THE MALE GAZE IN FENG XIAOGANG'S FILMS FROM 1997 TO 2017

by

XINZHU WANG

(Under the Direction of Hyangsoon Yi)

ABSTRACT

Feng Xiaogang, one of the most successful commercial directors in China, has made many highly stylized and widely appreciated films. However, although Feng aims to illustrate the changes in modern China through his works, he does not get rid of traditional Chinese male supremacy in his treatment of female characters. Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory proves useful in examining Feng's attitude towards women. Mulvey's notion of "visual pleasure" provides an enriching conceptual framework for analyzing Feng's particular portrayal of women. Feng plays a double role between being a supportive voice for women and a defender of patriarchal codes. A textual analysis of four selected films will be used to discern Feng's subtle yet recurring narrative pattern: Given the rising global conscience of women's rights, the female characters in Feng's films have to face the ultimate loss of their battle with a Chinese society dominated by man.

INDEX WORDS: Feng Xiaogang, Female Characters, Laura Mulvey, Male Gaze

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XINZHU WANG

B.A., Hunan University, China, 2012

M.A., University of Georgia, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018

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XINZHU WANG

Major Professor:	Hyangsoon Yi
Committee:	Masaki Mori
	Yuanfei Wang

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to express my profound gratitude to my major professor Dr. Hyangsoon Yi for her patient guidance and continuous encouragement. Whenever I had a question about my research or writing, she always replied to me promptly. This thesis would not have been finished without her mentorship. I would also like to thank Dr. Masaki Mori and Dr. Yuanfei Wang who kindly served on my committee. I am indebted to their insightful comments and invaluable support. Last but not least, I want to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother. When I lost everything, even faith, she told me to persevere. In Genesis, God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." She is the light leading me through the darkness. She is my hero.

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CHAPTER ONE

FENG XIAOGANG'S FILMS AND LAURA MULVEY'S MALE GAZE THEORY

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with Feng Xiaogang's treatment of female characters in his films.[1] The central research question is his perspective on women. As one of the most successful commercial filmmakers in China, Feng plays a significant role in China's "burgeoning yet vulnerable national film industry" (Zhang 2). Feng incorporates the dramatic changes in many facets of Chinese society into his films. Especially the female characters in his films have changed over time. Such changes are closely related to the status quo of Chinese women, which is one of Feng's preoccupations as a filmmaker.

In analyzing female characters in Feng's films, Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory proves useful. Mulvey highlights visual pleasure as embedded in Hollywood narrative cinema. This pleasure includes scopophilia and the audience's identification with characters. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, Mulvey's idea of visual pleasure provides an insight into Feng's oscillation between feminist views and patriarchal perception.

My thesis consists of five chapters. This Chapter is a brief introduction to Feng's filmmaking career and Mulvey's male gaze theory as my conceptual frame. The main body of this thesis presents a close reading of the four films selected from Feng's oeuvre: *A Sigh* (2000), *Cell Phone* (2003), *The Banquet* (2006), and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016). In Chapter Two,

[1] In this thesis, regarding all the East Asian figures, including directors, scholars and film characters, I will follow the Eastern Asian naming convention of placing one's family name first and then one's given name.

Feng's early works, *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, are discussed together because of their similar themes and characters, including couples trapped in extramarital affairs. Such bittersweet relationships between male and female characters provide good examples of Feng's treatment of gender inequality, as Mulvey stresses in her male gaze theory. These two films especially demonstrate Feng's ambiguous attitude toward women through narrative. In Chapter Three, visual images from *The Banquet* are analyzed in explicit detail. In this Chinese blockbuster, the heroine's role attracts attention because of the stunning images and the magnificent spectacle, in which she is presented. In Chapter Four, Feng's more recent work, *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, is examined. This is Feng's second film uniquely centered on a woman. In terms of narrative and visual elements, no work can better illustrate Feng's oscillation between the image of a liberated woman and the power of the male gaze than this film. In Chapter Five, a conclusion is offered regarding the significance of my research into Feng's cinematic portrayal of women.

Feng Xiaogang's Filmmaking Career

> Like the Fourth Generation directors,[2] as soon as they entered the Hall, the Fifth Generation closed and sealed the windows…[3] As a result, it is now very crowded in the Hall of Chinese Cinema—someone guards the door, another the window,

[2] The Fourth Generation directors consist of the graduates from the Beijing Film Academy and Shanghai Arts School. They are among the earliest Chinese filmmakers who received a professional education. They began their careers after the Cultural Revolution, and most of the works of the Fourth Generation directors are strongly concerned with Chinese history, traditions and rural areas in China. The representative directors include Xie Fei, Huang Jianzhong, and Wu Yigong.

[3] The Fifth Generation directors refer to those Chinese filmmakers who were born in the 1950s and started their filmmaking careers in the 1980s. The representative directors include Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang. This group of filmmakers is renowned for their graphic, realistic portrayal of China. Since most of them have experienced the traumas of the Cultural Revolution, this special historical period is a recurrent topic in their works. The Fifth Generation directors won international acclaim and awards for their revolutionary cinematic techniques and profound rethinking of Chinese culture and history.

> and even the underground tunnel is blocked by the Sixth Generation [directors].[4] I realized that it was impossible for me to get in, and that there wouldn't be any place left for me in any case. So, I decided to build a side room beside the Hall. Now I am surprised that my life here is not just comfortable, but also more and more prosperous. Now when I am peeping inside the Hall, it seems so crowded that I really don't want to be there. (qtd. in Zhang 155-156)

The above passage is from a speech Feng gave at the Beijing Film Academy in 2000. He compared Chinese cinema to a "hall" now full of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Generation directors, who are widely acclaimed for their artistic avant-garde films. As a director focusing on light-hearted comedies and dramas about social problems, Feng had no choice but to explore a side tunnel to survive in the Chinese cinema. Now, he no longer desires entry into the Hall of Chinese cinema because his life as a commercial director has grown "more and more prosperous." The metaphor of a "hall" accentuates Feng's marginalized position and extraordinary achievements simultaneously. Despite his enormous success at the box office, Feng is one of the most underestimated and even ignored filmmakers by Chinese film critics.

A survey of his career as a director is helpful to understand Feng. In an interview conducted by Jonah Greenberg regarding his latest film,[5] *Youth* (2017), Feng summarizes his two-decade-long career as a director:

[4] Most of the Sixth Generation directors released their debut films in the 1990s. Representative directors include Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan, and Jia Zhangke. Compared with the Fifth Generation directors, they have worked in a more complicated context, China having experienced many economic reforms. They are also the first generation of filmmakers to have experienced booming consumerism in China. In the face of a rapidly developing China, some of the Sixth Generation directors have turned to commercial films, while others insist on pursuing innovative cinematography. Most of the Sixth Generation directors release their works through unofficial media, so they are called "underground" filmmakers. This is why Feng says that they blocked the underground tunnel of the Hall of Chinese Cinema.

[5] Jonah Greenberg is the president of Motion Pictures Creative Artists Agency in China.

> In the first decade, I made a lot of commercial films, and I topped the box office many times…But I think you can't be a slave to the box office, you can't be consumed by it. In later years, I've been using the influence I gained because of my commercial films, including the resources—better conditions, better bargaining power with the studios—and a track record at the box office to start making things I really love. So I made films like '*1942*,' '*I Am Not Madame Bovary*,' '*Youth*,' and '*Assembly*.' It might not seem like these films would have an obvious appeal to the market, but I think it's meaningful to make them, and I have a personal need to make them. ("Reflection on 'Youth'")

Feng's response shows a clear-cut separation between the two types of works he has created: commercial films and ones he "really likes," that are more concerned with social problems, such as government corruption, marriage, and materialism.

Feng is among the first and the most successful commercial filmmakers in China. Early in his career, Feng gained popularity for his *Hesuipian* or "Chinese New Year films." In 1997, he made his first New Year film, *The Dream Factory*,[6] which became the top-grossing film of the year. The film earned 30 million RMB at the box office, equivalent to 3 million dollars (qtd. in Yin 106). Encouraged by the success of *The Dream Factory*, Feng made a number of New Year films on a yearly basis: *Be There or Be Square* (1998), *Sorry Baby* (1999), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), *Cell Phone* (2003), and *A World Without Thieves* (2004). Thanks to Feng's works, which have attracted a vast audience, Chinese New Year's Day has become a golden season each year

[6] The literary translation of the film's title is *Party A, Party B.* The title refers to the different parties of a contract. In China, the party who purchases the service is named party A, or *jiafang* in Chinese. The company offering a service or products is usually called party B, or *yifang*. The title suggests that the One-Day Dream Trip company sells dreams, a nonrepresentational thing, as a concrete commodity.

for the film industry. Feng has added "going to the theatre" to the routine of Chinese people's celebration on New Year's Day.

New Year films refer to a special genre of films released during the Chinese New Year holiday. Chinese New Year, also called the Spring Festival, is the most significant holiday of the year. The traditional celebrations include cleaning the house, a reunion dinner, visiting family and giving children *"Yasuiqian"* or money wrapped in red paper. The New Year holiday is considered a time for grand consumption of commercial products, including films. As Zhu Ying explains, "Chinese winter," when Chinese usually celebrate the Spring Festival, is a lavish season when "the available audience is so massive that [a] major film release is a potential blockbuster" (195).

However, the winter market was not Feng's main motivation to begin making New Year films. As Zhang claims, Feng's New Year films are the result of his battle with Chinese film censorship and Hollywood blockbusters (R. Zhang 100-101, Y. Zhu 196). Before New Year films became a turning point in his career as a director, Feng opened a television production company named Good Dream in 1994. At this stage, Feng was very concerned with social problems arising in China, and thus Zhang Rui defines his works of the time as "social conscience films" (23). However, in the following years, most of the company's works, including *Lost My Love* (1994), *Behind the Moon* (1997), and *I Am Your Dad* (1996), failed to pass government censorship or flopped at the box office. For instance, *Behind the Moon* tells the story of an ambitious couple overwhelmed by mania of money. The ten-episode TV series touched upon the "false promises of economic prosperity, on social inequality and government corruption" (R. Zhang 60). Due to the drama's pessimism and criticism of the government,

Behind the Moon was banned from all TV stations in China. This government censorship started to prevent Feng from confronting sensitive social problems in his works.

The importation of Hollywood blockbusters generated another challenge for Feng and other Chinese filmmakers. In 1995, ten Hollywood films, including *True Lies, The Lion King,* and *Forrest Gump,* were released in China. *True Lies*, a film topping the Chinese box office that year, earned 103 million RMB, equivalent to 13 million dollars (Li 2). Domestic films could hardly compete with Hollywood films featuring big budget, lavish visual elements, and effective marketing strategies. In 1995, 269 films were screened in Beijing, including the nine American films. But the tiny fraction made of the imported films accounted for a dramatic 40 percent of the city's box office, which is 11.4 million dollars at that year (qtd. in Wan and Kraus 424).

In the face of government censorship and Hollywood's challenge, Feng was forced to explore a film genre that would both survive such censorship and reap large profits. Therefore, Feng turned his focus from mainland China to other regions and countries. He borrowed the idea of New Year films from Hong Kong and Hollywood. In Hollywood, the concept of New Year films was first introduced by Barry Diller as a way of referring to a specific film genre aimed at a seasonal market (Zhu 196). Diller, a programming executive at ABC in the early 1970s, enumerates the essential elements of a seasonal film: up-to-date subjects, an all-star cast, a compact structure, and an enjoyable visual style (Zhu 196). In Hong Kong, one of the film production centers in East Asia, New Year films were produced much earlier than in mainland China.[7] Some traditional forms of entertainment during the national festival laid the foundation

[7] The division between Hong Kong and the mainland China is historical. In 1842, as the defeated country, the Qing government ceded Hong Kong to Britain to end the First Opium War. In 1984, China and Britain signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which declared that Hong Kong would be returned to China in 1997. To handle the situation after the return of Hong Kong, the Chinese government issued "Yiguoliangzhi" or "One country, two systems", which allowed Hong Kong's law and economic systems to remain independent from China's communist system. At present, Hong Kong is governed as a Special Administrative Region of China along with Macau, a former colony of Portugal. Thus, the designation of "mainland China" came into being in film studies.

for the emergence of Hong Kong's New Year films. According to Fiona Law, this genre "should be studied together with the other early forms of festive entertainment before cinema-going became popular" (107). She considers Cantonese opera a precursor to Hong Kong New Year films. These Cantonese operas usually feature "economically disadvantaged illiterate or semi-literate urbanite[s] steeped in the moral and aesthetic universe of local vernacular culture unexposed to the May Fourth discourse of modernity" (qtd. in Law 109). The humorous depiction of ignorant characters in Cantonese opera was followed by Hong Kong New Year films. Law also enumerates the basic formulas of the genre of films: comic narrative, motifs such as "family reunions, homecoming, love-matching, marriages, the making of fortunes and self-improvement that are related to the festive period", titles consisting of "familiar terms and idioms" (110), "promotional taglines and hyperbolic slogans" (112). Renowned examples include To Johnnie's *Eighth Happiness* (1988) and Chow Steven's film series. All of the above attributes are noticeable in Feng's New Year Films.

