

The Nature of Patriarchy and a Female-Centred Film Narrative: Feminist Critical Analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

Yuan Zhuang¹, Shuai Yang²

¹Hebei Oriental College, Langfang, Hebei, 065001, China

²North China Institute of Aerospace Engineering, Langfang, Hebei, 065000, China

Abstract: The movie film "Raise the Red Lantern" is a Chinese film that has received widespread attention and strong influence abroad. The oppression of women by the patriarchal system reflected in the film has aroused heated discussions among many people. The movie film "Raise the Red Lantern" centers on Songlian's tragic experience and profoundly reflects the oppression of women by the patriarchal system. Although Songlian has education and a clear understanding of her own status, her speech in the film shows that all women are basically subject to secular perspectives and are caught in the contradiction of fighting for power. The master's preferences and authority are passed through rituals and Servants come to consolidate, highlighting men's control and oppression of women. The flute becomes a symbol of women's optimism and happiness, while the red lantern implies that women are oppressed and cannot have autonomy in desire and sex. Eventually, the hut became a symbol of a reality that women could not escape. Based on this, the paper focuses on text analysis, selects fragments and refers to relevant research, deeply interprets these symbols and story fragments, deeply analyzes the dilemma and oppression caused by the patriarchal system to women, and presents the close connection between men's judgment of women and the master's authority.

Keywords: *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou, Feminist Film Study, Critical Analysis

1. Introduction

Raise the Red Lantern is set in northern China in the 1920s and describes the hardships Songlian went through. She grew up in the countryside and was full of love for her hometown. After her father's death, Songlian had no choice but to interrupt her studies, marry a wealthy man and become his fourth wife. She was also involved in struggles with other wives. Over time, her character changed, from initially rebellious to docile and submissive. After a year, Songlian, a rebellious and stubborn person, was not only successfully tamed, but also pushed to the brink of mental collapse, turning into a person who abandoned her life and failed in the struggle. This film, whether it is a historical theme or a folk theme, deeply explores the role and status of women in society, and further analyses the absolute rights and influence enjoyed by the male protagonist in family life. This provides a solid theoretical foundation for the views I hold [1]. This article attempts to explore the female images in this film and their relationship with the patriarchal centre from a feminist perspective. Clare Johnston, one of the leading figures in feminist film theory, has criticised the stereotypes and limitations of female characters in many films, arguing that they are an extension of male fantasies in mainstream films. She also pointed out that male directors ignored the impact of gender identity on the style and theme of their works when creating. She holds the view that making films for women as a form of resistance to cinema is a key means of breaking down such stereotypes and potentially leading to new interpretations.

Mulvey explores the dominant role of the male gaze in classic Hollywood films from a psychoanalytic perspective, arguing in part that the male gaze actually satisfies a voyeuristic desire in men as they subordinate the female image to their own appearance, which reduces men's anxiety [2]. The word "woman" is actually defined for men. Due to the male gaze and their role in films, women are often seen as passive pornographic characters. Mulvey's argument focuses on how "film" or its "text" "attracts" audiences through cinematic representations and the structure of the film. In 1981, she shifted her focus from written content to audiences, specifically women. Yang Yuanying, a Chinese feminist scholar, conducted an in-depth analysis of the historical process and current situation of women's liberation in China, and gave a methodological interpretation of the creations of Chinese

female directors from the perspective of Western film research. She recognised highly of the film "Ghost Love" by female director Huang Shuqin, believing that this work marked the progress of Chinese women's concepts. At the same time, it was pointed out that female film creation should adhere to "female orientation" and emphasise that gender is one of the most fundamental themes of female films [3]. The vast majority of Chinese feminists hold a critical view when analyzing analysing female characters in films directed by men. They believe that the creations of male directors are products of patriarchal cultural rule, which subverts and challenges traditional gender concepts. For example, Qu Ying believes that only those female directors who have truly experienced social inequality and subordinate status can make films with women as the core and focus on women [4]. Films that express female emotions. There was a cry of defiance from the ladies. The fact that cannot be ignored is that in movies films directed by male directors, most female characters find it difficult to escape the strong control of men. This also makes films directed by men regarded to a certain extent as products of a "patriarchal" culture. However, simply defining women's films as the works of female creators is too simplistic.

