-feminist theory, and criminological theory in its film analysis while simultaneously considering the specificities of the Chinese context, where the feminist movement has developed along its own recent and unique trajectory. It bridges the gap between Western and Chinese perspectives, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on gender and feminism at a global level.

The concept of 'post-feminist masquerade' serves as an analytical lens through which to examine the complex and often paradoxical representations of deviant female characters in Chinese-language cinema. It posits that while female characters may appear empowered on the surface, they remain constrained by traditional gender norms and expectations. Their actions and behaviours can be interpreted as a form of strategic performance or 'masquerade'. This thesis illustrates how the 'post-feminist masquerade' operates across various film genres, influencing the portrayal of female transgression and deviance. By exploring this concept, the thesis reveals the latent agendas and power dynamics underlying the representation of female characters, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social implications associated with these portrayals.

In conclusion, this thesis makes a contribution to the intersecting fields of Chinese-language films, cultural analysis, and gender studies. It conducts a detailed

and comprehensive examination of the nuanced representations of female transgression and deviance within the body of Chinese-language films, offering valuable perspectives on the intricate interplay between gender, power dynamics, and cultural values. Through its focus on innovative genres, the application of two-axis analytical frameworks, and an exploration of the concept of 'post-feminist masquerade', this thesis advances our understanding of Chinese cinema while challenging existing theoretical paradigms. Furthermore, it has implications for ongoing discussions regarding gender and feminism in contemporary Chinese society, emphasising the need for a more context-specific approach to analysing gender-related issues.

Filmography

A Chinese Fairy Tale (Wilson Yip-Wai Shun, 2011, Hong Kong)

A Chinese Ghost Story (Siu-Tung Ching, 1987, Hong Kong)

A Simple Life (Ann Hui, 2011, China)

A Touch of Sin (Jia Zhangke, 2013, China)

All About My Mother (Zhao Tianyu, 2021, China).

An Actress's Dream (Zhang Jinbiao, 1985, China)

Angels Wear White (Vivian Qu, 2017, China)

B for Busy (Shao Yihui, 2021, China)

Baober in Love (Li Shaohong, 2004, China)

Beijing Woman's Guide (Li Zhi, 2018, China)

Black Coal, Thin Ice (Diao Yinan, 2014, China)

Blind Mountain (Li Yang, 2007, China)

Blind Mountain (Li Yang, 2007, China)

Blind Shaft (Li Yang, 2003, China)

Body Heat (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981, the United State)

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2000, China)

Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944, the United States)

Dream Home (Pang Ho-Cheung, 2010, Hong Kong)

Empresses in the Palace (Zheng Xiaolong, 2011, China)

Empresses in the Palace: The Legend of Miyue (Zheng Xiaolong, 2015, China)

Feng Shui (Wang Jing, 2012, China)

Fish and Elephant (Li Yu, 2001, China)

Go, Lala Go! (Xu Jinglei, 2010, China)

Hard Candy (David Salde, 2005, the United States)

Hi, Mom (Jia Ling, 2021, China)

In the Realm of the Sense (Nagisa Oshima, 1976, Japan)

Ju Dou (Zhang Yimou, 1990, China)

Kill Bill: Vol. 1 (Quentin Tarantino, 2003, the United States)

Love is not Blind (Teng Huatao, 2011, China).

Mulan (Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook, 1998, the United states)

Mystery (Lou Ye, 2012, China)

Night and Fog (Ann hui, 2009, Hong Kong)

Nikita (Luc Besson, 1990, France)

Nothing Gold Can Stay (Ding Hei, 2017, China)

Ode to Joy (Kong Sheng, 2016, China)

Old Boy (Park Chan-wook, 2003, South Korea)

Old Town Girl (Shen Yu, 2020, China)

Onibaba (Kaneto Shindo, 1964, Japan)

Painted Skin (Gordon Chan, 2008, China)

Painted Skin: The Resurrection (Wuershan, 2012, China)

Palace of Desire (Li Shaohong, 2000, China)

People Mountain People Sea (Cai Shangjun, 2012, China)

Princess Agents (Wu Jinyuan, 2017, China)

Princess Weiyoung (Li Huizhu, 2016, China)

Red Sorghum (Zhang Yimou, 1987, China)

Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace (Wang Jun, 2018, China)

Secret Post in Canton (Lu Jue, 1957, China)

Send Me to the Clouds (Teng chongchong, 2019, China)

Shanghai Woman's Guide (Cheng Liang, 2018, China)

Slight Witness (Fei Xing, 2013, China)

Sophie's Revenge (Eva Jin, 2009, China)

Somewhere Beyond the Mist (King Wai Cheung, 2017, Hong Kong)

Suzhou River (Lou Ye, 2000, China)

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-wook, 2005, South Korea)

Ten Great III of Peach Blossom (Lin Yufen, Yu Cuihua & Ren Haitao, 2017, China)

The Case of Xu Qiuying (Yu Yanfu, 1956, China)

The Enchanting Shadow (Han-Hsiang Li, 1960, Hong Kong)

The First Half of My Life (Shen Yan, 2017, China)

The Good Wife (Charles McDougall, 2009, the United States)

The Man Behind The Courtyard House (Fei Xing, 2011, China)

The Missing Gun (Lu Chuan, 2002, China)

The Painted Skin (Paw Fong, 1966, Hong Kong)

The Postman Always Rings Twice (Bob Rafelson, 1946, the United States)

The Price of Frenzy (Zhou Xiaowen, 1988, China)

The Quick and the Dead (Sam Raimi, 1995, the United States)

The Red Detachment of Women (Xie Jin, 1970, China)

The Stool Pigeon (Dante Lam, 2010, Hong Kong)

Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991, the United States)

Tiny Times (Guo Jingming, 2013, China)

Visitors On The Icy Mountain (Zhao Xinshui, 1963, China).

Wu Zetian (Chen Jialin, 1995, China)

Yan Ruisheng (Ren Pengnian, 1921, China)

Bibliography

Classic of Mountains and Rivers (the Warring States period)

Creation of the Gods (Xu Zhonglin, the Ming Dynasty),

Crusade Against King Zhou of the Shang by King Wu of Zhou (the Yuan Dynasty)

Luxuriant Dew from the Spring and Autumn Annals (Dong, the Western Han Dynasty)

Premature Death of a Beautiful Young Girl (Zheng Guangzu, the Yuan Dynasty)

Search for the Gods (Gan Bao, the Eastern Jin Dynasty)

Shiji (Sima Qian, the Western Han Dynasty)

Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (Pu Songling, the Qing Dynasty)

The Biographies of Exemplary Women (Liu Xiang, the Western Han Dynasty)

The Mountain Spirit (Qu Yuan, Epoch of Warring States)

The Peony Pavilion (Tang Xianzu, the Yuan Dynasty)

Zi Silence (Yuan Mei, the Qing Dynasty)

Secondary Literature

Ai, Y. (2024, May). *Breaking boundaries: Transgressive representation of women in B for Busy*. Paper presented at the Transgressive Women in East Asian Screen Culture Conference, Cardiff, UK.

Amato, S. A. (2016). *Female anti-Heroes in contemporary literature, film, and television* [Master's thesis, Eastern Illinois University]. https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/2481

Bader, C., Becker, P. J., & Desmond, S. (1996). Reclaiming deviance as a unique course from criminology. *Teaching sociology*, *24*(3), 316-320. https://doi.org/10.2307/1318747

Bailey, P. (2006). "Women Behaving Badly": crime, transgressive behaviour and gender in early twentieth century China. *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China*, *8*(1), 156-197. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852606777374600

Bakken, B. (1993). Crime, juvenile delinquency and deterrence policy in China. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, (30), 29-58. https://doi.org/10.2307/2949991[^180^

Bakken, B. (1993). Prejudice and danger: The only-child in China. *Childhood*, *1*(1), 46-61. https://doi.org/10.1177/090756829300100106

Bakken, B. (2004). Moral panics, crime rates and harsh punishment in China. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 37(1_suppl), 67-89. https://doi.org/10.1177/00048658040370S105

Bao, W. N. (2017). *Delinquent youth in a transforming China.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bao, W. N., Haas, A., Chen, X., & Pi, Y. (2014). Repeated strains, social control, social learning, and delinquency: Testing an integrated model of general strain theory in China. *Youth & Society*, *46*(3), 402-424. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X11436189

Barr, A. (1986). Pu Songling and the Qing Examination System. *Late Imperial China*, *7*(1), 87-111.