Along with Hong Kong New Year films, Hollywood seasonal films became a source of inspiration for Feng, leading him into an entirely new phase of his directing career. *The Dream Factory* is the first New Year film in both Feng's oeuvre and Chinese film history. The film, loosely based on Wang Shuo's novel *You Are Not a Layman*, tells the story of four friends running a company called "One-Day Dream Trip." This company is aimed at helping their clients realize their dreams for one day. The four friends are Yao Yuan, Gao Beiyan, Liang Yuan, and Qian Kang, the boss of the company, who is played by Feng himself. Their clients include a bookseller who dreams to be General George S. Patton, a chef who yearns to be a brave martyr, a grouchy husband who desires to be abused in the way he abuses his wife, and a millionaire who wants to live a poor life again. Despite the limited profits they earn from the

business, the four friends enjoy helping others to realize their dreams, even though it is just for one day. The help they offer becomes more and more generous. Late in the film, Yao meets a man crying in a hospital, and he learns that the man is lamenting that his wife has been diagnosed with liver cancer. However, the couple cannot reunite because they have no apartment in Beijing, the city where the husband lives. Yao lends his apartment to the couple without any hesitations. On the Chinese New Year's Eve, the four friends have dinner together, and they decide to change the company into a charity organization offering free services. During the dinner, the husband who has borrowed Yao's apartment comes to their company and tells Yao that his wife has just died peacefully. He is very grateful for their help. At the end of the film, the voice-over says, "1997 has passed, and I really miss it."

The Dream Factory is fraught with Feng's cynical humor and witty jokes. For example, the loudmouthed cook dreams of being a revolutionary hero who guards a secret in the face of threats and temptations. To realize the client's dream, the four protagonists create a "torture inquisition." Yao tells the cook to keep the sentence "I won't say it for the life of me," from being known by the "enemy," Qian. The sentence is the "secret" that the cook needs to protect. When Qian interrogates the cook to let out what Yao tells him, he replies "I won't say it for the life of me." Although it sounds like a brave resistance, the cook is disclosing the secret. In threatening him to surrender, "enraged" Qian displays various punishments such as pepper water and hot irons. But the scared cook repeats the sentence "I won't say it for the life of me" in a tremulous voice until Qian finally understands that this is the secret Yao told the cook to keep. The cook's dream to be a reliable martyr comes true, even though he has disclosed the secret to the enemy.

The Dream Factory also successfully evokes sentimentality from the audience about the past year and provides a pleasant hope for the coming new year. This effect explains why the film was so well received by the audience. Law illustrates the audience's engagement with this film as follows: "These cinematic texts do not merely generate momentary enjoyment for the audiences, but also constitute a symbolic experience that can be brought to social reality by means of a utopian vision of the future... (107)." The very last line of the film, "1997 has passed, and I really miss it," induces nostalgia for the passing year full of precious memories, leaving the audience sentimental.

In his entertaining films made in early years, aside from witty humor and memorable characters, Feng's sustained concern with social problems, contributed to his uniqueness as a film director. In *The Dream Factory*, a millionaire comes to the company to experience poverty since he is weary of his luxurious life. Feng uses the plot to satirize the wide gap between the rich and poor in Chinese society. In 1978, the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, led China through an economic reform, which was called "*Gaigekaifang*" or "Reform and Open." His idea of reform exerted far-reaching influence on every aspect of Chinese society. Those who benefited from the reform quickly became wealthy. Since then, the economic inequality in China has increased at an unprecedented rate. In *The Dream Factory*, the millionaire gets tired of his rich life and desires to experience poverty again, as poverty was a major part of the Chinese collective memory in the last century. His story demonstrates that the new upper class in China have begun to miss the old days. While the rich express their nostalgia for the past, ordinary Chinese people are struggling to make ends meet. This satire attracted a huge audience to Feng's film.

Ironically, despite his success, making such commercial films was not Feng's ultimate career goal. As mentioned above, during the first years of his filmmaking career, Feng concentrated on films that explicitly addressed social and political problems, but these films failed to survive government censorship and were banned. Feng embarked on making Chinese New Year films as a way to save his filmmaking career and reputation, but he had been awaiting the opportunity to explore a different film genre altogether.

In 2006, after seven years of directing New Year films continually, Feng returned to feature films on social and historical themes. This was an ideal time for Feng to do so because the government's censorship had loosened and Feng had become well-established in the Chinese cinema (R. Zhang 113). In that same year, he made *The Banquet*, a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this film, Feng focuses on the upper class for the first time in his career. In his previous works, people of wealth and power were usually contrasted against poor protagonists. In *The Banquet*, Feng adapts the plotline of *Hamlet* to show the corruption and malice of a fictitious palace, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Since *The Banquet*, Feng has remained interested in epics. In 2007, he adapted Yang Jinyuan's novel *A Lawsuit* into *Assembly*, which is set in China's Civil War (1946-1949) between the Nationalist and Communist Parties and the Korean War (1950-1953). The film tells the story of a captain in the People's Liberation Army named Gu Zidi, who struggles to search for his dead comrade's remains and seeks fair treatment of those fallen in these military conflicts. After *Assembly*, Feng made *Back to 1942* (2012), a film which was based on Liu Zhenyun's novel of the same title, pertaining to the great famine of 1942. In recent years, Feng has paid more attention to making films regarding contemporary issues, such as *I Am Not Madame Bovary*. Recording China's rapid social changes has become his preoccupation as a filmmaker.

Studies on Feng Xiaogang and His Oeuvre

However, given his huge success with commercial films, it is surprising that Feng has failed to draw sufficient attention from critics and scholars. Only a few books are available on Feng and his works. To date, Zhang Rui's *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization and Censorship in Chinese Cinema After 1989* is the most comprehensive piece of research on Feng's achievements. Zhang focuses her research on a general picture of commercial Chinese films by analyzing Feng's explorations and struggles over the past few decades.

Tao Ye's[8] *The Dancer Perching on the Knife Edge: Studies in Feng Xiaogang's Films* is a collection of his commentaries on Feng's films. Li Chun, the author of *Twenty Years of Chinese Commercial Film: Research on Feng Xiaogang Phenomenon,* approaches Feng's films in terms of phenomenology. He investigates Feng's films as aesthetic objects and consumerist devices to explain the broad popularity Feng has gained.

Another important contributing material to understanding Feng's works is Feng's autobiography, *I Gave My Youth to You,* which has sold over six-hundred thousand copies. Here, Feng provides primary material in our efforts to understand his philosophy as a filmmaker, in addition to specific attributes of his films.

Beyond these books, there are journal articles and reviews on Feng's films such as "Feng Xiaogang and Mass Culture" by Jia Leilei, "The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang and Commercial Films Aesthetics" by Yin Hong and Tang Jianying. But they hardly offer a profound and exhaustive examination of Feng and his opus. The deficiency of comprehensive research on Feng's works may indicate a widespread tendency to stereotype in film studies. As Zhang points out, Feng's films seem "shallow" and "playful" compared with "the astonishingly exquisite

[8] Tao Ye is an associate professor at Communication University of Zhejiang in China.

visuality, exotic autoethnography and relentless criticism of the dark side of Chinese history, society and politics in films by [the] Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers" (1).

However, the arbitrary comparison of Feng with Fifth and Sixth Generation directors discounts the value of Feng's works. Because of his extraordinary accomplishments in making commercial films, a study of Feng's works offers a general picture of the film industry in China. As Li Chun states, Feng's film career is a microcosm of the development of Chinese commercial films in general (2). Li also points out that in his works, Feng creates significant precedents for his successors to follow. For example, in *Sorry, Baby*, Feng opened up the way for product placement advertising. In 2001, Feng collaborated with Columbia Pictures, a film production company based in the U.S. to make *Big Shot's Funeral*. The film tells the story of a high-profile American director's adventure in China and sets an example for a successful U.S.-China co-production. In recent years, Feng has distributed his works overseas, and he continues to become increasingly popular worldwide. Alexandra Seno, the author of "The Rise of China's Own Spielberg," compares Feng to Steven Spielberg, one of the most eminent filmmakers in Hollywood.

More importantly, the investigation of Feng's oeuvre can shed light upon the serious conflicts in today's China between modern trends, like consumerism, and traditional Chinese ethics and codes. A chronological and comprehensive analysis of the female characters in Feng's films helps to clarify the path Feng has walked over the years. His developing perception of women echoes ideological change of him and China as a whole.

As Cui Shuqin states, "In China, the process of feminizing the nation and nationalizing gender foregrounds woman as a symbol while effacing her self-identity. The motherland takes a female form while eliding any genuine female subjectivity" (xiii). In the twentieth century,

liberating women from an oppressive Chinese patriarchal society pushed the democratic movement forward. In *Wusi* or The May Fourth Movement,[9] the student participants and leaders claimed the status and power women deserved by denouncing the corrupt custom of foot binding, which resulted in severe disabilities for women. Emancipating women contributed to opposing traditional Chinese moralities and antiquated social systems. Hence the process was described by the term *Dadao kongjiadian* or "down with the shop of Confucianism," meaning abolishing dominant Confucianism. However, the movement's participants did not base women's liberation on a feminism centering around the equality between two sexes. In her 1994 article "Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Film and Women's Cinema," Dai Jinhua explains the dilemma in which women were trapped:

> When women broke the historical chain, they lost spiritual identity. Because of the disappearance of sexual difference in the mainstream ideological discourse, the establishment and investigation regarding women, feminist discourse, and female identity became unnecessary and even impossible…the particular reality is presented as a historical dilemma: the feminism movement, as regards to politics, economics, and culture, has become a new form of repression. (my trans.; 37)

The dilemma extends to film studies. Although female characters had become visible in China's national cinema, they had not been approached as a legitimate scholarly concern. Chow Rey illustrates the origin of the dilemma in academia,

[9] As Joseph Chen states in his article "The May Fourth Movement Redefined," in modern Chinese history, the May Fourth Movement "marked the beginning of China's modern revolutionary era, and a new stage after the Republican Revolution of 1911" (63). On May 4th, 1919, revolutionary organizations including students, workers, and citizens in Peking demonstrated against the corrupt Beiyang Government, unfair Treaty of Versailles, and Japan's occupation of Shandong Province. The movement spread through the whole of China rapidly and triggered the following revolutions in politics, education, and culture. In 1939, to commemorate the far-reaching influence of the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese government declared May 4th to be Chinese Youth Day, a national holiday henceforth.

> When feminist film theory alerted us to the cinematically fetishized status of women, its apparent iconophobia shared important affinities with the moral charge that accompanied Western political activisms of the 1960s and early 1970s, with their demands for an end to imperialism and military violence and for the granting of civil rights to disenfranchised populations. (10)

Similarly, in China, feminism and feminist events were part of national movements, such as The May Fourth Movement mentioned above. As Cui notes, "a review of a century of Chinese cinema reveals that gender issues do not arise merely from sexual difference but rather are embedded within the discourse of nationalism" (xix). In the early years of the twentieth century, the campaigns for women's rights intertwined with the political movements aimed at national revolutions. Cui names the phenomenon as "gender-nation complex" (xix). For example, the miserable lives Chinese women once led are solely attributed to the social system of *jiu shehui* or Old Society of China before 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded. Feminism centering on women power was far from being established.

Taking the intertwining relationship between gender and nation into account, Cui explains the role of the Fifth Generation directors, "These allegories…highlight woman as a visual signifier of national history and as sexual image for the world's gaze" (xv). In Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Judou* (1990) and Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), and *Yellow Earth* (1984), these directors render female victims of the patriarchal society as marginalizing and enslaving women. By presenting vulnerable and helpless Chinese women, the Fifth Generation directors associate their works with history and win an international reputation Thus, the dichotomy and opposition between the two sexes are of special interest to the Fifth Generation directors strongly.

Further work is required to reexamine the intertwining relationship between feminism and nationalism in Chinese films. Female characters merit a serious academic discourse. As a commercial filmmaker, Feng portrays women from a different perspective than the Fifth Generation directors. His works act as a connecting point in Chinese cinema in general and provide sufficient room for analysis in the framework of Western feminist film theory.

Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory

According to Laura Mulvey, one of the most distinctive voices in feminist film criticism, men tend to view women in narrative cinema as erotic objects of visual pleasure. She calls this the "male gaze" theory. Such "bearers of the look" can include film viewers, on-screen male characters, and male filmmakers ("Visual Pleasure" 19). Using Freud's psychoanalysis theory, Mulvey defines the "pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation" as voyeurism or scopophilia ("Visual Pleasure" 16-17). This pleasure leads the audience to develop a narcissistic attitude when they identify with the powerful and controlling male characters as onlookers ("Visual Pleasure" 16-17).