2. Songlian: From a Rebel into a Maintainer

In just one year, Songlian experienced the transformation from an educated rebel to a victim and protector of the male-centered feudal marriage system. This idea is well illustrated by the contrasting images of Songlian at the beginning and end of the narrative (see Figure 1), with Songlian wearing consistent clothing and makeup. The Songlian on the left appears bright and vibrant, while the one on the right gives a numb and unsettling feel. Her behavior has changed dramatically as times went by. This change is not only reflected in her character creation, but also in her way of thinking and value orientation. She changed from a person who "didn't understand the rules" and "didn't abide by the rules" to a person who dared to challenge tradition and began to think about how to change. The changes that Songlian experienced were mainly triggered by three events. The first is her change in family identity, the second is the shaken family status, and the third is sinking down in the enjoyment of being a concubine. When Songlian first entered the Chen's house, she had a confrontation with her maid Yan'er. This was the first time that Songlian publicly admitted that she was the fourth wife. This reveals to some extent that Songlian gradually accepted the change from student status to concubine status, and was therefore involved in the power struggle between the women of the Chen family. Next, Yan'er makes a sharp satire about Songlian's low social status, which prompts Songlian to falsely claim that she is pregnant, thereby reaching the pinnacle of her status as the fourth concubine, and Songlian also begins to experience the luxurious treatment given by her husband. However, lies will be always exposed, which leads to the bad ending of Songlian's live in Chen family. And she eventually completed the overwhelmed transformation of both status and spirit.



Figure 1: Contrasting images of Songlian at the beginning and end of the narrative

The film opens with a vibrant sound element - the percussion instruments of Peking Opera. The first shot (see Figure 2) is a static medium close-up of nearly one minute, mainly describing the conversation between Songlian and her stepmother. This conversation explains the reasons behind the marriage: Songlian had to marry Chen because of her father's death. However, in this specific situation, we can only hear the stepmother's voice but cannot find her. This shot mainly focuses on Songlian, revealing the rebellion, dissatisfaction and overwhelming emotions in her heart. In addition, its composition design is also very eye-catching. Songlian is placed at the center of the camera, against a backdrop of blurry lattice windows and square frames that seem to foreshadow her unfortunate fate in an enclosed courtyard [5]. Following the first subtitle "Summer", from 2:05 to 3:20, we can see the shot of Songlian walking from a distance (see Figure 3). As she gradually approaches, with the sound of gongs and drums, Songlian walked through the queue to welcome the bride. In fact, Chen also organised a team to pick up Songlian, but she preferred to walk by herself, carrying a suitcase to get

married, which also reflected the highly educated Songlian's initial rejection of feudal marriage customs. In the next 3 minutes (see Figure 4), the camera first captured the display screen opposite the courtyard door, and then along the central shooting path, Songlian walked into the courtyard and looked around curiously. The basic structure of Chen's compound is vividly displayed through a variety of different angle shots, such as panoramas and long shots from high, low and straight angles, like a prison courtyard surrounded by high walls. In fact, Zhang and Yang likened the courtyard to the space of a prison, and through the surveillance method of the Panopticon, it symbolized symbolised the absolute control of the female spirit (see Figure 5) [6]. The housekeeper asked: "Miss, who are you looking for?" Later, the dialogue and interaction between Songlian, the housekeeper, and Yan'er were presented through panoramic and mid-shot front and back shots. Songlian refused the housekeeper to help her carry her luggage and rolled up her sleeves to help Yan'er wash clothes, which reflected her acceptance of a new type of education. Songlian's awareness of equality and independence. Faced with the same question "Who are you?", Songlian's answer to the housekeeper was "I am Songlian", which to a certain extent reflects that Songlian had not yet accepted her identity as the fourth wife when she first entered the Chen family; The housekeeper answered Yan'er's question. Yan'er's instant strong dissatisfaction and unhappiness made Songlian confused and angry. So Songlian asked Yan'er to help her carry her luggage as a wife, which directly promoted Songlian's hatred of the fourth wife, recognise the new identity and begin to accept the status and rights that the new identity brings to oneself.