Barr, A. (1989). Disarming intruders: Alien women in Liaozhai zhiyi. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, *49*(2), 501-517. https://doi.org/10.2307/2719261

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The second sex* (Original work published 1949). Paris, France: Gallimard.

Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Free Press

Berry, C. (2003). *China on screen: Cinema and nation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Berry, C. J., & Farquhar, M. A. (2006). *China on screen: Cinema and nation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Berry, C., Dong, X., Zhang, Y., Zhen, Z., & Lim, S. H. (2016). The state and stakes of Chinese cinemas studies: A roundtable discussion. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *10*(1), 67-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2016.1145424

Blanchette, K., & Brown, S. L. (2006). *The assessment and treatment of women offenders: an integrative perspective*. John Wiley & Sons.

Boisseau, T. J. (2004). *White queen: May French - Sheldon and the imperial origins of American feminist identity*. Indiana University Press.

Bowman, N. D. (2015). *The rise (and refinement) of moral panic. The Video Game Debate* (pp. 22-38). Routledge.

Brunsdon, C., & Spigel, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Feminist television criticism: A reader*. UK: McGraw - Hill Education.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2017). Bodily inscriptions, performative subversions. In *Feminist theory and the body* (pp. 416–422). Routledge.

Butler, J. (2020). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In *Feminist theory reader* (pp. 353–361). Routledge.

Carrabine, E. (2008). *Crime, culture and the media*. Polity.

Cartwright, M. (2017, October 19). Women in ancient China. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1136/women-in-ancient-china/?utm_content=buffera835b&utm_medium=social&utm_source=plus.google.com&utm_campaign=buffer

Chang, C. (2023, February). A Study of the Commonalities of Online Novels with 'Big Heroine'. In *2022 4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development* (ICLAHD 2022) (pp. 552 - 558). Atlantis Press.

Chao, E. (2013). *Lijiang stories: Shamans, taxi drivers, and runaway brides in reform-era China*. University of Washington Press.

Chen, H. (2024). Research on Changes in the Female Image in Chinese Crime Films from 2013 to 2023. *Communications in Humanities Research*, *32*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/32/20240002

Chen, S. R. (2012). On the Film Innovation of the Ghost and Fox Story 'Nie Xiaoqian' in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. *Film Literature*, *21*, 65 - 66.

Chesney-Lind, M. (1999). Challenging girls' invisibility in juvenile court. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *564*(1), 185-202. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271629956400111

Chiao, C. (1971). *Female chastity in Chinese culture*. Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, *31*, 205-212.

Chow, R. (1993). *Writing diaspora: Tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies* (Vol. 785). Indiana University Press.

Chow, R. (1995). *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Clinard, M. B., & Meier, R. F. (1963). *Sociology of deviant behaviour*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Paladin, St Alban's, UK

Coulthard, L., & Bill, K. (2007). Rethinking feminism and film violence. In Y. Tasker & D. Negra (Eds.), *Interrogating post-feminism: Gender and the politics of popular culture* (pp. 153-170). Duke University Press.

Creed, B. (1993). Horror and the archaic mother: Alien. In *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (pp. 16–30). Routledge

Criveller, G. (2022). The Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong and Beyond: Protection, Education, and Emancipation of Women. In C. Y. Chu (Ed.), *The Catholic Church, The Bible, and Evangelization in China* (pp. 21–30). Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6182-2_2

Cui, S. (2003). *Women through the lens: Gender and nation in a century of Chinese cinema*. University of Hawaii Press.

Dai, H. (2012). Shilun zhongguo aiqing dianying de leixing tezheng (Discussion on the Characteristics of Chinese Romance Genre), *Movie Review*, *24*, 26-27.

Dai, J. (2002). *Cinema and desire: Feminist Marxism and cultural politics in the work of Dai Jinhua*. Verso.

Deng, L., & Luo, J. (2022). On the Image of Female Ghosts and Their Cultural Structure in *A Chinese Ghost Story* and *The Phantom Nan*a. *Journal of Jiaxing University*, 04, 88-92.

Denton, K. A. (2019). What Do You Do with Cultural 'Propaganda' of the Mao Era? *The PRC History Review*, *4*(2), 1-45.

Desser, D., & Hillenbrand, M. (2017). Beyond hypothermia: Cool women killers in Hong Kong cinema. In E. C. M. Yau & T. Williams (Eds.), *Hong Kong Neo-Noir* (pp. 118–139). Edinburgh University Press

Doane, M. A. (2004). Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator. In *Hollywood: Cultural dimensions: Ideology, identity and cultural industry studies* (Vol. 4, pp. 95–110). Edinburgh University Press

Doane, M. A. (2013). *Femmes fatales*. Routledge.

Doran, R. E. (2011). *Insatiable Women and Transgressive Authority: Constructions of Gender and Power in Early Tang China*. Harvard University.

Dosekun, S. (2015). For western girls only? Post-feminism as transnational culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, *15*(6), 960-975. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1062991

Ebrey, P. (1990). Women, marriage, and the family in Chinese history. In P. S. Ropp (Ed.), *Heritage of China: Contemporary perspectives on Chinese civilisation* (pp. 197–223). University of California Press

Ebrey, P. (2003). *Women and the family in Chinese history*. Routledge.

Ebrey, P. B. (1993). *The inner quarters: Marriage and the lives of Chinese women in the Sung period*. University of California Press.

Ebrey, P. B., & Gregory, P. N. (Eds.). (1993). *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China*. University of Hawaii Press.

Elvin, M. (1984). Female Virtue and the State in China. *Past & Present*, (104), 111–152. http://www.jstor.org/stable/650700

Feng, J. (2009). 'Addicted to Beauty': Consuming and producing web-based Chinese 'Danmei' fiction at Jinjiang. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *21*(2), 1–41. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41491008

Fishman, M. (1980). *Manufacturing the news*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Gao, X. (2003). Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China. *Race, Gender & Class*, *10*(3), 114–125. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675091

Geng, H. (2024, May). *Transgressing boundaries: Reimagining the fox spirit and women in Chinese horror cinema*. Paper presented at the Transgressive Women in East Asian Screen Culture Conference, Cardiff, UK.

George, A. (2015). He-Yin Zhen, Oyewumi, and geographies of anti-universalism. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *35*(1), 183-188. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2876200

Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, *25*, 432-445. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.28

Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *20*(6), 606-626. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003

Gilligan, S. (2011). Performing postfeminist identities: Gender, costume, and transformation in teen cinema. In *Women on Screen: Feminism and*

Femininity in Visual Culture (pp. 167 - 181). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Goode, E. (2015). The sociology of deviance: An introduction. In E. Goode (Ed.), *The Handbook of Deviance* (pp. 1–29). John Wiley & Sons

Goode, E. (Ed.). (2015). *The Handbook of Deviance*. John Wiley & Sons

Gournelos, T. (2014). Postfeminist radical: Jenna Marbles and the digital masquerade. In *Masquerade: Essays on Tradition and Innovation Worldwide* (p. 241). Lexington Books.

Guastaferro, W. (2013). Crime, the media, and constructions of reality: Using HBO's The Wire as a frame of reference. *College Student Journal*, *47*(2), 264-270.

Han, C. (2021, November). Modernity Mythology: Reconstruction of Female's Narrative Associated with *The Red Detachment of Women*. In *2021 3rd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2021)* (pp. 529 - 532). Atlantis Press.

Hare-Mustin, R. T., & Marecek, J. (1988). The meaning of difference: Gender theory, postmodernism, and psychology. *American psychologist*, *43*(6), 455-464. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.43.6.455

Heimer, K., & Coster, S. D. (1999). The gendering of violent delinquency. *Criminology*, *37*(2), 277-318.

Heinze, R., & Krämer, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Remakes and remaking: concepts-media-practices*. transcript Verlag.

Hendershott, A. (2012). Catholic social teachings and the sociology of deviance. In *Sociology and Catholic Social Teaching: Contemporary Theory and Research* (Vol. 6, pp. 91-110). Rowman & Littlefield.

Hinsch, B. (2006). The criticism of powerful women by Western Han dynasty portent experts. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, *49*(1), 96-121.

Ho, M. H., Li, E. C. Y., & Kam, L. Y. (2021). Editorial introduction: Androgynous bodies and cultures in Asia. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *22*(2), 129-138. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2021.1927568

Hooks, B. (1996). *Reel to real: Race, sex, and class at the movies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hu, T. (2019). Transgression as a post-feminist masquerade: The representation of female perpetrators in Hong Kong crime films. *Asian Studies Review*, *43*(4), 710-727. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1663406

Hu, T. (2021). *Victims, Perpetrators and Professionals: The Representation of Women in Chinese Crime Films.* Liverpool University Press.