As a way of explaining male gaze theory, Mulvey describes two kinds of separation. The first one is the dichotomy between man as the "bearer of the look" and woman as an image ("Visual Pleasure" 19). The second is between ego and libido ("Visual Pleasure" 20). The former separation requires a brief elaboration because it is directly relevant to the treatment of female characters in Feng's works. Mulvey approaches the dichotomy between man and woman in psychoanalytic terms. The lack of a penis makes a female a figure threatening castration and unpleasant sexual difference (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 22). Thus, the image of a woman continually evokes anxiety in man. The male has two avenues of releasing this anxiety. First, he

demystifies the woman, which involves investigating or punishing a woman who is viewed as an icon for men's visual pleasure (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure" 22). The first avenue closely connects with the narrative since man's sadism can push the story forward and force a change in the female character. This sadism highlights the man's supreme control over women in various dimensions of the film. The second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, means turning the woman figure into a reassuring fetish. Unlike sadism, this releases the castration anxiety by stressing the physical beauty of a woman, a "fetishistic object" ("Visual Pleasure" 22). Fetishism is associated with visual elements, especially the presentations of women's bodies in cinema.

Mulvey's idea of male gaze has received a diverse response, including controversial critiques. Relying on Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, Gaylyn Studlar denounces the basic assumptions accepted by many of feminist-psychoanalytic film theorists. She argues that "our desires are not simply Oedipal ones, nor are they governed solely in terms of lack/phallus" (23). By pointing out that women can be both objects of love and agents of control for dependent men, for example, a manipulative mother, Studlar opposes Mulvey's binary division between active man as the look-bearer and passive woman as the object of the look and the source of castration anxiety ("Visual Pleasure" 7). Studlar's research allows for a wider range of spectatorial pleasures than those currently discussed in the field (Studlar 5).

Regarding the broad applicability of Mulvey's theory, Edward Snow, in his article, "Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some problems," states that when masculine vision or male gaze is reduced to "terms of power, violence and control" and every male view of woman is pronounced "outlawed, guilty, damaging and illicitly possessive," the theory can become an agent of the patriarchal orders and serve the paternal superego (31). Snow criticizes Mulvey's theory as

failing to differentiate man's views of woman regardless of the various contexts in which they are situated.

The differences between Hollywood and other cultural contexts in which a film exists also challenge the applicability of Mulvey's theory. As Cui points out, although male gaze theory is powerful and widely accepted in film studies, the concept of gaze or look, which might be self-evident in a Western film context, can become problematic in analyzing Chinese films (135). The differences in culture, society, history, and politics between the West and China raise questions about the universality of Mulvey's theory.

Despite all these issues, Mulvey's theory proves to be useful in understanding Feng's treatment of female characters. This usefulness is justified partly by Mulvey's revision of her theory as a way to increase its cross-cultural applicability. In her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Dule in the Sun* (1946)", Mulvey answers the frequently asked question of why she "only used the male third person singular to stand in for the spectator" ("Afterthoughts" 31). By resting her analysis of *Duel in The Sun* on Freud's concept of femininity, Mulvey redefines the dichotomy of active male and passive female. She illustrates how female audiences find pleasure in viewing a film by identifying with a heroine who is a combination of masculinity and femininity.

More importantly, Feng's portrayal of female characters in his films are heavily influenced by Hollywood conventions. As mentioned above, in the late 1990s, Feng's New Year films were partly derived from Hollywood's concept of films for a specific season. The widely appreciated elements in his films, such as "small characters", referring to those ordinary and unprivileged people with happy endings, and optimism, were frequently used by his predecessors, Hollywood filmmakers. Feng's interest in Hollywood formulas was exemplified by

Big Shot's Funeral, a U.S.-China co-production. *The Banquet*, Feng's first epic, combines elements of Chinese culture and the Hollywood blockbuster formula such as complicated romance, epic battle scenes, and sumptuous costumes. The increasing influence of Hollywood conventions left a significant mark on Feng's film career. Thus, analyzing his works in terms of Western feminist theory, such as Mulvey's male gaze, helps to map out a shift in Chinese filmmakers' general attitude towards Hollywood from emulation to competition.

In this thesis, I argue that Feng oscillates between a feminist and a patriarchal stance in his treatment of female characters. On the one hand, he speaks for women through his films with his marginalized and mistreated female protagonists. In his early works, such as *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, female characters are independent and courageous facing the betrayal of their husbands. In his recent work, *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, Feng depicts Li Xuelian as a challenger to the male-dominated Chinese government. Although Feng's heroines are not self-conscious feminist activists, they are different from many of the female characters who lead miserable lives in the works of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. In his *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Judou*, Zhang Yimou shows women in federal China, who are enslaved as erotic objects and child-bearers for their husband. In *Judou*, Yang Jinshan is a rich but cruel fabric businessman, who purchases a young girl named Judou as his wife. He tortures Judou every night out of frustration because of his impotence. Using sequences presenting the bruises and scratches on Judou's back, Zhang shows her husband's sadism and Judou's suffering. *Raise the Red Lantern* takes a further step in revealing the deplorable life of Chinese women. A well-educated girl, Songlian, marries a rich man who she calls *Laoye* or master and is involved in endless intrigues among his four women. Because she discloses the adultery between the third mistress Meishan and their family physician, Meishan is hanged by the master. Songlian goes insane after seeing Meishan's death.

Raise the Red Lantern reveals the cruelty that women suffer in a patriarchal society. Unlike Judou or Songlian in Zhang's films, the female characters Feng presents are more independent and controlling.

On the other hand, a male perspective can still be traced in Feng's portrayal of these female characters. Although Feng rarely shows scenes involving "men's looking and women's being-looked-at" in his films (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 17), women are gazed at "unknowingly." Point-of-view shots present a woman's body especially for the audience. Take Feng's latest film, *Youth*, as an example. The film, adapted from Yan Geling's novel *You Touched Me*, dramatizes the story of a dancing troupe in the People's Liberation Army in late 1970s China. The protagonist of the film, He Xiaoping, is a recruit of the dance troupe. Her father is arrested and sent to a "re-education camp" when she is very young.[10] Before long, He's mother remarries and has two children. As a stepdaughter, He has been isolated and abused by her family members, including her mother. When she joins the army, she is excited to learn from a girl named Xiao Suizi that taking a shower is free in the camp. He's mother had forbade her to bathe because it cost 1.5 mao, equivalent to about 7 cents. The sequence of He's excitement about the free shower, shot in a bathroom, demonstrates the unfair treatment she has received from her family.

In the film, Feng presents a close-up of He's bare back when she explains to Xiao why her mother refused to let her have a shower. While putting on a white shirt, Xiao walks to He after their conversation with her white bra appearing in some of the shots, but not others. However, what draws attention from the audience is the sequence in which He's bare back and

[10] The camp was a prison for the intellectuals in China's Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. Those scholars, college teachers, physicians, and writers who were considered opposed to Mao's thoughts were arrested and sent to these camps. They were forced to do intense labor and confess their crimes, which might not exist, to the government. The process was called "re-education."

Xiao's breasts are presented in a close-up. In the narrative, the scene does not require the presentation of these two girls' bodies.

Why does Feng use a close-up in this bathing scene? Feng's autobiography can offer an answer. In his *I Gave My Youth to You*, Feng recalls a girl in a military uniform whom he had met at a dance party many years earlier.

> I cannot remember her face clearly. What impressed me most was that she had a bright and elegant neck. It was hot that August, so she wore a summer military uniform without a white shirt. Her smooth neck stood beautifully in the small lapel of her military uniform, making her neck look whiter and her collar even redder. This was a very common way for female soldiers to wear military suits. After showering, with their wet hair down, the girls wore the uniforms with their necks exposed. They put the hats in their military bags and walked out of the barracks. Strictly speaking, this style of dress was violating army's regulations, but it looked very lovely. Now as soon as the word sexy is mentioned, the first thing that comes to my mind is the above description. Until today, I've been thinking of making a movie for such a plot, to express the feeling about those girl soldiers that I had buried deep in my heart for so many years. (my trans.;18)

The above passage strongly resonates with the bathroom scene in *Youth*. It is clear that Feng's experience of looking at the girl generated an unforgettable pleasure in his mind. Feng reproduces his memories of pleasure from the past for the audience of *Youth*. This is a strong example illustrating a male director's visual pleasure as Mulvey points out.

Another basis for my reading of Feng's approach to women as patriarchal but partly feminist is the narrative pattern in Feng's films. His films tend to illustrate the ultimate loss of

the women who challenge patriarchal authorities. Although brave and rebellious, these women inevitably lose their battles with men in the end and sometimes lose their lives as well. In *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, the formidable heroine, Li Xuelian, spends decades seeking justice. However, her quest cannot succeed because of the "wrong" path through which she pursues it—the legal system. In *The Banquet*, the heroine, Wan'er, wins the battle in the palace and becomes the empress, but she is stabbed by an off-screen killer in the end. This portrayal show Feng's mixed perspectives on women.

Methods

To understand Feng's attitude towards female characters appropriately, I will conduct a textual analysis of his films. Over the years of progression in his filmmaking career, Feng has created highly individualized works. His personal experiences, memories, sentiments, and both implicit and explicit commentaries on various aspects of Chinese society are repeatedly presented in his films. His depiction of an auditorium in his autobiography supports the above notion of his allusion to personal experience. In his childhood, Feng often played with his friends in an auditorium, and he felt that the place was gigantic. But when he returned to the auditorium as an adult, he realized that it was actually a small chapel. This event raises the question of "truth" for him:

> I began to think about such a question: if I were to make a film about my childhood, should I shoot it according to my memory, or should I restore it to the original situation? From the perspectives of a child, the door of the auditorium is big and tall, but adults don't think so. Which sight of the line is truer? The result

> of the thinking is, I should shoot according to a child's view, because that is childhood. (my trans.; 24)

It is evident that Feng can make a small door look bigger as a way of recalling his childhood memory and perspective. Feng's subjectivity as an artist can be understood in light of Mulvey's argument about the narcissistic pleasure men can find as directors. The door of the auditorium is remembered as "anthropomorphic" by Feng when he decides to depict the door in the way he looked at it as a child. ("Visual Pleasure" 18)[11] What he intends to show is the door in his imagination, not the door in real life. Similarly, throughout his career, Feng has expressed his sustained perspectives on many issues, including female characters and social problems. This tendency is what leads Zhang Rui to view Feng as "a filmmaker working under political and economic pressures in a post-socialist state while still striving to create works with a personal socio-political agenda" (12).

Keeping Feng's rather ambiguous attitude towards female characters in mind, I will analyze four of his films in this thesis: *A Sigh*, *Cell Phone*, *The Banquet* and *I Am Not Madame Bovary*. Tracing the development of the female protagonists in these films demonstrates how Feng's efforts to create an independent and rebellious woman in fact tend to subjugate her to the male perspective deeply embedded in his directorship.

A comparison between Feng and the Fifth Generation directors will also be included in this thesis. By means of the metaphor of the hall of Chinese cinema, Feng ridicules the Fifth and Sixth Generation Chinese directors. This metaphor implies a distinct contrast between Feng and

[11] As Michel Weemans and Bertrand Prevost explain in *The Anthropomorphic Lens: Anthropomorphism, Mircrocosmism, and Analogy in Early Modern Though and Visual Arts*, "anthropomorphism—the projection of the human form onto aspects of the world—closely related to early modern notions of analogy and microcosm." This work specifically stresses the "metaphor relating the human body to the body of the world" (1). In Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," anthropomorphic refers to the tendency for the audience to identify with the world by associating objects with human characteristics (18).

other prominent filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. The difference between Feng and Zhang's portrayal of female characters may be explained in terms of their different views on women. But it should also be noted that their difference is due to the distinctive missions of the Fifth Generation director and Chinese commercial filmmakers. As Ni Zhen argues in *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China's Fifth Generation*, in terms of Chinese cinema, distinguishing the Fifth Generation directors from other groups of filmmakers marks a clear change regarding "political thinking, cultural consciousness, and film aesthetics and individual differences in artistic pursuits and styles" (190). Thus, a comparison between Feng and his predecessors, the Fifth Generation directors, can help provide historical insight into Feng and other commercial Chinese filmmakers that are represented by him.