Figure 2: The film opens



Figure 3: The Shot of Songlian Walking From a Distance

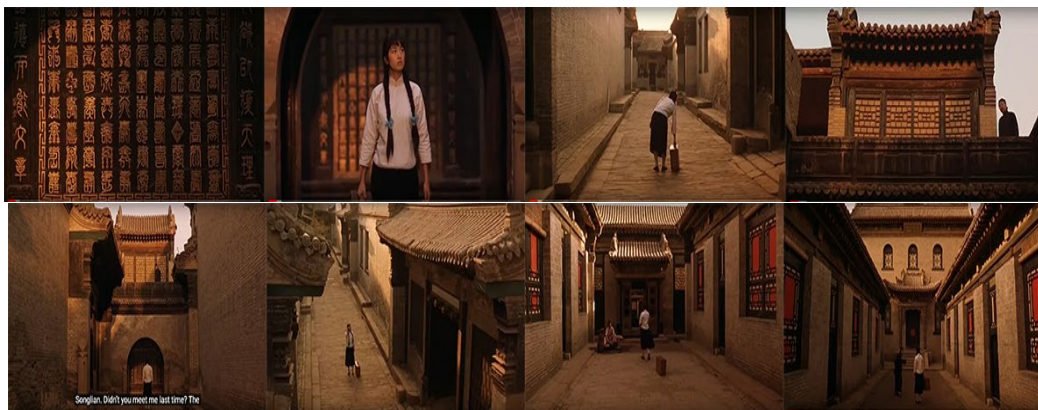


Figure 4: Shot of Songlian walking from a distance



Figure 5: Dialogue between Zhang and Yang

The film is filled with unique rituals performed by the male protagonists of the Chen family throughout the generations, which results in the women's amplified sense of superiority and frustration, thus accelerating the transformation of Songlian's character. For example, foot massages is one of main rituals in the film, and Songlian's changing attitude toward this activity reveals a dramatic shift in her personality and outlook (Figure 6). When shooting the scenes with foot massage, Zhang Yimou often uses panoramic to show the full picture of the characters and the relationship between them. He uses front/reverse shots to show the dialogue and interaction between the characters, while close-ups are used to clearly capture the expressions. Foot-beating scenes are always accompanied by crisp dynamic sound effects that are deliberately amplified, as if whoever is enjoying the foot-beating service can be heard by the wives of each hospital; this sound is not only hammering on the feet, but also hammering in the hearts of every wife [7]. The foot massage scene can be first seen at the wedding night, when the servant washes her feet and serves her, it is easy to find her discomfort and tension from her facial expressions, clenched fists and straightened waist. Ten days later when Songlian enjoyed foot massage again (Figure 7), Songlian closed her eyes with a relaxed look on her face, which showed that she had begun to gradually adapt and immerse herself in this service. When Chen decided not to stay with Songlian at night (Figure 8), Songlian heard the sound of mallet coming from the other yard. This made Songlian full of jealousy, so she asked Yan'er to do foot massage for her. Songlian was dissatisfied with Yan'er's massage method, and Yan'er said sarcastically: "If you are really capable, let Aunt Cao give you a massage!" Songlian withdrew her legs and said angrily: "Let's wait and see!" After that, Songlian lied that she was pregnant so she could enjoy special services everyday (see Figure 9). Songlian leaned back on the mat, looking very relaxed, and her face was filled with enjoyment. In addition, Songlian required Yan'er to feed her, which also implies that Songlian has lost herself in luxurious lifestyle. Zhao interprets the core idea of foot massage as a special right granted to men, but this practice is also a means of controlling women [8].