Hu, Y., & Cai, X. (2024). Quantitative analysis of female representation in Chinese films (2001 - 2018). *Media and Communication*, *12*(1), 56-72.

Huang, K., & Chitty, N. (2009). Selling participation to audiences in China. *Global Media Journal*, *2*(1), 123-147.

Huang, Y. (2022). *Study of the Images of Unconventional Women in Ming Dynasty Classical Chinese Fiction* [Master's thesis, Southwest University of Science and Technology].

Huntington, R. (2005). Ghosts seeking substitutes: Female suicide and repetition. *Late Imperial China*, *26*(1), 1-40.

Imbach, J. (2017). *Not afraid of ghosts: Stories of the spectral in modern Chinese fiction* [Ph. D Thesis, University of Zurich].

Jackson, S. A., Thomas, P. R., Marsh, H. W., & Smethurst, C. J. (2001). Relationships between flow, self - concept, psychological skills, and performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *13*(2), 129-153. https://doi.org/10.1080/104132001753149865

Jenks, C. (2003). *Transgression: The offense of the ordinary*. London, UK: Routledge.

Jin, H. (Ed.). (2021). Chinese Cinemas in Translation and Dissemination. London, UK: Routledge.

Kang, X. (2005). *The cult of the fox: Power, gender, and popular religion in late imperial and modern China*. Columbia University Press.

King, A. Y., & Bond, M. H. (1985). The Confucian paradigm of man: A sociological view. In *Chinese culture and mental health* (pp. 29 - 45). Academic Press.

Klaber, L. (2014). *Taming the Perfect Beast: the Monster as Romantic Hero in Contemporary Fiction* [Doctoral dissertation, Cleveland State University]. Cleveland State University.

Ko, D., Haboush, J. K., & Piggott, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Women and Confucian cultures in premodern China, Korea, and Japan.* University of California Press.

Kong, H. (1996). Symbolism through Zhang Yimou's subversive lens in his early films. *Asian Cinema*, *8*(2), 98-115. https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.8.2.98_1

Kwon, H. C. (2005). Investigation of Scholarship on Chinese Vernacular Fiction with an Emphasis on Representations of Sexuality and Gender. *The Journal of Chinese Language and Literature*, *29*, 527-568.

Kwon, H. C. (2006). 'Fear Me, or Amuse Me, Ghost!' The Theme of Subduing Ghosts in Zibu yu. *The Journal of Chinese Fiction*, *24*, 79-100.

Lan, Q. (2021). Analysis of Blood Revenge in the *Píng Huà* 'Wu Wang Fazhou Shu', *Journal of Chinese Traditional Culture Studies*, *2*, 118-128.

Lee, H. (2014). *The stranger and the Chinese moral imagination*. Stanford University Press.

Lei, C. P. (2021). 'Indecent' women and gendered memory: reflective nostalgia in Hong Kong cinema. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *31*(3), 163-178. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1913617

Lei, W. (2017), 'Big heroinedramas: a good era or a fantasy?' *Arts Criticism*, *13*(12), 77–85.

Li, E. C. Y. (2015). Approaching transnational Chinese queer stardom as zhongxing ('neutral sex/gender') sensibility. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, *1*(1), 75-95. https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.1.1.75_1

Li, J. (2016). Identity and the politics of (self) representation: women in Chinese cinema 1985–2015. *Cineaction*, (98), 35.

Li, X. (2000). What have we achieved in the past 50 years: A review of women's emancipation and development in China. *Zhejiang Academic Journal, 1*, 59–65.

Li, Y., & Gao, L. (2024). Female directors and the representation of women in Chinese cinema. *Chinese Cinema Quarterly*, *15*(3), 112-130.

Li, Z. (2015). *Painted Skin*: Romance with the Ghostly Femme Fatale in Contemporary Chinese Cinema. In M. Leeder (Ed.), *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (pp. 219–233). London: Bloomsbury.

Liang, S.-n. (2008). *Painted Skin*: From Pu Songling to Gordon Chan - Investigation of the Gains and Losses of the New Version of the Film *Painted Skin*). *Movie Literature*, (24), 55-56.

Liao, J. Y. (2018). Reflections on Chinese big female lead TV dramas from a media criticism perspective. *Journal of News Research*, *9*(3), 119, 135. https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1674-8883.2018.03.080

Lin, Y. (1957). *Lady Wu: A true story*. Heinemann.

Liu, X. (2015). *Red Detachment of Women*: Revolutionary melodrama and alternative socialist imaginations. *Differences*, *26*(3), 116-141. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-33403966

Liu, Y. (2024). Shaping Identities: The Influence of Female Filmmakers on the Portrayal of Women in 21st-Century Chinese Mainstream Cinema. *Communications in Humanities Research*, *43*, 140-149. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/43/20240153

Loeber, R., & Stouthamer-Loeber, M. (1986). Family factors as correlates and predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency. *Crime and Justice*, *7*, 29-149.

Madill, A., & Zhao, Y. (2021). Female - oriented male - male erotica: Comparison of the engaged Anglophone demographic and that of the Greater China Area. *Sexuality & Culture*, *25*(2), 562-583. https://doiorg.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1007/s12119-020-09783-9.

Mahoney, M. R. (2013). Victimisation or oppression? Women's lives, violence, and agency. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 59–92). London, UK: Routledge.

Mann, S. (1997). *Precious records: Women in China's long eighteenth century*. Stanford University Press.

Mann, S. (2000). The male bond in Chinese history and culture. *The American Historical Review*, *105*(5), 1600-1614. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/105.5.1600

McGrath, J. (2023). *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age*. University of Minnesota Press.

McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, *4*(3), 255-264. https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937

McRobbie, A. (2007). Top girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(4–5), 718-737. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701279044

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage.

McRobbie, A. (2013). Feminism, the family and the new 'mediated' maternalism. *New Formations*, *80*(80), 119-137. https://doi.org/10.3898/newF.80/81.07.2013

McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the perfect: Competitive femininity in neoliberal times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *30*(83), 3-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485

McRobbie, A., Spigel, L., Tasker, Y., & Negra, D. (2007). *Interrogating postfeminism: gender and the politics of popular culture*. Duke University Press.

Millett, K. (2016). *Sexual politics*. Columbia University Press.

Min, A. (2004). *Empress orchid* (Vol. 1). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Mohammed, E. Y. (2024). Reclaiming Agency: Mulan's Empowerment in the Post-feminist Era. *Midad Al-Adab Refereed Journal*, *1*(English Department Confrence).

Montgomery, M., & Zeng, Z. (2016). Gender perceptions of female criminality in China and the United States. *Review of Social Sciences*, *1*(8), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.18533/rss.v1i8.52

Morris, A. (1989). Interspousal violence: a review of research. *Cambrian L. Rev*., 20, 7.

Morrissey, B. (2003). *When women kill: questions of agency and subjectivity.* London, UK: Routledge.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, *16*(3), 6-18.

Munford, R. (2016). Spectral femininity. In A. Horner & S. Zlosnik (Eds.), *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (pp. 120–134). Edinburgh University Press.

Negra, D., & Tasker, Y. (Eds.). (2014). *Gendering the recession: Media and culture in an age of austerity.* Duke University Press.

Neroni, H. (2012). *The violent woman: Femininity, narrative, and violence in contemporary American cinema*. State University of New York Press.

Ng, M. K., Yeung, T. C., Cheng, C. H., & Ma, N. Y. (2023). Hong Kong: One city, three spatial forms, and two possible fates? In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Cities* (pp. 87 - 103). Routledge.

Norris, C. (2003). *Deconstruction: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Nylan, M. (2000). Golden spindles and axes: Elite women in the Achaemenid and Han empires. In C Li (Ed.), *The sage and the second sex: Confucianism, ethics, and gender* (pp. 199 – 222). Albany: State University of New York Press.

O'Dwyer, S. (2019). *Confucianism's prospects: a reassessment*. State University of New York Press.

Orr, M. (2010). Intertextuality. In Ryan, M. (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444337839.wbelctv2i002

Ouazzani , A. T. (2023). Femininity Construction between Rebellion and Victimisation in L'Amante du Rif (2011). *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, *5*(8), 85-93. https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2023.5.8.10

Owen, A. S., Berg, L. R. V., & Stein, S. R. (2007). *Bad girls: Cultural politics and media representations of transgressive women* (Vol. 6). Peter Lang.