CHAPTER TWO

A SIGH AND *CELL PHONE*: FENG XIAOGANG'S PORTRAYAL OF THE WOMEN CAUGHT IN EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS

In the early years (1994-2004) of his career, the vivid and eloquent portrayal of ordinary people brought Feng enormous success both commercially and critically. According to Zhang Rui, among all the recurrent topics in Feng's early works, the "victory of small characters" is a significant part of Feng's powerful strategy of dealing with Chinese censorship and the elusory tastes of the audience (82). These small characters represent "the simple joy, sorrow, hardship, and success of people" who are ignored by other socialist realist films (R. Zhang 85). Additionally, Feng also displays their optimism to the audience. Although humble and underprivileged, a virtuous and hardworking person can succeed and realize his or her dream despite an unhospitable social milieu (R. Zhang 87).

However, almost all of Feng's impressive small characters are male, such as Yao Yuan in *The Dream Factory*, You You in *Big Shot's Funeral*, and Liu Yuan in *Be There or Be Square*. Lǔ Shumei captures the central role of male characters in Feng's films as follows: "Since the story unfolds around a male's perspective, the male characters are the protagonists of the narrative, being put in an active position, and their lives and mental activities are displayed more clearly" (my trans.;13).

With the male-oriented view comes the woman's marginalized position. For example, Feng adapted Wang Shuo's novella *You Are Not a Layman* into his first Chinese New Year film, *The Dream Factory*. In the original novella, there are two female characters, Ding Xiaolu and

Liu Meiping. Feng combines these two women into one single figure in his film—Gao Beiyan. She plays the role of an assistant to her male colleagues without putting forward any of her own ideas. In his early career, Feng gave disproportionate emphasis to the male characters in his films, much in the way that conventional Hollywood cinema does. Mulvey points out that in mainstream Hollywood films, a man usually plays the active role to forward the story and "make things happen." A controlling male character, with whom the spectator can identify, structures the entire narrative (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 20).

Given the similar inclination that Feng had in his early career, his films that depict the complicated relationship between men and women, such as in extramarital affairs, clearly illustrate his different attitudes towards the two genders. The universality of this attitude is expressed by Robin Wood in his *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, Wood explains the significance of extramarital affairs in F.W. Murnau *Sunrise*: [12]

> F.W.Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927-28) offers itself as a particularly useful starting point for an investigation into the functioning of sexual politics within narrative cinema, not because it has much to do with liberation but because it establishes with great clarity the basic principles of the sexual ideology that has been dominant in Western culture for at least the past century and at the same time unwittingly manifests the tremendous strain involved in their enforcement. (31)

12 The film was adapted by German director F.W. Murnau from Herman Suderman's short story "The Excursion to Tilsit." It tells the story of a husband attempting to murder his wife and live with his lover. But the man regrets his plan at the last moment and abandons it. The film concludes with the couple's reunion. *Sunrise* won the first Academy Award for Best Unique and Artistic Picture in 1929.

This statement is also applicable to Feng's films, in which the different reactions of women and men to an intruder in their marriage stem from gender differences or different ideological trends in contemporary China.

The topic of a husband's infidelity has interested Feng for a long time beyond the early years of his filmmaking career. His works *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone* deal with similar stories of a husband leading a double life between his wife and mistress. In *If You Are the One*, a romantic comedy released in 2008, Feng presents a female character named Liang Xiaoxiao, who is the mistress of a wealthy businessman. The plot of *I Am Not Madame Bovary* begins with a fake divorce intended to allow the couple to have an apartment that is solely available for single people. But the husband, Qin Yuhe, moves into the apartment with another woman rather than with his wife.

Seemingly, in *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, Feng does not create any powerful male character that the audience can quickly identify with. He presents the suffering of both male and female characters caught in extramarital affairs. When the independence and courage of the women in his films attract the attention of the audience, he demonstrates these women's dependence on female roles immediately. In both *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, a middle-aged and successful husband oscillates between his virtuous wife or girlfriend and an attractive mistress. After his affair is discovered, he gets into endless troubles and chaos. Although Feng concludes these two films with men's loss of their double lives, these male characters still play the central roles of "forwarding the story and making things happen" as Mulvey describes it ("Visual Pleasure" 20). In dealing with these stories of extramarital affairs, Feng reaffirms his oscillation between woman and man at opposite ends.

A Sigh tells the story of a renowned screenplay writer named Liang Yazhou. He writes a screenplay in a seaside resort and meets a young girl, Li Xiaodan, who becomes his assistant. While staying at the resort, he falls in love with energetic and beautiful Xiaodan. Liang's wife, Song Xiaoying, discovers the affair and separates from Liang. Xiaodan, feeling genuinely guilty in her heart, decides to leave Liang to keep his family intact. After Xiaodan disappears, Liang reconciles with his wife and the broken family returns to a normal state. They go on a vacation at a beach. However, in the last scene of the film, Liang receives a phone call and looks at the camera with a fearful gaze. This powerful shot suggests that he has not completely ended the extramarital affair as he had promised.

Cell Phone is a film adaptation of Liu Zhenyun's novel of the same name. Although the film shares a similar theme with *A Sigh*, it approaches extramarital affairs from the perspective of the intrusion of technology into modern people's lives. The hero, Yan Shouyi, a famous talk-show host, oscillates between his wife, Yu Wenjuan, and mistress, Wu Yue. His wife discovers his affair through a phone call and divorces him immediately. After the divorce, Yan begins a relationship with a college teacher, Shen Xue, while also maintaining the affair with Wu. Yan seems to be proud that he has taken control of his double life and enjoys the romances with both women. However, after Wu texts Shen a photo of her sexual relationship with Yan, Shen leaves him, too. Further, Wu uses the photo to blackmail Yan into giving her the talk show host position. If he refuses, she threatens that she will release information about their relationship to the public. In the end, Yan loses everything he has, including his job and relationships.

The female characters in these two films can be described differently concerning their relationships with the male characters. There are wives: Song in *A Sigh*, and Yu and Shen Xue in

Cell Phone.[13] Then there are mistresses: Xiaodan in *A Sigh* and Wu Yue in *Cell Phone*. In terms of their characteristics, these women can be grouped into two types: traditional women who strictly obey family oriented Chinese ethics, and young girls who are witty and playful. The wives are women submissive to the traditional ethical codes while the mistresses are those playful girls.

Feng's ambiguous attitude is noted in his treatment of all these women. On the one hand, he sympathizes with the wives who suffer from the betrayals of their men. He shows the wives' unconditional love for their families to get sympathy from the audience for these women. For example, in *A Sigh*, Song has been striving to renovate their new house until she breaks her back. Feng also shows their quick decisiveness in the face of their husband's infidelity. After discovering the affairs of their husband, both Song in *A Sigh* and Yu in *Cell Phone* ask to divorce immediately.

On the other hand, despite the different stories, Feng presents the compromises these women make to save their marriages and the difficulties facing them after their respective divorces, indicating the realistic plights independent women may encounter in Chinese society. In *A Sigh*, Song requests a divorce determinedly at first. However, as time goes by, she begins to strive to save her marriage and even begs Liang to stay in the family. In one scene, she wails, "if there is anything that I did wrong, please tell me. I'll fix it!" This line implicitly conveys the opinion that a husband's infidelity is his wife's fault. When Liang begins living with his mistress Xiaodan, Song tells Liang's friend that "I'm satisfied with the situation. Although Liang comes back randomly, he always gives us all the money he earns and helps me do housework. That's all I want!" When Liang decides to go back to his family, Song accepts him instantly. The film ends

[13] Although Shen and Yan are not married in *Cell Phone*, their relationship is public and they intend to get married. So Shen can be considered to play the role of wife.

with the sequence of a pleasant beach holiday for the family, suggesting that Song has fully forgiven Liang's infidelity.

In *Cell Phone*, Yan's ex-wife, Yu, leaves him immediately when she discovers her husband's affairs. However, shortly after they divorce, Yu finds that she is pregnant with Yan's baby and decides to keep the child. Yu seems to be more decisive and tenacious than Song in *A Sigh*. But Yu loses her job after she becomes a mother. Her brother secretly tells Yan about Yu's unemployment, and Yan gets her a new job with the help of Wu, his mistress. The plot illustrates realistic dilemmas Chinese women may confront. They can be mentally independent by leaving an unfaithful man, but they can hardly be financially self-supportive.

Another character illustrating wifehood in *Cell Phone*, Shen, begins to doubt Yan's infidelity very early in their relationship. In the sequence where Shen interrupts a rendezvous between Yan and Wu, she questions their relationship. Guilty but scared Yan attempts to cover up the affair by pretending to be angry. He shouts out loud at Shen, "I need a wife, not a spy! What are you thinking?" Upon hearing these words, Shen calms down quickly and leans on Yan's shoulder and says, "I don't want you to contact her anymore." Yan's use of the idea of "wife" convinces Shen of the seriousness and truthfulness of her relationship with Yan. Yan take advantage of her desire for marriage to reassure her and save himself. Although skeptical, Shen does not leave him until she receives the sexual photo from Wu.

When it comes to the subject of a mistress in an extramarital relationship, Feng first highlights her kindness and selflessness. In *A Sigh*, Liang's lover Xiaodan never asks for anything but Liang's companionship. She takes cares of him so that he can devote himself to writing. She leaves when Liang's wife comes to visit him. She even reminds Liang of gifts he should buy for his daughter for a holiday. When Song falls off a ladder and injures her back,

Xiaodan wants to go to the hospital with Liang to help her. Xiaodan never asks Liang to get a divorce and marry her instead. When Liang fights with Song, Xiaodan consoles him by saying that "you don't have to rush to leave her. I'll be with you even if you cannot marry me." Later in the film, when Liang decides to go back to his wife, Xiaodan leaves Liang without any complaint.

However, Feng highlights a critical voice towards the women as mistresses in his film by dramatizing the societal condemnation Xiaodan encounters both implicitly and explicitly. Liang and Xiaodan attempt to spend their first night in a hotel together after Liang leaves his wife. But because they cannot provide a legal document to prove their relationship, Liang and Xiaodan are arrested by the police for suspected prostitution. This scene confirms Xiaodan's despised position in society as a mistress. People tend to view a woman who breaks up others' marriages as a prostitute. In the scene where Song hurts her back, and Liang goes to take care of her, Xiaodan insists on staying in the hospital to help Liang. Failing to separate her from Liang, Liang's friend exclaims "Shame on you!" The words serve as a moral judgment in the film. A close-up of Xiaodan's face exposes her embarrassment to the audience.

In *Cell Phone*, on the one hand, Feng renders the mistress Wu as an object of man's erotic gaze and embodiment of materialism. On the other hand, Feng dramatizes how Wu uses her beauty and body to fulfill her desires. In a sequence in which Yan stands far away from Wu to avoid people from knowing about their relationship, Feng shows the curves of Wu's figure, indicating her sexual attractiveness to Yan. But Wu herself also projects an erotic gaze upon herself, objectifying her own body. Wu has never asked Yan to have a serious relationship with her, but she sends his girlfriend Shen a photo that was taken when she and Yan were having sex. Wu also records the encounter and threatens Yan that she will release it to the public unless Yan

agrees to give her the job of the talk show host. When she threatens Yan, Wu also tells him that she slept with the president of the press to get a job for his ex-wife, Yu. Her "help" makes Yan feel even more guilty, and he agrees to give up his job as a talk-show host. Although the film does not actually show the sexual act between Wu and the president of the press, Wu's body is emphasized again as the central object of attraction for both the male characters and the audience.

Feng's treatment of the male characters reflects his ambivalence as well. The male characters in these two films pay the price for their affairs because they lose control over the female characters in the film. However, by presenting the women figures' spiritual and physical dependence on them, these male characters return to a central role, with which male spectators can easily identify, as Mulvey claims.

In the last sequence of *A Sigh*, after answering the call on the beach, Liang turns to face the camera with a scared expression, suggesting that he is still stuck in a double life between his wife and mistress. At the end of *Cell Phone,* Yan is sitting on the couch with messy hair, a pale face, and empty eyes. To promote the newly released mobile phone, Yan's nephew, a saleswoman at an electronics company, takes a photo of Yan, which ironically displays his scared face to the audience.

Despite the presentations of these upset men, male dominance is still hidden in the film's storyline. Feng implicitly shows the central role of male characters in four ways. First, he differentiates the plots of the two films through a principle connoting the concept of *karma.*[14] In

[14] Karma, a term within Hinduism, indicates the principle of causality: good deeds lead to happiness and luck while bad deeds generate punishment and misfortune. As Traleg Kyabgon explains in his *Karma: What It Isn't, Why It Matters*, "In its early phase, karma referenced a fixed universal order, similar to the Western idea of natural law, and it contained ideas of divine sanction and governance, and following on from that, ideas about one's proper position and duty within that order. Straying from this structure was considered an abrogation of duty, one's karmic duty, and such a deviation from one's proper station and role was duly punished" (2).