Figure 6: Songlian enjoyed foot massage for the first time

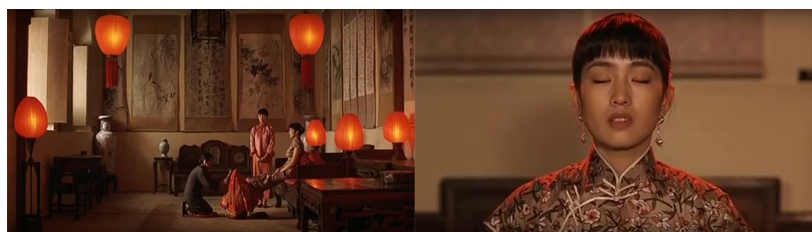


Figure 7: Songlian enjoyed foot massage again



Figure 8: Songlian closed her eyes with a relaxed look



Figure 9: Songlian lied that she was pregnant

3. Master Chen: Strengthening Male Control in Invisible Ways

Master Chen, as the patriarchal figure who dominates the narrative, is often indirect or absent in the film, so the authority he holds and the pressure he endures often appear in invisible forms. The shots of Master Chen are mainly long and panoramic shots, which only capture his back, side face or part of his body, making it difficult for the audience to clearly see his face and appearance. Chen's authority is unconsciously established and strengthened by the characterisation of servants, his words and hosting events like a foot massage. Apart from that, there is the ceremony of listening to orders in front of the door and turning on and off the lanterns. However, these rituals were not performed by Chen himself, but by a group of older and insensitive servants who will perform a series of specified behaviours after accepting orders from their masters. Mr. Chen conveyed his decisions and instructions through his butler, showing that these rituals and the master's authority have become a collective consciousness, which determines the indifference and inexorability of those involved when tragedy occurs. From a specific perspective, the relatively distant and "abstract" role of the protagonist in the film is actually a control of his power and ideology by the film (that is, he does not seem to need to use direct force or violence to show one's authority). This not only hints at the prevalence of male rulers in the feudal era at that time, but also stimulates the audience's attention and imagination from a film perspective, thereby enhancing the depth and power of its symbolic meaning.

Chen's first appearance is on his wedding night to Songlian (see Figure 10), an occasion that symbolises women becoming targets of male prying and sexual desire [9]. His appearance brought an unforgettable feeling to the audience. What is shown first is a 15-second static long shot, with the servant's cordial greeting and Chen's laughter, heralding his imminent arrival. Whenever the door opens or closes, he turns his back to the camera, as if his eyes are always fixed on Songlian. For several minutes in front of the camera, Songlian stared at his husband. The next sequence of shots always focus on Songlian and record her facial expressions and movements after hearing Chen's orders, ranging from close-ups to long shots, like the "male gaze" at female. She seemed emotionless at Chen's arrival and sight, staring straight ahead with an expressionless face. Chen kept talking about the meaning of the foot massage, a ritual to help wives serve their husband better, and ordered Songlian to illuminate her face. There was a layer of curtain separating the room when Songlian had to take off her clothes, creating a hazy atmosphere. Her inner resistance and tension can be found by the tightly wrapped quilt. Even Chen slept with Songlian, the camera still focused on Songlian and shot a part of Chen's arm from a high angle. Chen refused Songlian's request about turning off the lights and said the purpose of lightening lanterns was to gaze at her, which shows directly his absolute power of speech and explicit desire.