Pan, Y., & Sun, G. (2022). Exploring work-life balance among professional women in mainland China: A qualitative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 938664. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.938664

Pang, L. (2011). The state against ghosts: a genealogy of China's film censorship policy. *Screen*, *52*(4), 461-476. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjr039

Parsons, T. (1975). The Sick Role and the Role of the Physician Reconsidered. *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society*, *53*(3), 257-278. https://doi.org/10.2307/3349493

Pei, R. (2023). Cinematic Style, Female Figure and Ideology in Lou Ye's Art Films. *Art and Performance Letters*, *4*(1), 30-37. https://doi.org/10.23977/artpl.2023.040106

Phipps, A. (2014). *The politics of the body: Gender in a neoliberal and neoconservative age*. John Wiley & Sons.

Poo, M. C. (2004). The concept of ghost in ancient Chinese religion. *Religion and Chinese society*, *1*, 173-191.

Rafter, N. (2007). Crime, film and criminology: Recent sex-crime movies. *Theoretical criminology*, *11*(3), 403-420. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480607079584

Rafter, N. H. (2006). *Shots in the mirror: Crime films and society*. Oxford University Press.

Rafter, N., & Brown, M. (2011). *Criminology goes to the movies: Crime theory and popular culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Raphals, L. A. (2014). Debates about fate in early China. *Études chinoises*. *33*(2), 13-42. https://doi.org/10.3406/etchi.2014.1520

Ren, J. (2017). The changing image of women in television dramas: From the romantic soap operas of Qiongyao to the palace drama, *the Legend of Miyue*. *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, *17*(5), 98-103.

Riley, D. (1988). Does a sex have a history? In *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women'in History* (pp. 1–17). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Riviere, J. (2018). Womanliness as a Masquerade. In *Female Sexuality* (pp. 172–182). Routledge.

Rottenberg, C. (2022). Women who work: The limits of the neoliberal feminist paradigm. In *The Routledge Companion to Marketing and Feminism* (pp. 434–444). Routledge.

Sa'eed, M. K., & Jubran, H. S. Y. (2019). The representation of women in the horror movies: A study in selected horror movies. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, *5*(1), 14-17. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.cls.20190501.13

Sa'eed, M. K., & Jubran, H. S. Y. (2019). The representation of women in the horror movies: A study in selected horror movies. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, *5*(1), 14-17. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.cls.20190501.13

Sarah E. Stevens. (2003). Figuring Modernity: The new woman and the modern girl in Republican China. *NWSA Journal*, *15*(3), 82-103. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317011

Scott, J. L. (2007). *For gods, ghosts and ancestors: The Chinese tradition of paper offerings* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.

Scott, J. L. (2007). *For gods, ghosts and ancestors: The Chinese tradition of paper offerings* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.

Shen, A., & Antonopoulos, G. A. (2013). Restorative justice or what?: Restorative justice in the Chinese youth justice system. *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, 21(3-4), 291-315.

Shen, A., & Antonopoulos, G. A. (2013). Restorative justice or what?: Restorative justice in the Chinese youth justice system. *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, *21*(3-4), 291-315. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718174-21042031

Shen, A., & Hall, S. (2015). The same the whole world over? A review essay on youth offending from the 1980s and youth justice in contemporary China. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, *43*(2), 273-291. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2014.09.004

Shen, A., & Hall, S. (2015). The same the whole world over? A review essay on youth offending from the 1980s and youth justice in contemporary China. *International journal of law, crime and justice*, *43*(2), 273-291. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2014.09.004

Singh, P. (2013). *Perspectives in Flux: 'Red Sorghum' and Ju Dou's Reception as a Reflection of the Times* [[Doctoral dissertation, Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges]. http://hdl.handle.net/10066/10577

Sommers, C. H. (1995). *Who stole feminism?: How women have betrayed women*. Simon and Schuster.

Song, X. (2010). Re-gendering Chinese History: Zhao Mei's Emperor Wu Zetian. *East Asia*, *27*(4), 361-379. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-010-9122-z

Sun, C. H. (2014). The Changing of Love Concept in Love Stories in the New Century. *Contemporary Cinema*, 5, 163-166.

Sun, H., & Xu, J. (2023). Gender Stereotypes and Composition in the Chinese Film Industry: A Study of the Top 15 Grossing Films. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *68*(1), 125-144. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2023.2298276

Tang, C. S. K., Wong, D., & Cheung, F. M. C. (2002). Social Construction of Women as Legitimate Victims of Violence in Chinese Societies. *Violence Against Women*, *8*(8), 968-996. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780102400447096

Tasker, Y., & Negra, D. (Eds.). (2007). *Interrogating post-feminism: gender and the politics of popular culture*. Duke University Press.

Taylor, M. C. (1986). *Deconstruction in context: literature and philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Teiser, S. F. (1986). Ghosts and ancestors in medieval Chinese religion: the Yü-lan-p'en Festival as mortuary ritual. *History of Religions*, *26*(1), 47-67.

Teo, S. (2008). Promise and perhaps love: Pan-Asian production and the Hong Kong–China interrelationship. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *9*(3), 341-358. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370802184429

Teo, S. (2019). *Hong Kong cinema: The extra dimensions*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Thornham, S., & Pengpeng, F. (2010). 'Just a Slogan': Individualism, post-feminism, and female subjectivity in consumerist China. *Feminist Media Studies*, *10*(2), 195-211. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680771003672320

Thornham, S., & Pengpeng, F. (2010). 'Just a Slogan': Individualism, post-feminism, and female subjectivity in consumerist China. *Feminist Media Studies*, *10*(2), 195-211. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680771003672320

Tian, Y. Y. (2009). Metaphor of Body: The Portrayal of Female in *Painted Skin*. *Movie Literature*, *14*, 44-49.

Verevis, C. (2006). For Ever Hitchcock: Psycho and Its Remakes. In C. Verevis (Ed.), *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality* (pp. 15–30). University of Texas Press.

Wang, X. (2022). An analysis of the portrayal of madwomen in the films of the sixth generation of Chinese directors. In *The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2022: Official Conference Proceedings* (pp. 63-72). IAFOR. https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-9643.2022.6

Wang, Z. (2017). *Finding women in the state: A socialist feminist revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964*. University of California Press.

Wong, C. K. B. (2016). *Inheriting and transforming the ghost: the commercialised and gendered painted skin.* [Ph. D thesis, City University of Hong Kong]. Digital CityU Collections. http://dspace.cityu.edu.hk/handle/2031/8795

Wong, D. S. W. (2000). Juvenile Crime and Responses to Delinquency in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *44*(3), 279-292. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X00443003

Wong, D. S. W. (2001). Changes in Juvenile Justice in China. *Youth & Society*, *32*(4), 492-509. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X01032004005

Wu, S. (2020, December). A comparison of the representation of women in contemporary Chinese cinema: The fifth generation and the sixth generation. In *2nd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2020)* (pp. 95-99). Atlantis Press.

Wyatt, J. (1994). *High concept: Movies and marketing in Hollywood*. University of Texas Press.

Xiao, Y. (2013). *The politics of crisis management in China* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Warwick]. University of Warwick Repository. https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/58953/

Xinran, T. (2002). *The good women of China: Hidden voices*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Xunnan, L. (2024, June). *Wang Baochuan's intermedial trajectory: from subordination to female transgression*. Paper presented at the Transgressive Women in East Asian Screen Culture Conference, Cardiff, UK.

Yan, Y. (2021). The politics of moral crisis in contemporary China. *The China Journal*, *85*(1), 96-120. https://doi.org/10.1086/711563

Yang, F. (2023). Post-feminism and chick flicks in China: Subjects, discursive origin and new gender norms. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(3), 1059-1074. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1791928

Yanru, C. (2008). From ideal women to women's ideal: Evolution of the female image in Chinese feature films, 1949–2000. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *14*(3), 97-129. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2008.11666052

Ying, Z. (2020). Big heroine dramas in contemporary China: Costume, authenticity and an alternative history of women of power. *Studies in Costume & Performance*, *5*(2), 211-238. https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00026_1

Yiren, Y. (2000). *Wu Zetian.* Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe.

Yu, J., Luo, W., & Xie, Y. (2022). Sexuality in China: A review and new findings. *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, *8*(3), 293-329. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057150X221114599

Zhai, X. (2022). *Research on Television Adaptations of Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [Master's thesis, Northwest Normal University].