A Sigh, Liang experiences deep agony in the double life he leads between his wife and mistress. One line explicitly delivers his regret for the affair, "I thought it was a path to new life, but now I know, it is a dead end!" At the end of the film, Liang chooses to go back to his wife's side and connects with his family again. Compared with Liang in *A Sigh*, Yan in *Cell Phone* has never felt guilty about the three women he has cheated on. In the end, he loses everything, including his job, family, and even his health. Seemingly, the extent of the failures of the male characters in these two films depends on whether they are apologetic about their affairs. As long as they decide to go back to their respective families, women are always prepared to welcome them back again. That is to say, these unfaithful husbands can always be redeemed from a loss of everything as long as they show a remorse.

Second, Feng's comedic presentation of the male characters' lies helps them survive a potential break-up of their marriages. In the two films, there is a duplicated scene when the male protagonist lies to his wife or girlfriend. In *A Sigh*, Liang returns home from his rendezvous with Xiaodan in the evening. His wife, Song, suspects that he is hiding something because he is supposed to arrive home early in the morning. Faced with his wife's query, Liang seems embarrassed, which suggests that he is feeling guilty for cheating on his wife, and he even appears to be about to tell the truth. However, after a short silence, he reluctantly tells his wife that he was invited to a dinner party held by his boss, a successful film producer. At the imaginary party, Liang meets a businessman who admires him very much. The businessman persuades Liang to drink a lot of wine, which is considered good manners at a Chinese table. Although uncomfortable, Liang drinks all of the wine until he gets drunk. When he wakes up, he finds that he has been sleeping in a sauna room, which is a typical social scene in China but is also known for prostitution. Liang concludes his story with a confession, "I don't want you to

misunderstand me, so I didn't bring it up when I got home." Feng uses a point-of-view shot to present Liang's sincere face to the audience. Liang's angry wife calms down very quickly when she hears Liang's explanation. She even begins to blame the fictitious businessman who had forced her husband to drink. She apparently believes her husband and accepts the party story.

Feng shows a strikingly similar scene in *Cell Phone*. Yan is searching for a chance to talk to his mistress, Wu. He pretends to look for the newspaper and enters the bathroom while his girlfriend, Shen, is cleaning the hairs off Yan's razor. Yan enters the bathroom and calls Wu in haste. However, during the call, Shen runs into the bathroom suddenly with a bloody finger having been cut by the razor. Unguarded and scared, Yan stands up, and his cell phone drops to the ground. Aware of his strange behaviors, Shen asks him why he is making a phone call in the bathroom. Feng does not detail what happens following the scene in the bathroom and thus creates suspense: how will Yan explain his cheating to Shen? The next scene relocates the two characters in the living room. Shen is sitting on the couch, and Yan is burying his face in his hand, indicating that he is guilty or embarrassed. It seems that Yan has confessed to an affair with Wu. However, Shen angrily asks Yan, "Why did you call Yu's brother behind my back?" So the audience is told that he had been calling his ex-wife's brother. Shen is angry because Yan seems to believe that she will get mad at him for getting in contact with his ex-wife. The plot twist creates a comedic effect because of Yan's unexpected lie.

In these two scenes, Liang and Yan have similar facial expressions and vocal tones. They both successfully lead their mates to believe them: they do not mean to lie but are merely trying to avoid unnecessary battles. However, Feng has revealed their affairs previously, so the audience knows that they are lying. When the two characters' embarrassed faces indicate a confession, the viewers of the film are surprised and find it amusing to see they create a

deliberate lie in such a short time. The lies contribute to the development of Feng's witty and elaborate characters, one of the best known elements of his films. Utilizing humor, Feng decreases the negative emotions that the audience may feel toward these cheating male characters.

These two similar scenes and the response they evoke from the audience illustrate the pleasure of scopophilia as Mulvey defines it. She explains the pleasure as followed:

> The mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy ("Visual Pleasure" 17).

Feng makes use of this sense of separation and amuses the audience by presenting the male characters' lies through boyish charm. In a way, audiences are led by Feng to stand by the male characters' side because they are not expected to criticize these cheating husbands any more.

Third, male dominance also manifests in the commentaries that Feng provides in this film. After Yan divorces, Feng uses a voiceover to reveal Yan's view on choosing a spouse. "Yan tells Fei Mo that it is very passionate to be with Wu, but she is the girl who always thinks of herself. Shen is different because she will consider other people." In the scene mentioned above where Shen is cleaning the hairs off Yan's razor, Yan is touched and says, "You are such a thoughtful and family-oriented woman, just like my ex-wife. It seems that I am always looking for the same kind of woman." He has told Wu straightforwardly that "I cannot marry you." Wu provides him sexual pleasure but is excluded when he searches for a future wife. In Yan's mind, a woman to marry and a woman to keep as a mistress are different. In his double life, he can enjoy a mistress' body while having a girlfriend take care of his career and family. Feng puts

Yan in a position to judge and classify the women according to their usefulness. In this way, Feng develops the narcissistic aspect of visual pleasure as Mulvey argues.

Last but not least, Feng reflects on the extramarital relationship from a male-centered perspective, excluding men from any moral denunciation. In *Cell Phone,* Yan's close friend Fei Mo repeatedly claims that affairs are trouble. However, he also has a romance with a young graduate student. After the affair is discovered by his wife, Fei tells Yan that he is jealous of people living in ancient China, in which a man desiring to enter the state bureaucracy had to take the imperial examination. Once he was selected for the state exam, he had to travel to the capital to take the examination. In the ancient era, it would take several years to get to the capital and return home. Fei believes that when a man came back from the capital, he could describe the trip freely as he wanted because the capital was too far from their hometowns and none would know what really went on. Fei suggests that even though these men may have had extramarital affairs on the way, their wives would not be able to discover or verify anything. But nowadays, due to technology such as cell phones and other communication devices, people are too intimately connected. Fei never reflects on his mistakes but complains about the technology. He blames cell phones, rather than his own cheating, for the uncovering of his affair. Man is portrayed as one who does not have to consider ethical issues.

Feng uses the aftermath of the double life to reveal the risks of extramarital affairs for men: endless chaos and the loss of everything. At the same time, he portrays men as the biggest victims in his films while he simultaneously neglects to address the injury female characters suffer. This tendency results in an imbalance in the power relationship between men and women.

Feng's general perspective on women in the early years of his career can be traced in the literary works of Wang Shuo, one of the most influential Chinese writers of the 1980s. *A Sigh* is adapted from Wang's unpublished screenplay called *Embarrassment*. Earlier in 1994, Feng made the film *Lost My Love* based on a screenplay combining Wang's novel *Stewardess* with *Lost My Love*. In 2013, Wang collaborated with Feng on the film *Personal Tailor* as the scriptwriter. The film shares a similar storyline and characters with Feng's first Chinese New Year film, *The Dream Factory*. Wang deeply influenced Feng, especially in his characterizations. Because of Feng's close collaboration with Wang Shuo, the witty and sarcastic dialogue and images of marginalized and alienated small, urban characters that characterize Wang's writing also became a hallmark of Feng's films (R. Zhang 33). Zhu Lidong's comprehensive examinations of female characters in Wang Shuo's works provide insight into his attitude towards women. Wang Shuo's portrayal of female characters echoes traditional Chinese male supremacy, which has oppressed women for thousands of years. As Zhu argues, "they enter the world of his novels as some patterns or genres and become the prolocutor of some conceptions (L. Zhu VI)." The above statement partly explains Feng's perception of his female characters in his films adapted from Wang's novels, such as *A Sigh*. Unlike Wang Shuo, Feng shows women's independence and courage. However, male supremacy still dominates his films inexplicitly.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BANQUET: THE SPECTACLE OF A WOMAN CHALLENGING A MAN'S EMPIRE

In 2006, Feng created *The Banquet*,[15] a retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Chinese context. This historical costume drama is Feng's first effort at entering the international market. Unlike the Hollywood mainstream films mentioned in Mulvey's argument on visual pleasure, *The Banquet* highlights women's power, which is central to the film's storytelling.

The Banquet was made within the context of intensified globalization, which was the most immediate motivation for Feng to create this epic. Challenges, especially those presented by Hollywood, and opportunities arising in the international market, coexist within globalization. Hollywood had dominated the international film market by producing "transitional films." David Hancock, Head of Film and Cinema at IHS Screen Digest, explains that "Hollywood is making films that have fairly universal ideas and themes, they're not really culturally specific" (qtd. in Brook). The themes of these films tend to concern human beings in general, not just Americans, so that they attract a broader audience.

These transitional films pose a serious challenge for countries like China in their attempts to develop their state's film industry on a global scale. In their paper "Hollywood Globalism Strategy and the Development of the Chinese Film Industry," Yin Hong and Xiao Zhiwei argue that, from a globalist perspective, the U.S. exerts a much more significant influence than other countries do (42). American popular culture, represented by Hollywood films, plays a major role

[15] *The Banquet* is titled *Legend of the Black Scorpion* in the United States.

in the world's mass culture (Yin and Xiao 42). This dominant role of Hollywood presents a major obstacle for Chinese filmmakers even in their local market.

In response, some Chinese filmmakers have tried to compete with Hollywood by exploring the possibility of producing films rich in regional and national culture that would also meet international expectations. In his paper "Globalism, Hollywood and Ethno Films," Yin observes that when Chinese directors first tried to introduce their films to Western audiences, they found an effective strategy in stylizing Chinese history, culture, and traditions. Usage of well-known Chinese elements such as the Peking Opera, traditional Chinese weddings, the Great Revolution, and Beijing's Sihe Courtyard helped bring about a new kind of Chinese film with magnificent scenes designed to attract as many audience members as possible, similar to Hollywood's strategy (Yin 100). China's Fifth Generation directors successfully won the attention of Western film audiences and critics with Chinese historical films such as Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern, Judou* as well as Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993).

However, these films are acclaimed for their artistic value rather than any notable box office revenues. To achieve the dual goal of highlighting Chinese culture while also attaining commercial success, filmmakers draw inspiration from ancient Chinese stories full of war and turmoil, which can be more alluring to film viewers and thus result in greater commercial success. Martial arts have come to the attention of Chinese filmmakers due to their consistent popularity around the world. As early as the 1970s, Bruce Lee, one of the most prestigious martial artists, appealed to a broad audience worldwide with hits such as *Way of the Dragon* (1972), and *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Acclaimed for his martial arts skills, Lee colored the West's vision of the East and challenged the stereotype of Asians in Western cinematic practices. To explain the prevalence martial arts in Asian films, Ko Yu Jin argues that although the image

of the Asian martial arts master is a well-worn cinematic cliché, the cliché "has enjoyed a remarkably sustained life largely because it has so many dimensions and is continually being revised" (1,3).

In 2000, Lee Ang, one of the most renowned Asian directors in the West, made *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The film, adapted from Wang Dulu's martial arts novel of the same title, tells the story of love and hatred among three accomplished swordsmen and women. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* impressed Western audiences and film critics with its ravishing images, traditional Chinese philosophy, appealing martial arts, and other uniquely Chinese elements. The film won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and two Golden Globes in 2000.

In 2002, director Zhang Yimou released the film *Hero*, considered the first Chinese blockbuster ever. The film is set during the Chinese Warring States (400-221BC), a bloody and chaotic period. With a production cost of 30 million dollars, *Hero* was the most expensive project of its time. It was also one of the highest-grossing motion pictures of the year, earning 177 million dollars worldwide ("Budget and Box Office"). Its success gave rise to the Chinese blockbuster, a genre known for such features as its setting in ancient China, magnificent spectacles of war, display of Chinese martial arts, and plots involving complicated romantic relations. While the visual sensation of war spectacles was aimed primarily at Chinese audiences, the display of Chinese history and culture was a way of broadening the film's appeal to international audiences. Visually appealing dynamic plots and the inclusion of heroic characters soon became a widely accepted blockbuster formula in China.

In 2006, following the blockbuster formulas created by Lee and Zhang, Feng made *The Banquet*. Feng's aspiration of the international market contributes to the production of the film, a

milestone in his directing career. As Zhu argues, "*The Banquet*'s melodramatic narrative, sparse dialogue, and the whisper-quiet delivery contrast sharply with Feng's accustomed witty urban satire" (Y. Zhu 207). Aiming at a wider audience, Feng combines a Western storyline, exquisite visual elements, and Chinese culture in this film.

In terms of storyline, *The Banquet* is a remake of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Chinese context. Possibly the most well-known English author and dramatist, Shakespeare is recognized by readers around the world. Therefore, Shakespeare's works have become a platform for filmmakers who want to make their voices heard internationally. In her conversation with Sun Bo, Dai Jinhua points out that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, Shakespearean adaptation has developed into an omnipresent cultural phenomenon, especially in non-western countries (3). She exemplifies her idea with the Shakespearean adaptation made in Japan and Turkey. In 1957, one of the most prominent Japanese directors Kurosawa, released his film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth—Throne of Blood*. The film worked as a symbol for Japan's policy 'Departure from Asia for Europe (Dai and Sun 3).' In 2012, Turkey staged a localized version of *Hamlet*, which became a cultural endorsement for joining the European Union (Dai and Sun 3). Shakespeare's plays provide a strong framework to be injected with the producer's authentic cultural elements. Based on this reasoning, if the filmmakers can collect sufficient funds, a blockbuster adapted from Shakespeare seems to be the perfect combination of the Hollywood style and authentic Chinese culture.