Figure 10: Wedding night

4. Signs Related to the Man

In Chinese cultural tradition, lanterns are regarded as symbols of hope and good luck. However, in this film, Zhang reinterprets its meaning as a symbol of male power, social status and desire, and further strengthens this meaning through a series of repeated rituals of lighting, extinguishing, and sealing the lamp. When the lantern is lit, it represents the owner's special preference, and concubines related also have the opportunity to enjoy various special treatments such as foot massages. Sealing the lights represents permanent abandonment by the owner. From a certain perspective, the pattern of lantern usage is actually a way of expressing whether a woman is favoured or not. Furthermore, the film is unique in that it provides a visual representation of male desire and control, which is already explored in depth in the wedding night scene. Zhang captured the lantern ceremony (see Figure 11) through panoramic shots and close-ups from multiple angles and used montage techniques to enhance its symbolic meaning. In addition, there is a series of strong rhythmic percussion of Beijing Opera in such scenes, which confirms the connection between lanterns and preference and implies the strifes among wives.

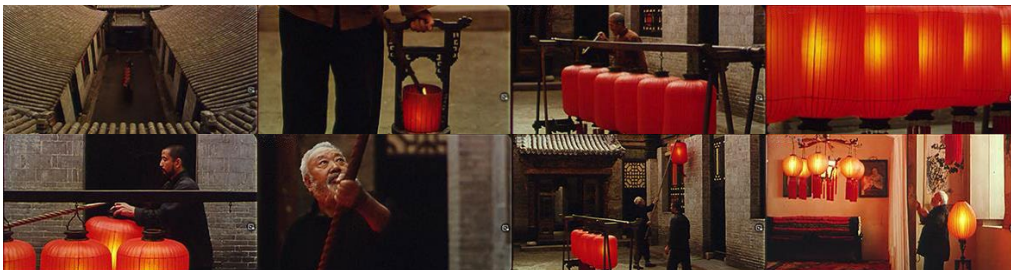


Figure 11: The Lantern Ceremony

The flute brought spiritual comfort to Songlian. When Songlian gets bored, she takes out her carefully guarded flute from her suitcase. This flute is a precious relic left by Songlian's father. For Songlian, it has far-reaching significance. It is not only a deep memory of her father, but also a symbol of family affection. Songlian and the eldest wife's child Feipu got to know each other because of the flute. Her face showed deep happiness and relaxation (see Figure 12), although this happy time was short-lived [10]. The flute gradually became a catalyst for the ambiguous emotions between them, and it also carried Songlian's longing and fantasy for love. When Songlian realizes that her flute is missing, Chen tells her that he has destroyed it because he suspects it might have been a gift from a man. To Chen, the presence of the flute constituted a threat to his authority over women's emotions, as well as to their gifts and skills. However, for Songlian, the disappearance of the flute means that she has lost the original warmth and color in the enclosed courtyard. It is a metaphor for the spiritual oppression of women by patriarchy.



Figure 12: Her Face Showed Deep Happiness and Relaxation

5. Conclusion

Raise the Red Lantern is a female-centered film that uses Songlian's tragic experience to show the patriarchal system and the oppression it brings. Although Songlian was well-educated and had a clear understanding of her place in this life, as she revealed in public, when she claimed that the fate of all women was essentially that of concubines or prostitutes, she still caught in the conflict of power and interests. The master Chen's authority is established and reinforced through various rituals and the servants who maintain the "system." In this film, the flute is portrayed as a unique symbol of female optimism and happiness, the lantern represents the oppression of women in society and male unfettered desire and sex. Men's views of women are often closely related to their authoritative status, which highlights men's control and suppression of women.

Feminist film studies is regarded as one of the core areas of film studies, and it conducts in-depth discussions from multiple dimensions such as content analysis, audience observation, and cross-cultural communication. This article mainly conducts an in-depth analysis of the film text by selecting several representative video clips and referring to relevant academic research originated from China and Western countries. However, it must be admitted that *Raise the Red Lantern* is a Chinese film that has received wide attention and positive influence internationally. Its response among domestic and international audiences is equally worthy of in-depth discussion. It is one of the most eye-catching examples. It is known as "World Cinema" or International Art Cinema. I look forward to exploring this film in depth from a variety of audience perspectives in the near future.

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