Zhang, J. (2022, June). May-Fourth Feminism and Consumerist Pseudo-Feminism: Subjects and Comparison. In *2022 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2022)* (pp. 867–871). Atlantis Press.

Zhang, X. (2022, January). The cultural transmission of *Raise the Red Lantern*: The representation of symbolism. In *2021 International Conference on Public Art and Human Development (ICPAHD 2021)* (pp. 509–512). Atlantis Press

Zhang, X. (2023). *Study of the Image of 'Immoral Women' in 21st Century Chinese Cinema* [Master's thesis, Shanghai Normal University].

Zhu, Y., & Rosen, S. (2010). *Art, politics, and commerce in Chinese cinema* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.

---

[1] Early depictions in films like *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944, the United States) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1946, the United State) paved the way for contemporary narratives on female deviance. This trope was further explored in movies like *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981, the United State), *Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990, France), *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991, the United States), *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995, the United States), and *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003, the United States). Japanese cinema, with films like *In the Realm of the Sense* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976, Japan) and *Onibaba* (Kaneto Shindo, 1964, Japan), also delved into this territory.

[2] The Fifth Generation of Chinese directors is a group that emerged in the 1980s and represents a new wave of Chinese cinema, which played a pivotal role in revitalising Chinese filmmaking and gaining international recognition. Prominent directors associated with this generation include Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige and Li Shaohong herself.

[3] The Sixth Generation directors are a group of Chinese filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s. They are known for their focus on marginalised individuals and social realities, often employing a documentary-style approach to capture authentic everyday life. Key figures include Wang Xiaoshuai, Jia Zhangke, and Lou Ye, whose works have garnered international acclaim for their unique perspectives and critical examination of contemporary Chinese society.

[4] For instance, sexual promiscuity, female homosexuality or bisexuality, trans-sexuality and intersexuality are examples of diverse forms of sexual expression. Regarding 'female homosexuality', it is currently undergoing a transitional phase in mainstream American society. While still considered 'deviant' within conservative and strongly heteronormative circles, its status has gradually become more normatively conventional over time in most other contexts. However, individuals who deviate from stereotypical gender roles may still encounter adverse reactions from some conventionally heteronormative audiences. Therefore, this study acknowledges that homosexuality cannot be entirely regarded as non-deviant.

[5] Examples include auditory hallucinations, schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, dissociative identity disorder, and various others.

[6] Examples include conditions such as obesity, physical disability, and AIDS.

[7] https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/sociology/deviance-crime-and-social-control/theories-of-deviance

[8] According to specific conceptualisations of deviance, crime can be regarded as a manifestation or subtype of deviant behaviour, while other perspectives posit that crime and deviance are distinct phenomena. This study adopts the former perspective, considering crime as one specific category within the broader concept of deviance.

[9] The field of deviance sociology encompasses two separate yet interconnected endeavours: positivistic/explanatory theories characterised by objectively defined attributes and constructionist/interactionist theories marked by subjectively contentious aspects (Goode, 2015, 34-35).

[10] 'In all things, there must be correlates and in each correlation there is the Yin and Yang, thus the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, are all derived from the principles of the Yin and Yang. The ruler is yang, the subject is yin; the father is yang, the son is yin; the husband is yang, the wife is yin. The "three bonds" comprising "the way of the King" may be sought for in heaven' (*Luxuriant Dew from the Spring and Autumn Annals• Jiyi*, Dong Zhongshu, the Western Han Dynasty).

[11] The Western Han Dynasty existed from 202 BC to 8 AD.

[12] Although Confucian moralising encourages women to develop more virtue because of the double standard it creates between males and women. It should also be noted that Confucianism also laid strict norms for men to obey, but they were less strict compared with those for women. One case in point is *Xiaozi Zhuan* (*the Biographies of Filial Sons*), which mainly focuses on the loyalty and filial piety of men.

[13] It is currently challenging to ascertain the precise origin of 'The Exemplary Woman Theme'. It appears to be a concept that has emerged within the field concerning the study of women's roles in traditional Chinese society. This theme may derive from ancient Chinese classics, texts related to traditional moral norms, or scholarly literature focused on traditional Chinese women's culture. For instance, relevant expressions of this theme can be found in works such as *Admonitions for Women* and *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, which elaborate on codes of conduct and moral standards for women. Additionally, it may also stem from academic monographs or research papers authored by contemporary scholars investigating issues pertaining to traditional Chinese women.

[14] 'Muyi', exemplary mothers; 'xianming', capable and virtuous women; 'renzhi', benevolent and intelligent women; 'zhenshun', chaste and undefiled women; 'jieyi', chaste and righteous women; 'biantong', reasoning women, and 'niepi'.

[15] The Western Zhou Dynasty is generally believed to have lasted from 1046 BC to 771 BC.

[16] The later stage of the Shang Dynasty is generally considered to span from around the reign of King Wuding to its downfall. King Wuding's reign is often seen as a high point, after which the dynasty gradually declined until its final collapse around 1046 BC when it was overthrown by the Zhou.

[17] The Warring States Era is generally considered to have spanned from 475 BC to 221 BC. The period commenced following the Spring and Autumn Period and concluded with the unification of the Qin Dynasty.

[18] The origin of the Daji archetype could be traced back to the nebulous figure of the 'unnamed hen' in *Shangshu*. Here, *Shangshu* did not mention Daji by name; through the metaphor of the 'unnamed hen', it seems to describe the female relation to the mandate of heaven and transfers the idea that accepting the opinions of any woman, whatever her character, could cost the King the mandate of heaven. The text *Mozi*, composed during the early Eastern Zhou period, further developed the myth of the evil woman by transforming her into a standard archetype associated with societal decline (a standard fin-de-siècle archetype), emphasising that the forces of dynastic collapse described in *Shangshu* were not specific to Shang but instead constitute a universal historical process.

[19] For instance, within the imperial domain of Han Gaozu, Empress Lü subjected Lady Qi to extreme mutilation: amputating her feet and hands, gouging out her eyes, searing her ears, administering a drug that rendered her speechless, and banishing her to live in the privy while derogatorily referring to her as a 'human hog'. Even Emperor Xiaohui, Lü's son, acknowledged that his mother's cruel actions were inhumane. However, Lü's motivations for such brutality stemmed from her desire to protect Emperor Xiaohui and secure the interests of her political clan. This was precipitated by Han Gaozu's intention to replace Xiaohui with Lady Qi's son as the heir - a decision that Lady Qi had persuaded him to make.

[20] For example, in *Hanshu*, written by male historian Ban Gu, *the Biography of Empress Lü* is presented to illustrate her wickedness in her quest for power. This perception is further reinforced when Ban Gu matter-of-factly mentions that not only did Empress Lü cause the demise of Lady Qi but also orchestrated the downfall of her son, King Zhao, as well as two kings from the Han dynasty and an additional son of a king.

[21] Television dramas and feature films, both of which serve as distinct forms of visual storytelling, demonstrate several significant differences, particularly in the portrayal of female characters within the context of prominent heroine narratives:

Television dramas typically employ a more episodic and extended narrative structure. While big heroine dramas have the capacity to gradually unfold character development, relationships, and the exploration of feminist themes across multiple episodes, occasionally spanning several seasons. For instance, these narratives can deeply examine the daily struggles faced by a female protagonist as she challenges patriarchal norms, illustrating her incremental victories and setbacks in a slow-burn fashion. This approach facilitates more profound character development and allows for a comprehensive investigation of complex social issues related to gender. Feature films typically present a more compressed narrative structure. They are required to convey a complete story within a limited time frame, generally ranging from 90 minutes to 3 hours. This constraint compels filmmakers to adopt a more concise and focused approach. In the context of a big heroine film, for instance, the character's transformation from a vulnerable woman to an empowered figure may be distilled into several pivotal events, often at the expense of some subtler character nuances in favour of delivering immediate and impactful storytelling.

Besides, viewers often engage with television dramas on a regular basis, sometimes daily or weekly. This long-term engagement fosters a sense of familiarity and investment in the characters. In the context of big heroine dramas, female viewers may develop a closer connection to the protagonist over time as they witness her journey unfold. The audience also tends to anticipate more subplots and character arcs due to the extended duration available for exploration. In contrast, feature films typically represent a one-time viewing experience for most audiences. They rely on creating a strong initial impact coupled with a memorable narrative. Audiences expect a more polished and self-contained storyline. In the case of big heroine films, it is essential for the film to swiftly establish the character's situation, her conflict with patriarchal structures, and her path toward empowerment - all while maintaining high entertainment value.