What is more noteworthy is the visual spectacle in *The Banquet*. Displaying Chinese history and culture serves as a way of broadening the film's appeal to domestic and international audiences. To join with other prominent Chinese directors, including Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, Feng brought out his first historical epic film, *The Banquet* (Y. Liu 175). As Constantine

Santas argues in *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster*, epic film constitutes "an embodiment of aspirations, hopes, fears, and other collective emotions and feelings," and "therefore is and must be primarily valued for its mythic dimensions above and beyond its formal properties or its all too obvious commercial character" (2). Santas also points out that, in the film industry, epic has become a catchword usually associated with "size, action adventure, casts of thousands and special effects" (Santas 13). The term epic has become interchangeable with blockbuster, a genre aimed at attracting large audiences (13) Thus, the commercial aspect of epic films blurs the boundary between artistic forms. Santas explains the ambiguity embedded in an epic film as follows:

> It is not strictly speaking a literary product, though some of its plotlines have been borrowed or adapted from literary epics, nor is it an art film, made for and by a distinct film group or school…but the overwhelming majority of epics are movies made to appeal to large audiences and hence are mainstream, commercial ventures mindful of box office receipts. (15)

The Banquet, adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but set in ancient China, features lavish images and a prevailing film marketing strategy. Hence, it fits well within the definition Santas holds. Feng intends to engage with a wider audience by mixing Chinese culture and Hollywood blockbuster formulas, especially visuality.

Feng's obsession with the visual experience in *The Banquet* originates not only from marketing needs but also from the difficulty he encountered with his previous works, especially his Chinese New Year films. As mentioned above, Feng has gained popularity and wide acclaim for his cynical humor and impressive characters. However, it is difficult to translate his humor for non-Chinese audiences. Zhang elaborates on the notion of "untranslatability" in the context

of globalization: “The untranslatability of Feng’s humor relating to China’s present reality reveals the poignant fact that even though the world has entered an age of globalization, the interaction of culture between the modern East and West is often only unidirectional (133-134).” Zhang also argues that this one-way communication result from “the perpetuation of cultural imperialism,” and “an Orientalist perception of the East in Western media and culture (134).” Therefore, although he is extremely good at creating linguistic manipulations, Feng has struck a compromise to pursue the visual spectacle, which is more popular in the international market. These visually appealing dynamic plots have become a widely accepted blockbuster formula in Feng’s works.

In the framework of Mulvey’s theory, *The Banquet* shows a reciprocal relationship between visual spectacle and the narrative. Mulvey separates the visual experience from the narrative because of the heterosexual division. As she explains, “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline to freeze the flow of action…” (“Visual Pleasure” 19). However, this sustained dichotomy is destroyed in *The Banquet*, where a female character plays the central role in both spectacle and narratives. Here, Feng bestows the role of moving the story forward on the heroine, Wan’er, who represents a development in Feng’s perspectives on women.

The film is set in the era of the Five Dynasties and Ten Nations (907-979), when China was divided. The crown prince, Wuluan, falls in love with a girl named Wan’er who has been his friend since childhood. However, his father, the emperor of the country, marries Wan’er instead, and she becomes the queen. The heartbroken prince flees to the Wu district to avoid seeing the couple. While he is gone, his uncle, Li, murders his father, usurps the throne, and marries

Wan'er. When Wuluan learns the truth, he decides to come back to avenge his uncle for his father's death. His goal of revenge is finally achieved at a banquet, from which the film draws its name.

In *The Banquet*, there are two major female characters: Wan'er, the heroine, and Qingnü, the Ophelia figure from *Hamlet*. In his insightful article "A Thousand Universes: Zhang Ziyi in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*",[16] Woodrow Hood explains the central role of Wan'er as follows: "While Shakespeare's Gertrude is reduced to inaction and textual marginalization, Empress Wan's actions drive *The Banquet*'s plot; through her two-faced, poisonous plans, she functions as the dominant agent in the destruction of the entire court" (3). Qingnü is the daughter of Minister Yin and deeply loves Wuluan. In contrast to Wan'er, Qingnü plays the lone role of a "sexual object" and an "erotic spectacle," as Mulvey describes ("Visual Pleasure" 19).

Regarding the storyline, one of the biggest changes Feng made to Shakespeare's play was the relationship between Prince Wuluan and Queen Wan'er. In the original work, after murdering his brother, Hamlet's uncle married his sister-in-law, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. In *The Banquet*, Wan'er turns out to be the lover of Wuluan. Central to *The Banquet* is the relationship between Wan'er and Wuluan. Wan'er plays the role of lover, mother, and protector of Wuluan. As Ko argues, "However, Feng's representation of Hamlet/Wu Luan is also mediated by another well-worn cliché that has enjoyed a remarkably long life in the West: the effeminized Asian male" (3).

The first conversation between the two characters after the death of Wuluan's father reveals the complexity of their relationship. At the reunion, Wuluan questions Wan'er's infidelity to his father and her marriage to Li. This dialogue is a reworking of the conversation

[16] Zhang Ziyi is the actress playing the role of Wan'er.

between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude, in Act III of the original play, in which Hamlet kills Ophelia's father, Polonius, and slanders his mother for her betrayal of his father. However, the conversation in Feng's film reveals Wan'er is making a sacrifice unknown to Wuluan.

WAN'ER. You sound a little hoarse. Why are you wearing such a strange mask and a battered old sword case? What has happened to you?

WULUAN. This is a question I should be asking you.

WAN'ER. What have you heard?

WULUAN. Did I come back to grieve for my father or to congratulate my step-mother?

WAN'ER. Do not use such a cruel tone of voice against a helpless woman. I have sacrificed more than enough for you and your father.

WULUAN. But my father's spirit still wanders restlessly outside the palace gate. Empress Mother, look into my eyes and tell me. Did my father really die from the sting of a scorpion?

WAN'ER. Wuluan, the pain in your eyes breaks my heart. Don't ask so many questions. Don't think too much. Promise me? The best way to soothe your father's spirit is to make sure we are both safe, especially you.[17]

In this scene, Wuluan kneels before Wan'er like a defenseless child. Wan'er, wearing a bathrobe, hugs him with tears in her eyes. At this moment, she plays a maternal role, gently comforting him in his sadness and clarifying the situation for him. Wuluan appears to be infantilized by Wan'er, the most powerful female character in the film (Ko 4).

To transform Wan'er into a protector in the relationship, Feng visualizes three elements: sex, violence, which is martial arts in this film, and desire. All of these are typical of a

[17] The quote is drawn from the English subtitles of *The Banquet*.

blockbuster aiming to grab the attention of the audience as quickly as possible. Since Emperor Li intends to assassinate Wuluan to secure his throne, Wan'er pleases Li with sex in the hope that he will spare Wuluan's life. In the film, there is a scene when Emperor Li slides his hand into Waner's clothing, but she stops him and asks, "Could you let Wuluan go?" He asks her in return, "Could you let go of my hand?" Wan'er succumbs to his words and closes her eyes. Through a close-up of Waner's face and breast, the audience can infer what happens next. Wan'er's helpless situation is revealed through this shot and the lines. She is not only gazed upon by Emperor Li, but also spied on (Cheang 11). Wan'er's intention to save Wuluan through compromise with Emperor Li, Li's cruelty, and Wuluan's gloomy destiny are all conveyed through this image.

Additionally, as the queen of two emperors, Wan'er is also rendered a signifier of supremacy in the court. There is a scene in which Wan'er is about to bathe. She walks into the water, a giant pool covered with rose petals. This scene easily engages with the Chinese audience by reminding them of a famous female figure in Chinese history: Yang Guifei, the favorite concubine of Emperor Tangxuan of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). A renowned poet, Bai Juyi, composed a widely known poem called "*Changhen ge"* or "Song of the Everlasting Regret" to commemorate their love story. In the poem, there is a sentence depicting Yang's bathing, "She bathed in glassy water of warm-fountain pool, which laved and smoothed her creamy skin when spring was cool" (Xu 59). Feng uses the similarities between Wan'er and Yang Guifei to illustrate that she is a trophy for the winner of the throne.

Martial arts also contribute to the visual feast the film offers. In *The Banquet*, Feng uses redundant close-ups and slow-motion shots to show martial arts maneuvers, along with the characters and the environment, such as the bamboo groves, snowfields, and the palace. Feng

makes Wan'er an accomplished martial artist. He presents Wan'er's martial skills to illustrate the state of the relationship between Wuluan and Wan'er. In their first reunion mentioned above, Wuluan opens his sword case, and Wan'er pulls out a dagger hidden in it. Next, they engage in a flirting combat, but Wuluan loses. This sequence reveals not only Wan'er's superb martial arts, but also her expectation of Wuluan. A dialogue after the combat shows her image of Wuluan as follows:

> WAN'ER. When your father allowed you to pursue arts in the Wu district, I opposed it. To me, a man shouldn't be a lonely musician, a product of warm hills and soft steams. A proper man is a prince who rules over his kingdom with strength and courage.
>
> WULUAN. That is only your idea of man, Empress-mother.
>
> WAN'ER. But you have responsibilities. They're bestowed upon you by heaven above, passed on to you by your ancestors, expected of you by your people.[18]

The above dialogue demonstrates that Wan'er initially expects that Wuluan should be a heroic emperor, rich in strength and courage. However, Wuluan's contradictory answer suggests that he differs from Wan'er's image. He is the one who requires protection in this relationship.

Wan'er's second chance to demonstrate her martial arts skills is a rehearsal for her coronation. Wuluan is asked to collaborate with a few imperial guards to perform a sword dance. However, Li secretly asks the guards to kill Wuluan during the rehearsal. When Wuluan is on the brink of being killed, Wan'er, who has been sitting next to Li, jumps onto the platform and saves him. This scene marks the switch in the relationship between Wan'er and Wuluan. Wan'er has

[18] See footnote 17.

taken Wuluan under her wing with her power. This plot seeds her later intrigue aimed at the throne.

Martial arts Wan'er obtains brings her the central role in the narrative of the film. The significance Feng attributes to Wan'er is similar to the treatment of female characters in Lee Ang's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In an interview with *American Cinematographer* magazine, Lee expresses his confusion regarding the masculinity in traditional martial arts films.

> The martial-arts genre is traditionally very macho, but this film [*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*] has two very important female leads, [Xiulian Yu] played by Michelle Yeoh and [Jen Yu] Zhang Ziyi. They are the anchors of the movie, and although other martial-arts films have strong female characters, they are not usually the focus of the story. Whether this is because of the material, the filmmakers, or the intended audience, I don't know. (Williams 50)

Lee's response to his confusion is to create two strong and courageous female characters in his film. Similarly, through the battle sequences in *The Banquet*, Feng presents exquisite spectacle and associates Wan'er's martial arts skills with her growing ambitions.

Last but not least, Feng visualizes Wan'er's spiritual odyssey by the colors she wears. At first, Wan'er merely seeks peace and survival. However, as the story unfolds, she further understands the dangerous situation. To protect Wuluan, the man she loves, and herself, she decides to kill Li. At the banquet when both Wuluan and Li die, she is pushed to the throne by the officials and becomes the new empress.

In her very first shot in the film, Wan'er, walking through the grand palace, wears a white dress for two reasons. First, her husband, the late emperor, has just died, and she wears a garment

to express her mourning.[19] Second, white also symbolizes her purity. When Li asks her to call him "Your Majesty," she tells him that "It's hard for me to adapt to it so quickly, brother-in-law,"[20] which expresses her refusal to accept the malicious new emperor. However, when she knows that Li has attempted to kill Wuluan, she makes a compromise by calling him "Your Majesty" and sexually pleasing him. After this act, she wears a black and gold dress, a symbol of her identity as the new empress and of her oppressed mind. When an aged general, who is loyal to the late emperor, refuses to recognize Li, Wan'er kneels down before Li to show her support for him. In her coronation as empress, she wears a red dress with golden phoenixes on it. Both the color and the pattern represent honor in Chinese culture.

Feng concludes the film with Wan'er's death, which is also presented by way of color. At first, she holds a piece of red cloth and speaks to herself, "Do you know why I like this red? Because it is the color of the flame of desire."[21] After she declares proudly that she is the only one who has survived the "fire of desire," she is stabbed by a dagger flying towards her from an off-screen killer. As she dies, she loses her grip on the red cloth, which symbolizes her loss of the throne and power.

As opposed to the powerful and vicious Wan'er, Qingnü, the Ophelia figure, appears to be nothing but a timid and feeble girl. Mulvey's definition of "traditional exhibitionist role" illustrates Qingnü's function in *The Banquet* as she is coded for visual and erotic impact ("Visual Pleasure" 20). When Wuluan learns that his father died from poisoning instead of a sting by a black scorpion, he is enraged and vents his anger by tearing apart Qingnü's clothes. Qingnü struggles to get free of Wuluan, and her bare back is exposed to the camera. In an attempt to

[19] White is the ritual color at Chinese funerals. To express respect for the deceased, the relatives and family members wear *xiaofu* or white garment, during the mourning period, which can last up to three years.
[20] See footnote 17.
[21] See footnote 17.

calm Wuluan, Qingnü shouts out to him, "I'm not her!" She means that she is not Wan'er, the woman whom Wuluan loves. But Wuluan does not stop his assault, claiming that "You are her!" Feng does not show what happens next. But following the off-screen sexual assault is a shot in which Wuluan is resting in Qingnü's arms. Qingnü seems to be comforting him without any complaints. By asserting control over Qingnü, Wuluan redeems his dignity as a man.

Wuluan is not the only character featuring a sadistic bent; Wan'er is also violent toward Qingnü. To reveal Li's crimes, Wuluan creates a short play featuring someone being poisoned to death, which is an adaption of Hamlet's play within a play, "The Murder of Gonzago." The play infuriates Li. In a blatant attempt to send Wuluan into exile, enraged Li asks that Wuluan be sent as a hostage to Khitan, a country a thousand miles away. While Wan'er is trying to diffuse Li's anger, Qingnü volunteers to go with Wuluan. Wan'er gets jealous of the relationship between Wuluan and Qingnü, so she orders the guards to take Qingnü away and flog her. Qingnü's bare back covered by scars is presented in the next shot. Wan'er comes to visit Qingnü, and she touches these scars. A close-up captures the scene in which Wan'er runs her fingers across Qingnü's back, which is covered by unsightly and deep scars.

In the following sequence, after Qingnü incenses Wan'er again, Wan'er suddenly exclaims, "Brand her face! Have her exiled to the South."[22] Branding one's face is an ancient Chinese punishment called *mo* or *qing*. The punishment is intended to humiliate criminals by ruining their faces. Qingnü's father, the crafty Minister Yin, has to beg for Wan'er's forgiveness. To protect his daughter, Yin collaborates with Wan'er to kill Li. Wan'er's threat against Yin combines two avenues through which to release the castration anxiety as described in Mulvey's argument: sadism and fetishistic scopophilia. Sadism involves torturing a female character and

[22] See footnote 17.

forcing changes upon her so that the subject of the paternal gaze can release his castration anxiety (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 22). Fetishistic scopophilia refers to transforming women's bodies into "something satisfying in itself" to look upon (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 22). However, in *The Banquet,* the torture is performed by another woman, Wan'er. Her physical persecution of Qingnü pushes the story forward and demonstrates her controlling character.

Although it seems that Wan'er is in a better position than Qingnü to challenge the male characters in the film, their same fatal endings illustrate Feng's narrative pattern. Feng depicts liberated female characters in his films, including Wan'er and Qingnü in *The Banquet*. These women, who violate the Chinese patriarchal order and seek freedom and equality, inevitably lose their battles in the end. As mentioned previously, in the scene shot of Wan'er's death, she touches the red cloth while immersed in the memory of Wuluan. She is stabbed at this moment. In her *Women in Chinese Martial Arts Films of the New Millennium: Narrative Analyses and Gender Politics*, Chen Ya-chen reads Wan'er death as her ultimate sacrifice to her love for Wuluan. "Wan'er identifies herself with a helpless woman who had sacrificed too much for her love story with Wuluan, Wan'er's life becomes blank, empty, dry, and meaningless; therefore, the young girl Wan'er spiritually 'dies' (126)."

Qingnü, although thought to be an abused role, shows her rebellious character when her father asks her to leave Wuluan. She clings to her love for him and dies for that love. To commemorate Wuluan, Qingnü dances to a song called *Yuerenge* or "The Song of Yue People" by Wuluan at the banquet.[23] Li does not intend to kill her, but he gives the poisoned wine to her as a reward for her performance. This plot point is similar to Gertrude's death in *Hamlet*. She drinks the poisoned wine that King Claudius intended to use to kill Hamlet. Qingnü always

[23] Before the banquet, Li sends assassins to kill Wuluan on his trip to Khitan, but Qingnü's brother saves Wuluan. To escape Li's hunt-down, Wuluan has been playing dead until he shows up at the banquet.

remains outside the court intrigue and devotes her unconditional love to Wuluan, so her death takes on strong tragic overtones. The two female characters' deaths illustrate their intertwining destinies. As Niamh O'Leary explains, Feng entangles the storylines and presents "a Gertrude who has many elements of Ophelia, and an Ophelia who dies Gertrude's death" (63).

As a film that follows the blockbuster format and also presents itself as an adaptation of Shakespeare, *The Banquet* subordinates the latter's cultural endeavor to the former's commercial goal. Adaptation is used in this film less as a way to reveal the universality inherent in the source text, and more as a marketing strategy aimed at appealing to Western as well as Chinese audiences. On the surface, in the film there are many Chinese signifiers, including numerous Chinese martial arts scenes, sumptuous costumes, and female characters' traditional Chinese makeup. Inspired by "The Song of Yue People," which tells a love story of a prince and a ferry girl, Wuluan writes a song of the same name, which is repeated in the film many times.

However, these cultural elements in the film only represent superficial Chinese characteristics because Feng fails to interpret and present Shakespeare's play as an authentic Chinese story when it comes to the key plotlines and characters. Instead of stressing Hamlet's defining trait of hesitancy, which keeps him from taking revenge, the director reduces his existential and epistemological struggle to the characteristic Chinese literary motif involving *jiangshan meiren* or "choice between kingdom or beauty." This means that if an ambitious character aspires to become the emperor, he or she must give up love, and vice versa. In *The Banquet*, Wuluan, the Hamlet figure is excluded from the struggle for the throne among the characters. Wan'er and Li face this difficult but purely self-centered and self-aggrandizing choice, underscoring the film's lack of meaningful character development.

Let us take Li for instance, in sharp contrast to Shakespeare's play in which Hamlet finally accomplishes his act of revenge by killing Claudius, Li commits suicide at the end of this film after learning of Wan'er's conspiracy to poison him. Before he drinks the poisoned wine, he raises his head and asks his dead brother who was killed by him.

> Li. Was it the desire for revenge that leads you through the valley of death? Or was it your melancholy that touched the heart of women so that their tenderness wove a web of protection around you? Or perhaps millions of conspiracies cannot beat a pure heart. Or maybe it is you, my brother, who has been protecting your son all along so that he can honor you with my blood?[24]

The lines echoing Shakespeare's text depict Li as a highly emotional figure. On his deathbed, he murmurs to Wan'er, "How can I say no to your toast?" He dies on Wan'er's knees, suggesting his deep love for her.

However, this seems out of character, as he killed his brother and nephew without any hesitation in order to become emperor earlier in the story. When a general taunts his authority in court, Li commands that his whole family, relatives and friends, be executed immediately. That such a cold-blooded and ruthless character ultimately dies of heartbreak may appear tragic, but it is hardly convincing. Such a mixture of sex, incest, secrecy, and conflict goes against Chinese cultural traditions. While *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be" soliloquy raises universal human concerns, *The Banquet*'s plot is driven simply by love and lust.

In terms of Feng's career, *The Banquet* is a milestone due to the attributes discussed above. By visualizing Wan'er's struggles with the male characters, Feng attributes the role of pushing the story forward to her. In *The Banquet,* Feng uses exquisite visual elements to create a

[24] See footnote 17.

perplexing and mysterious atmosphere in which its grand narrative centered on power, love, and death can unfold. He changes the subject of gaze in Mulvey's argument into a woman, and neatly connects the presentations of female characters with the narrative.

Beginning with *The Banquet*, Feng has made many epics in a similar manner. In *Assembly*, audiences can find similar scenes to those of a Hollywood blockbuster, such as *Saving Private Ryan*, produced by Steven Spielberg. *Back to 1942* (2012), a film set against China's devastating famine in 1942, impresses the audience with the image of millions of famine victims evacuating. *Aftershock* is a film released in 2010 about the Tangshan earthquake that occurred in 1976. Feng spent 30 million RMB on the special effects in this film to recapture the disaster scene ("The Special Effect"). His latest work, *Youth*, is acclaimed for its graphic portrayal of the China-Vietnam War in 1979. The *Banquet* prepares Feng to make the films set in modern China but with the same stunning visual elements as those of his epic works, such as *I Am Not Madame Bovary* to be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

I AM NOT MADAME BOVARY: A COMPREHENSIVE EXAMPLE OF FENG XIAOGANG'S MALE GAZE

A Sigh and *Cell Phone* illustrate Feng's ambivalent attitude towards women through narrative, while *The Banquet*, thought to be Feng's effort to enter the international market, presents a woman's spiritual odyssey in the manner of a Hollywood blockbuster. Despite the increasing prestige Feng has gained over the years, the oscillation that marks his attitude towards women continues. *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (*Madame Bovary* henceforth), Feng's recent work released in 2016, incorporates his constant narrative pattern with his stylized cinematography. Compared with his previous works, the failure of the rebellious female character in *Madame Bovary* provides a deeper insight into the status quo of Chinese women. Visually, the epic battle scenes and sumptuous costumes no longer dominate the spectacle in this film. Instead, Feng uses the shapes of the images to express his commentary on the social issues with which this film is concerned. However, because of the leading role he assigns to a woman in *Madame Bovary*, Feng's ambivalence towards women further perplexes the audience. A review from *The New York Times* calls the film "a not quite successful formal experiment in adapting a best selling novel" (Glenn).

Madame Bovary tells the story of a poorly educated woman, Li Xuelian, and her journey to seek justice. The film is adapted from the novel *I Did Not Kill My Husband* by Liu Zhenyun, one of China's most celebrated writers. This chapter discusses the character development of Li on the basis of Mulvey's idea of male gaze. On the one hand, the entire story unfolds around Li's

search for justice. Li takes the role of the central character who pushes the story forward. On the other hand, as her journey goes on, she eventually becomes the object of the male gaze. Her body is presented on the screen, and male characters can make erotic sense of her. Her quest turns out to be in vain as well.

Among Feng's works, *Madame Bovary* most directly illuminates his perspective on women because men play the leading roles in most of his previous films. Among his Chinese New Year films, most of the impressive characters are male, such as Yao Yuan in *The Dream Factory*, Yan Shouyi in *Cell Phone*, and Han Dong in *Sorry Baby*. In 2010, Feng made his first film centering around a female character, *Aftershock*, based on Zhang Ling's novel of the same name, tells a story set in the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. A Chinese woman named Li Yuanni painfully decides to abandon her daughter in the rescue after the earthquake. However, her daughter Fang Deng survives, but leaves her mother to avenge being quit in the ruins. In 2008, thirty-two years after the Tangshan Earthquake, Fang Deng finally forgives her mother, and the family reconciles.

Although the film depicts the story of a mother and daughter, it does not focus on the gender imbalance that Mulvey discusses in her male gaze theory. Most of the male characters in the film, such as Fang Deng's adoptive father and Yuanni's son, are depicted as upright, compassionate, and diligent. They each act in the same way: a catalyst for the reconciliation of Yuanni and her daughter. The bright side of human nature in the face of natural disaster becomes the theme of the film. Thus, *Aftershock* does not provide much information about Feng's viewpoint on women despite its focus on female protagonists.

In comparison with *Aftershock*, *Madame Bovary*, an illustration of the battle between man and woman, provides a clearer insight into Feng's ambiguous attitudes towards female

characters. In the film, Li Xuelian and her husband, Qin Yuhe, pretend to end their marriage to obtain an apartment only available to single people. But Qin moves into the apartment with another woman when their divorce papers go through, thereby making the fake divorce a real one. Li, cheated and betrayed, goes on a legal journey to overturn the divorce. But her request for the reversal is not supported by the local government, and she is even put into prison for obstructing the police. When weary Li is about to give up the lawsuit, Qin slanders her as "Pan Jinlian," an adulteress figure in Chinese culture similar to Madame Bovary in Western literature. Enraged Li decides to fight to the death to clear her name. The determined woman seeks help from all levels of the Chinese bureaucracy, from the local up to the national level. Her decades-long campaign involves an increasing number of governors and officials. During her last effort to intrude into the Great Hall of the People, where crucial national conferences are held, to seek justice, the governors inform Li that her ex-husband Qin has died in a traffic accident. This news means that she has to stop her quest for fairness, as the defendant in her case is deceased. The film ends with Li staying in Beijing and opening a small restaurant where she will work for the rest of her life.