Television dramas often operate under more stringent budgetary constraints compared to feature films. These limitations can restrict the scale of production, affecting issues such as elaborate sets, special effects, as well as the casting of high-profile actors. Nevertheless, television dramas may enjoy greater creative freedom in certain respects. As they are not as heavily reliant on immediate box-office success, these productions can afford to take risks by delving into complex feminist themes. For instance, a prominent heroine drama has the potential to examine the interconnection between gender and various other social concerns like class and race in greater depth. In contrast, feature films, particularly those with substantial budgets, benefit from more extensive resources for production. They possess the financial capability to create visually stunning content, employ advanced special effects technology, and engage well-known actors. However, this increased resource availability also comes with heightened pressure to appeal to a broad audience and generate significant box-office revenue. Consequently, this dynamic may lead to a more conventional approach that is less radical in its representation of female characters within big-heroine films. For example, filmmakers might choose to moderate more radical feminist messages in order to attract a wider demographic audience.

Television dramas possess a broader scope in terms of cultural dissemination, as they are readily accessible through various television channels and streaming platforms. Prominent heroine-centric dramas can exert a substantial influence on popular culture, shaping societal perceptions of female empowerment. Furthermore, these dramas often provide a platform for discussions regarding gender roles in everyday life, given that they are frequently viewed in family settings or shared among friends. In contrast, feature films tend to have a more concentrated impact within the cultural sphere. A successful heroine-focused film has the potential to ignite national or even international dialogues surrounding feminism and gender equality. Additionally, such films may significantly affect the film industry itself by inspiring other filmmakers to produce more female-centric narratives. However, their reach may be comparatively limited when juxtaposed with television dramas, particularly in regions where access to theatres or high-speed internet for streaming is restricted.

These distinctions between television dramas and feature films can profoundly impact the crafting, reception, and interpretation of female character representations in big heroine narratives. Each medium presents its own unique set of opportunities and challenges when it comes to exploring feminist themes. As in this case, television is more suitable for this thesis.

[22] Zhu Deyong is a contemporary cartoonist from Taiwan.

[23]It tells the story of four women living together in the same villa, including one crazy for marriage, who is willing to marry any man with a pulse; one lover, who wants love but not marriage; one tomboy, who is interested in work, not love/men or marriage; and one naive girl. Each has a very different attitude towards love.

[24] Here, 'unreflexive' means without self-reflection or consideration. Li believes that simply applying Western concepts of androgyny to non-Western situations, like China, without thinking about the differences in culture, history, and social structures, is wrong. It implies that one should be more cautious and take into account the unique aspects of each context when using such concepts.

[25] The research object of this part is the costume big heroine dramas, dramas with leading female protagonists that add a limited story setting to a specific period in history. According to the current unwritten regulations on the TV drama industry and the vast number of Chinese netizens, in the general sense, the big heroine drama mainly refers to contemporary and urban ones. However, in order to facilitate the research, this chapter still makes a limitation, excluding the urban big heroine dramas, such as *Ode to Joy*, *The First Half of My Life* (Shen Yan, 2017, China), *Beijing Woman's Guide* (Li Zhi, 2018, China), *Shanghai Woman's Guide* (Cheng Liang, 2018, China) and others contemporary works from this part of the study.

[26]For example, in *Declaration of War against Wu Zhao/Zetian* (Luo Binwang, the Tang Dynasty) the male poet Luo Binwang, writes that, 'The usurper woman Wu, now occupying the throne by false pretences, was born of low origin and with a far from sweet character'. By diminishing her heritage, personality and character and undermining her authority, Luo establishes the framework for future discussions on Wu Zetian. The allegations made by Luo later gained acceptance as historical truth by subsequent biographers, particularly male ones, who also depicted Wu as an unconventional figure, the figure of 'unwoman'.

[27] At the age of 14, Wu Zetian initially entered the Tang Palace as a concubine to Emperor Taizong. After Emperor Taizong died in 649, she was sent to live out her days as a Buddhist nun at Ganye Temple. However, through a series of unlikely circumstances, she returned to the palace and rose from concubine to become Empress alongside Emperor Gaozong, Taizong's son. In reality, between 665 and 690 AD, she effectively governed China through her husband and her sons. In 690 AD, she established her own Zhou dynasty and ruled under various titles Sacred and Divine Emperor for fifteen years. Eventually, in 705 AD, she was compelled to abdicate by her son Emperor Zhongzong who subsequently reinstated the Tang Dynasty. Following her demise, she was laid to rest as an empress at Qianling near Xi'an alongside her husband Emperor Taizong.

[28] This sentence means that Wu's inheritance of the imperial system signifies a bad omen of disaster for the nation.

[29]https://yule.sohu.com/20040717/n221055284.shtml

[30] The novel states that Wu Zetian was dissatisfied with Li Zhi because she could not stop admiring a 'father' like Emperor Taizong, and that the psychological disparity led her to eventually become a female Emperor.

[31]For example, Su Tong's family dramas or historical novels, such as *The Escape of 1934* (Su Tong, 1988), *Wives and Concubines* (Su Tong, 1990), *My Life as Emperor* (Su Tong, 1992), *Chengbei Didai* (Su Tong, 2004), and *Wu Zetian* (Su Tong, 2010), conceal the fable of a decaying nation caused by women, especially the skilled use of female characters and perspectives in the historical novel *Wu Zetian*, which has formed a literary spectacle of gender dislocation and a

regional landscape.

[32] The theory of Yang and Yin is a core notion in ancient Chinese philosophy and pertains to the domains of traditional Chinese philosophy. It delineates two fundamental forces that are both mutually opposing and interdependent in all entities of the universe: Yang and Yin. The theory posits that all things in the world encompass these two forces, and the dynamic equilibrium between them is crucial for maintaining harmony and stability in nature. From an anthropological perspective, Yin, representing the female, is expected to occupy the designated sphere of femininity. In contrast, Yang, representing the male, is expected to fulfil the societal roles associated with masculinity. Sociologically, Yin assumes the position of the subject, whereas Yang assumes the position of authority or ruler.

[33] In an unprecedented scenario, Wu Zetian assumed the role of the Emperor within her dynasty, representing the culmination of a lengthy lineage of female rulers. Subsequent women political leaders endeavoured to establish their distinctiveness while drawing inspiration from her strategies for legitimisation, including endorsing and supporting artistic endeavours and religious practices, employing cosmic titles and terminology, and occasionally adopting the persona of a male emperor.

[34] For example, Lin Yutang and Yelin Yiren.

[35] The Mandew Temple is for punished concubines. Throughout the generations, as long as the punished concubines went there, no one could return to the palace again. They died of old age in the Mandew Temple. The female monks in the temple also gave the punished concubines all kinds of difficulties, so the lives of these concubines were even worse than those of enslaved people.

[36] Her status changes from one man's (Emperor Yongzheng) wife to another man's (the king of Guojun) mistress. She has experienced two pregnancies for Emperor Yongzheng and the King of Guojun. However, it is worth noting that the first pregnancy of Emperor Yongzheng's offspring is terminated.

[37] In Chinese historical big heroine dramas, it is typical for the main female protagonist to compete with other supporting actresses. In her pursuit of gaining and satisfying the exclusive favour of the male Emperor, one may resort to employing intrigue as a means to showcase her sexual allure. Individuals who possess awareness or engage in active involvement, such as through deliberate presence, do not surpass the ongoing dynamic; instead, they persist inside it.

[37] While some scholars argue that the recent upsurge of feminism in popular culture indicates the decline of post-feminism, such as Hanna Retallack and Emilie Lawrence, others contend that this 'new feminism' is still largely influenced by post-feminist principles.

[38] This development blurred the boundary between entities traditionally classified as 'gods' and those classified as 'ghosts'.

[39] This ancient Chinese mythology primary source (from the third century BC to the second century AD) presents a valuable collection of unique information and imaginative narratives regarding mythical characters, customs, medical practices, natural phenomena, and diverse ethnic communities in antiquity.

[40] *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* is not the work of a single individual or a specific period; rather, it is the result of collabourative creation and transmission across multiple eras by numerous authors.

[41] The Warring States period denotes the concluding centuries of the Zhou Dynasty in Chinese history, approximately from 475 BC to 221 BC.

[42] The Eastern Jin Dynasty lasted from 317 to 420 AD.

[43] The authorship of *Crusade Against King Zhou of the Shang* remains uncertain.

[44] The Yuan Dynasty existed from 1271 to 1368.

[45] The Ming Dynasty existed from 1368 to 1644.

[46] In *Creation of the Gods*, the fox demon Su Daji is finally killed by Jiang Ziya.

[47] The Qing Dynasty exists from 1644 to 1911.

[48] The Chinese female ghost mentioned here is just a general term. Traditional Chinese ghosts are classified into four categories: banshee, devil demon, ghost and monster. This thesis will not be so

carefully divided, but all named female ghosts.

[49] Despite the presence of numerous male ghosts, such as water ghosts, town ghosts, gambling ghosts, debt-collecting ghosts, and impermanent ghosts, Chinese female ghosts possess a more pronounced and unique personality For example, in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, the male ghosts, Xi Fangping and Wang Liulang, are less famous than other female ghosts.

[50] For instance, the portrayal of female ghosts in traditional dramas like Ao Guiying in *Wang Kui and Guiying* (the Yuan Dynasty) showcases explicit expressions of emotion primarily concerning matters of love and animosity. To support her romantic partner Wang Kui in his academic pursuits, Ao Guiying generously bestows all her financial resources upon him. However, following Wang's waning affection and betrayal towards Guiying, she transforms into a malevolent spectre capable of ending his life. The manifestation of profound intensity and impulsive affection is rarely observed among male ghosts.

[51] 'Ghostification' is not a term commonly found in mainstream dictionaries of Standard English. However, within this thesis, it denotes the process or act of transforming something into a ghostly form or imbuing it with ghost-like characteristics (the female ghosts). In fictional or supernatural contexts, for instance, it may describe the metamorphosis of an individual, location, or object into a spectral entity.

[52] Since 1860, the Canossian nuns have been present in Hong Kong. They established schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Women from China and various other backgrounds joined this Italian religious order of nuns, contributing to its status as the biggest female Catholic religious congregation in Hong Kong.

[53] The 'Western fantasy film genre' refers to a kind of film category that is set against a backdrop of a fantasy world and incorporates elements such as magic and mythical creatures. Such films usually draw in audiences through abundant visual effects and complex narrative structures and are frequently produced in Hollywood. Western fantasy films tend to integrate themes like adventure, heroism, and the opposition between good and evil and are highly favoured by audiences all over the world.

[54] The term 'new' in Chinese new magic films refers to the modern approach in combining traditional elements with contemporary technology and storytelling. It is not just about retelling old stories but presenting them in a fresh, innovative way. 'Magic' is used because these films are centred around magical and supernatural elements drawn from Chinese mythology and folklore. However, it is essential to emphasise that some films might seem not to fit the 'new or 'magic' label at first glance. There could be cases where the use of traditional elements is more subtle, or the technological implementation is not as overt. But upon closer examination, they still adhere to the core principles of the genre, using Chinese cultural roots and modern techniques to tell a unique story.

[55] Pu's original literature recounts the story of Wang Sheng, who falls victim to a female ghost's deceit leading to his demise, and his wife Chen, who willingly consumes his spittle to save him.

[56] It is important to note the intentional shift from 'female ghost' to 'female spirits' in the context of the 2008 film *Painted Skin*. This alteration is grounded in both cultural specificity and narrative strategy, distinguishing the film from Hong Kong's horror traditions while addressing mainland audience expectations and censorship norms. In Hong Kong cinema, the term 'ghost' is frequently associated with the horror genre and carries connotations of campiness or formulaic supernatural portrayals. By substituting 'ghost' with 'female spirits', the film circumvents these genre-specific expectations and instead humanises the character of Xiaowei, portraying her as a tragic figure whose spiritual form symbolises emotional complexity. This terminology also aligns with the film's objective of blending folklore with contemporary themes, thereby softening the narrative for a broader pan-Chinese audience while maintaining cultural authenticity.

[57] 'Intertextual deconstruction' pertains to the act of uncovering the concealed associations and meanings within a film and among films by scrutinising the relationships such as citation, imitation, and transformation between films and literary works, other films, historical events,

cultural symbols, and other texts. 'Intertextuality' emphasises the mutual referencing and influence between films and other texts, whereas 'deconstruction' focuses on the internal contradictions and multiple interpretive possibilities within a film.

[58] 'Concept design' is a critical early stage in film production, aimed at exploring and defining the visual style, character designs, and scene settings. It establishes the foundation for the overall visual effect and helps the director and production team clarify the artistic direction. Before filming begins, designers use the script and director's vision to create preliminary designs of characters, scenes, and props through sketches, 3D modelling, and digital painting. This phase focuses on capturing the overall atmosphere and creative intent rather than specific shooting details. The results, such as hand-drawn sketches, 3D models, and animation demonstrations, aim to stimulate discussion and gather feedback for refining the design plan.

[59] The period commencing in 2013 holds paramount significance.

[60] Here, the term 'new' in 'new crime cinema' likely refers to several aspects related to the evolution and innovation within crime cinema:

1, Genre hybridisation and fluidity: The subgenres of courtroom dramas, police procedurals, and prison films are showing increasing fluidity through subdivision, recombination, and evolution. This means that traditional boundaries between these subgenres are blurring, and new combinations are emerging. For example, elements of a police procedural might be combined with elements of a psychological thriller in a way that is different from how these genres were previously structured. These new combinations give rise to novel configurations within crime films, which can be considered as part of this 'new' crime cinema.

2. Emerging narrative forms: The emergence of forms such as psychological thrillers and neo-noir crime narratives within crime films. These are new ways of telling crime stories that build on traditional crime subgenres but introduce new themes and styles. For instance, psychological thrillers within the context of crime cinema might explore the mental states of criminals and victims in more depth than traditional crime films, while neo-noir crime narratives might bring in a darker, more complex visual and narrative style.

3. Thematic innovation: The new configurations in crime cinema are said to highlight themes related to transgression and forbidden pleasures. This indicates a shift in the thematic focus of these films, moving away from more traditional crime film themes and exploring new areas of human behaviour and morality. This exploration of new themes can be seen as a sign of the 'new' in crime cinema.

4. Innovative approaches: The analysis will focus on these innovative configurations, suggesting that the 'new' crime cinema represents a departure from the traditional ways of making and understanding crime films in China. It implies that there are new creative approaches, whether in terms of storytelling, cinematography, or character development, that are characteristic of this new wave of crime cinema.

[61] *Film Administration Regulations* is the central film censorship regulation in force now. It was officially adopted during the 50th Executive Meeting of the State Council on December 12, 2001, and subsequently released on December 25, 2001. The former Premier Zhu Rongji personally signed it, leading to its enforcement starting from February 1, 2002. Comprising a total of eight chapters with a cumulative count of 66 articles, the comprehensive Film Administration Regulations encompass every aspect of the filmmaking process - right from establishing film production to distribution and screening. Consequently, censorship exerts its influence across all facets of the film industry.

[62] *Article 25* Films shall be banned from containing the following contents:

1, Being against the fundamental principles laid down in the Constitution

2, Jeopardising the unification, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State

3, Divulging State secrets, jeopardising the security of the State or impairing the prestige and interests of the State

4, Inciting hatred and discrimination among ethnic minorities, harming their unity, or violating their customs and habits

5, Propagating cults and superstition

6, Disrupting public order and undermining social stability

7, Propagating obscenity, gambling or violence, or abetting to commit crimes

8, Insulting or slandering others or infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of others

9, Jeopardising social ethics or fine national cultural traditions

10, Other contents banned by laws, administrative regulations and provisions of the State

[63] Perry Link describes the hidden power of censorship in a fascinating metaphor: 'Chinese Communist Party rejected these more mechanical methods in favour of an essentially psychological control system that relies primarily on self-censorship'; 'The Chinese government's censorial authority in recent times has resembled not so much a man-eating tiger or fire-snorting dragon as a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier. The great snake does not move. It feels no need to be clear about its prohibitions. Its constant silent message is "You yourself decide," after which, more often than not, everyone in its shadow makes large and small adjustments - all quite naturally' (Link, 2002, ch. 12).

[64] In the first ten years of the 21st century, several crime films, such as *The Missing Gun* (Lu Chuan, 2002, China), *Blind Shaft* and *Blind Mountain* (Li Yang, 2007, China), appeared in mainland China, stylised both in terms of narrative and characterisation. Although some of these films failed at the box office, and some were even banned from being released under the strict control of the censorship system, their attempts to display crime content and artistic value played a significant role in developing mainland crime films.

[65] Furthermore, numerous films employ additional gimmicks and incorporate crime elements into their original genres to attract the audience; however, these films fall outside the conventional definition of crime films.

[66] As living standards improve, the demand for diverse film genres among audiences continues to grow. Crime films, characterised by their intense narratives and suspenseful elements, effectively cater to individuals' desires for stimulation and novelty. Furthermore, crime films often draw strong connections to real-life cases, allowing viewers to experience a sense of substitution and triggering empathy. This connection ultimately enhances audience engagement and fosters greater appreciation for the genre.

[67] In contrast to their predecessors, contemporary young filmmakers exhibit heightened sensitivity to current social issues and possess an enhanced ability to capture the zeitgeist. They adeptly integrate pressing social concerns into their works, thereby rendering them more relevant and reflective of contemporary society.

[68] With the advancement of society, various social issues have gradually come to the forefront, garnering significant attention. Problems such as fraud, domestic violence, and human trafficking have become central concerns for the public. Filmmakers often depict these societal phenomena in crime genre films, which not only enhance public awareness of these issues but also encourage audiences to contemplate their underlying causes and potential solutions.

[69] In recent years, the relevant departments responsible for film regulation have made adjustments to their review criteria. Subsequent to the initiation of the anti-organised crime and anti-evil campaign by higher-level authorities, themes centred around anti-organised crime have become

increasingly prevalent in film production. This change indicates that the film censorship authorities are affording greater leeway and support for the creation of realistic themes, enabling filmmakers to confront certain social issues and criminal activities in a more direct manner. Such developments establish favourable conditions for the growth of crime-genre films. The film industry has been progressively advocating for the exploration of realistic themes. Realistic crime-genre films are capable of effectively mirroring social realities while simultaneously possessing considerable educational significance and social value. They are in line with the direction advocated by national film development policies. For example, certain films concentrate on legal subjects and high-profile cases. These films not only enhance public awareness of legal matters but also exemplify how film regulations play a positive guiding role in the creation of crime-genre works.

[70] Since 2011, significant research has been placed on depicting female perpetrators in these emerging crime films.

[71] Such as *Mystery* (2012) and *Dream Home* (2010).

[72] *Somewhere Beyond the Mist* (King Wai Cheung, 2017, Hong Kong)

[73] *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) and *Fish and Elephant* (Li Yu, 2001, China)

[74] *Night and Fog* (Ann hui, 2009, Hong Kong), *Feng Shui* (Wang Jing, 2012, China) and *Angels Wear White* (Vivian Qu, 2017, China).

[75] On September 19, 2004, the concept of 'building a socialist harmonious society' was officially introduced during the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. At that time, China's economy was experiencing rapid development. However, this growth also brought to light various contradictions and issues, including a severe disparity between the affluent and the impoverished and social instability. The notion of a 'harmonious society' emerged as a profound reflection on these challenges and as an active response to the social problems arising in such circumstances.

[76] The term 'new Chinese crime cinema' encompasses several implications: Firstly, it signifies a new era in the evolution of Chinese crime cinema. As social environments, cultural trends, and technological advancements evolve, a distinct phase emerges that showcases characteristics markedly different from earlier crime films in China. For instance, recent years have seen rapid urbanisation and the advent of the digital age within China. Films produced during this contemporary period are likely to incorporate elements that reflect modern urban landscapes and utilise advanced digital filmmaking techniques, such as sophisticated visual effects or enhanced cinematography made possible by high-tech equipment, which distinguish them from their predecessors. Secondly, this term could suggest innovative narrative styles. Traditional Chinese crime films often adhered to specific plot patterns and storytelling conventions. In contrast, the 'new' iterations may embrace more avant-garde narrative structures; for example, they might employ non-linear storytelling methods or multiple perspectives while delving deeper into the psychological dimensions of characters involved in criminal activities. Furthermore, these films may explore complex themes such as moral ambiguities within modern society and examine how the internet and new media influence criminal behaviour rather than merely focusing on straightforward crime-solving narratives. Thirdly, there is potential for emerging directorial voices and creative teams within this genre. A new generation of filmmakers has entered the industry with fresh ideas, diverse artistic sensibilities, and unique interpretations of crime stories. These young directors are often influenced by international cinematic trends as well as varied cultural backgrounds and contemporary social issues; such influences manifest in their works and contribute to what is termed 'new Chinese crime cinema'. Additionally, the notion of 'new' may also pertain to evolving audience expectations. As the tastes and viewing habits of the audience have evolved, the 'new Chinese crime cinema' aims to meet these new demands by offering more engaging stories, more realistic portrayals of characters and social realities, and a higher level of entertainment value while still maintaining the essence of the crime genre.

[77] 'Deviance' encompasses a much broader territory than 'criminality' (Goode, 2015, pp. 33-34), and 'homicide' is one severe form of criminality or criminal behaviour. Female perpetrators of 'homicide' are mainly manifested as intentional or negligent homicide, intentional or negligent

injury, etc.

[78] There exist some Hong Kong film works that portray 'active female perpetrators'.

[79] Hong Kong was under British colonial rule for over a century (1842-1997), during which it developed a unique identity bridging the East and the West. Hong Kong officially became part of the People's Republic of China in 1997, when sovereignty was transferred to China. Despite maintaining its unique identity, there are cultural differences between Hong Kong and the mainland. Furthermore, despite a century of colonial rule, Hong Kong shares common cultural roots. With the increasing economic integration between Hong Kong and the mainland, Hong Kong is becoming increasingly dependent on the Chinese mainland film market.

[80] In the traditional female perspective, 'sex' often means passive 'giving' rather than active 'asking'.

[81] Besides, women's excellent educational and professional achievements are frequently discriminated against by men's 'male superiority standards', which further exacerbates single women's husband selection dilemma.

[82] Tianya Community is one of the largest and most influential online forums in China. Its 'Entertainment Gossip' section has been characterised by high levels of user engagement and frequent interactions. This platform has attracted a significant number of female users who share personal experiences, thereby fostering an environment rich in discussions on diverse topics. Tianya Forum served as a critical channel for information dissemination and interpersonal communication, with numerous trending topics continuously emerging. During this period, posts addressing themes such as problematic relationships with mothers-in-law, colleagues, and third parties garnered substantial attention. These topics resonated deeply with users due to their relevance to everyday life and the emotional responses they evoked.

[83] The scavenger appears near the end of the film. During that rainy night, when Lu Jie and Sangqi assault Wenzi, their actions are observed by a destitute individual on the roadside. Subsequently, this scavenger confronts Lu Jie and Qiao Yongzhao, engaging in repeated acts of extortion. Overwhelmed by the situation, Qiao Yongzhao resorts to fatal violence against the scavenger.

[84] The popularity of South Korean revenge films has surged over the past few decades, characterised by their frequent portrayal of characters retaliating against oppression under authoritarian regimes.

[85] The concept of 'mobility' in this context encompasses both population migration and shifts in values. The 'dongluan' (refers to as unrest) can be attributed to the influx of new migrants and their prominent mobility. There is apprehension towards modern Western ideologies and their impact on the younger generation, exemplified by concerns surrounding 'liumang' (refers to as Chinese hooligans). Both aspects signify tangible risks as well as perceived threats.

[86] China, specifically, has been disregarded and marginalised in the field of criminology for an extensive period. One contributing factor to this lack of attention is that following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, China projected itself internationally as a society with minimal criminal activities, experiencing a low crime rate from the 1950s to the 1960s. Additionally, due to the 'Cultural Revolution', there was a dearth of official crime statistics reported during the 1970s.

[87] The phrases 'bad boys' and 'innocent girls' are often used together to contrast two completely different gender roles and behavioural patterns. This contrast not only reflects traditional social perceptions of gender roles but also reveals how these stereotypes influence public opinion and individual behaviour.

[88] Usually, the way to portray a specific main character in a film is to externalise it, usually into the lines he or she says and the things he or she does. However, this is abstract, and then the best way

to do this is to externalise the character in the vision or, more concretely, in colour.

[89]Moreover, Shui Qing's schoolbag is yellow, implying that Shui Qing becomes the same fate as Qu Ting at the end of the film.

[90]南京"母女杀人案"始末：赌徒母亲裹挟女儿成凶犯，杀害 15 岁少女_李小婷_冯若颖_陈雁陪　https://www.sohu.com/a/683652906_121370032