To make Li the anchor of the narrative, Feng differentiates her from the conventional female characters in his films. Throughout the story, Li has two legal claims: overturning the fake divorce and clearing her name from being associated with "Pan Jinlian." In the film, Feng changes Li's motivation for the fake divorce, making the character more materialistic and less maternal compared with that of Liu's original book. In the novel, Li and Qin divorce to circumvent China's One Child Policy, which strictly mandates that every couple may have only one child. The policy had been a significant part of China's population planning since the 1980s, but was terminated in 2016. Li already has a son when she finds out that she is pregnant

unexpectedly, but she desires to keep the second child. Therefore, she agrees to divorce to become single again so that she can have the baby legally. In Feng's film, Li's motivation for the divorce switches to acquiring the apartment. Only if Qin becomes single again can he get the desired apartment offered by his company. Because of China's soaring housing prices in recent years, audiences can relate to this rationale more readily than they can to the One Child Policy. In China, many young people who are referred to colloquially as "house slaves" spend the largest portion of their household incomes on mortgages loan. At the same time, some people try to earn profits from the fast-growing real estate market, and thus they buy as much real estate as possible. In order to slow the market and secure economic stability, the Chinese government has issued a series of measures, including "Xiangouling" or regulations of limiting a couple's access to multiple houses.

However, when the measures were effective, the divorce rate rose abruptly because many couples obtained a fake divorce to buy more real estate. As a report released by the Department of Social Service and Development indicates, in 2013, after the policies limiting the purchase of real estate were issued, the number of legal divorces was 3.5 million. Compared with the corresponding figure for the previous year, there was an increase of 12.8% (qtd. in Z. Chen 200).[25] Fake divorce is not only depicted in the film, but is also an emerging real-life problem in China. As a report from Bloomberg explains, "China's rising property prices this year have been inspiring such desperate measures, as frenzied buyers are seeking to act before further regulatory curbs are imposed" ("Fake Divorce Is Path").

[25] This data is drawn from Chen Zhuyun's "Investigation of Fake Divorce under Limits on Purchase in Hangzhou." In her article, she points out that although the cause and effect relationship between the limits order and the rise in the divorce rate cannot be established directly, her ensuing investigations prove that many couples divorce to be entitled to buy more real estate.

Given this situation, Li's story is not unusual. Some of the couples mentioned above remarry after the bank approves their loan applications to buy more real estate. But there are many cases in which the couple actually breaks up after they separate, legally. In those cases, the party who does not want to end the marriage enters a dilemma. His or her divorce is legally valid but emotionally unacceptable. Li's story is one of those unfortunate cases, so she becomes representative of those couples who are struggling for a house and fall into this perplexing situation. Therefore, when Li's motivation for the fake divorce changes from a child to an apartment, she is taking part in the consumerism and materialism that are prevalent in such a society.

Besides the apartment, Feng attempts to make Li's motivation more complicated by adding the motif of miscarriage. In the original book, Li has the second child after she divorces. However, in the film, she suffers a miscarriage during the battle with Qin, now her ex-husband. The lost second baby is the reason that she insists on suing for decades as she points out at the end of the film. But her child is never seen in the film. In other words, her motherhood is never confirmed. Feng hereby renders Li as a benefit-oriented woman, which is the first departure from other female characters in Feng's previous films. As a commercial filmmaker, Feng tends to create films that appeals to a broad audience. Controversial topics like fake divorce can attract more attention from modern viewers. The change Feng makes in Li's motivation for the divorce succeeds in making her more closely related to contemporary social problems, such as housing issues. However, the materialism added by Feng to Li's character undermines the logic of the narrative, because Li is not in a good position to request justice. She is not as innocent a victim in the divorce as she claims.

Her second request, clearing her name with respect to the "Pan Jinlian" slur thrown at her, leads Li into the most significant contradiction in the film. Patriarchal society is the cause of her agony, but she still turns to that system for help. In order to correct the name given by her ex-husband, Li takes on a two-decade-long journey, which raises new questions: Why is she so obsessed with the name Pan Jinlian? Why would she spend so much time clearing her name? To answer the questions, it is crucial to provide a brief overview of women in Chinese ethics. One of the most basic principles to follow for traditional Chinese women is called "Sancong side" or "Three Obedience and Four Virtues." The Three Obedience found in *Yili* or *Ceremonies and Rites* (The Period of Spring and Autumn), refer to the "obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after her husband's death (Taylor and Choy 496)." The expression "Four Feminine Virtues" is found in *Chou Li*, or *Rites of Chou*. It includes "moral conduct, proper speech, modest appearance, and diligent work" (Taylor and Choy 496). In traditional Chinese society, women were considered dependent on the male members of the family, both physically and mentally. Obedience within this ethical system limits women significantly in all aspects of their lives.

One of the most notorious violators of these ethical codes is Pan Jinlian. Pan Jinlian appears in two literary works: *Shuihuzhuan* or *Outlaws of the Marsh* (the Ming Dynasty 1368-1644) and *Jinpingmei* or *The Plum in The Golden Vase* (the Ming Dynasty).[26] In Chinese culture, she is widely known as an adulterous woman and the murderer of her husband. Both novels depict Pan as a sex maniac who brings destruction on herself and the men around her" (Wei and Yu 1). The two novels share a similar storyline: Pan is the wife of Wu Dalang (Wu the Elder), who is an ugly dwarf nicknamed "three-inch nail (my trans.; Shi Naian)," an ugly figure like

[26] *The Plum in The Golden Vase* is usually considered the continuation of the story of Pan Jinlian in *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Both of the two literary works tell her ending: killed by avenging Wu Sung, but in different details.

Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. To get rid of her disgusting husband, she and her lover, Ximen Qing, conspire to kill him.

The authors of the two novels render Pan as an evil woman. According to Martin Huang, "what makes Pan Jinlian such an evil character in the eyes of many traditional readers is not her indulgence in sexual desire per se but the fact that she is a *woman* (emphasis mine) who indulges her sexual desires" (112). The author of *The Plum in The Golden Vase* portrays her as the bane of all the men around her. In the novel, Ximen Qing falls ill following a final act of intercourse with Pan and dies before long. Victoria Cass explains the meaning beyond the narrative as Pan murders her lover by stealing his masculine energies and ends his life in a horrendous spectacle of excessive sex (99).

The hatred towards Pan in this two novels reveals the fact that adultery was considered a felony in China. According to traditional Chinese ethics and laws, adulterous men and women, like Pan Jinlian and her lover, Ximen Qing, should pay for their wrongdoings with their lives. As early as the Qin Dynasty (221-207BC), if a husband committed adultery, the wronged wife could kill him with impunity. The First Emperor of Qin once declared, "Guard the separation between inner and outer living quarters, thus to prevent licentiousness. If a husband becomes a hog put out to stud,[27] killing him is not a crime…" (Ssu-ma 153). This statement, stressing the legitimacy of killing an adultery husband, further illustrates that licentious behaviors were punished severely in traditional Chinese society.

Killing an adulterer is legal not only for the wronged husband or wife, but also for other family members. Theiss explains the extension of the concept of chastity as follows:

[27] "Hog put out to stud" refers to a boar that breaks into other people's house, presenting a metaphor of an adulterous husband.

> Chastity was understood in this context to be a household and family concern. All members of the household and family, including servants, were considered equally responsible for defending its moral integrity, and all would be exempt from punishment if they immediately killed an adulterous intruder and the woman who betrayed the household. (101)

The importance Chinese ethics attaches to chastity illustrates the perception of Pan as evil. Pan, a woman who dares to murder her husband for the sake of adultery, deserves a cruel punishment beyond death according to traditional Chinese social order.

Both *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *The Plum in The Golden Vase* describe how Wu Sung, who is Wu Da's brother, kill Pan to avenge his brother's death. In *The Plum in The Golden Vase,* Wu Song's slaughter of Pan is portrayed in explicit detail:

> …he took the dagger and cut open her pale and fragrant breast with a single slash, producing a blood-filled cavity from which fresh blood gushed out. As for the woman: Her starry eyes blinked half open, and her two feet kicked spasmodically. Holding the dagger in his teeth, Wu Sung then pulled open her breast with his two hands and, with a popping sound, tore her living heart and entrails, dipping with blood, out of the cavity, and laid them as a sacrifice before the spirit tablet. After which, with a single swipe of the dagger, he cut off her head, as a result of which: The flow of blood inundated the ground. (Hsiao-hsiao-sheng 128)

The bloody scene evokes readers' excitement to see such an evil adulteress die. Horrible as it is, Chinese patriarchal social order fully justifies Pan's death. That also explains the widely recognized heroic image of Wu Sung, who is never blamed for killing his sister-in-law. Moreover, there are examples of the deaths of many other adulteresses in Chinese films. For

example, *Raise the Red Lantern*, mentioned in Chapter One, shows that Meishan, the third concubine of the master, is hanged after her adultery is revealed. Her death illustrates the capital punishment endorsed by Chinese patriarchal society, which stresses women's absolute loyalty to their husbands.

Given the notoriety of the name "Pan," the anger and fear Li develops in Feng's film are understandable. The only similarity that Li's ex-husband, Qin, finds between Li and Pan is that Li slept with two other men before she married Qin. But Li believes that she is completely different from Pan because she has never cheated on her husband during the marriage. Therefore, Li is determined to clear her name.

How does Li deal with this crisis in her reputation? At first, enraged Li decides to kill Qin to take revenge. But she knows that she is unable to do that because of their physical difference. As the original novel depicts, "[Qin] was over six feet tall, with bulging arms and powerful hips, which meant she might well fail in her attempt…To kill him, she'd need help" (Z. Liu 6). Then she goes to talk to two men: her younger brother and Butcher Old Hu. Although her ex-husband betrays her, the first solution that comes into Li's mind is to ask for help from another man.

The traditional ethics deeply rooted in her mind accounts for Li's faith in her brother and Hu. As the both film and novel indicate, Li enjoys taking care of younger children, including her brother, which is considered a part of traditional Chinese ethics: "Zunlao aiyou" or "respect the old and care for the young". As ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius articulates, "Honor your own elders as befits elders, and extend this honor to all elders. Honor your own children as befits children, and extend this honor to all children. Then you can turn all beneath Heaven in the palm of your hand" (29). Li believes that she treats her brother very well because she lends him

twenty-thousand RMB when he gets married. So, she takes it for granted that when she needs him, he will help her unhesitatingly.

However, her younger brother, Yingyong, which means courage in Chinese, refuses her request for help upon hearing about her plan for murder, indicating that he is not as brave as his name suggests. In both the original book and the film, Yingyong replies to Li's request for help, "I'd be glad to help you slaughter a pig, Sis, but I've never killed a man" (Z. Liu 7).[28] He explains his cowardice by pointing out the legal punishment he will receive, "The killing's easy, but I'd have to take a bullet for murder" (Z. Liu 7).[29] Although Li explains that she will be the actual killer while Yingyong holds Qin down, Yingyong refuses again by stressing that if he assisted Li, he would still go to prison.

Then Li turns to Old Hu, who has desired her body for a long time. She attempts to get Hu's help in exchange for sex. What she counts on is Hu's loyalty to the agreement, which is called *Xin* or trust in traditional Chinese ethics. Hu agrees at first because he thinks Li is only asking him to hold down Qin. However, when Hu finds out that she wants him to kill six people for her, he withdraws from their arrangement immediately. Feng captures the deal between Li and Hu with the following dialogue:

LI. Do you know who I want you to kill?

HU. I thought it was Qin Yuhe.

LI. This is the list.

HU. That's a lot of people!

[28] This dialogue between Li and her brother shows up in both Feng's film and Liu's novel, which is translated by Goldblatt and Lin. However, the English subtitles of the film are much less thorough and accurate than the English version of the novel. So I replace the quotes of the film with the novel paragraph here and in the other places for the same reason.

[29] See footnote 28.

LI. Mayor Cai Fubang, County Chief Shi, Chief Xun, Wang, and Qin.

HU. One stopover in the clink had made you dotty, my dear. How am I, one, you know, person, going to kill all them? Except or Qin, everyone on that list is an official, surrounded by people, morning, noon, and night. That would make it virtually impossible.

LI. Just kill as many as you can. You don't know how bad I feel.

HU. That's no bargain, for one roll in the hay with you I've got to kill six people. Am I some kind of mobster? (Z. Liu 47-48)[30]

Hu loses his interest upon hearing Li's extensive murder request. She seems to have learned nothing from her break with Qin. When a man betrays her, the first thing she can think of is going to another man. But the sharp contrast between Li's strong aspirations for violence and these two male characters' cowardice suggests the excessive attention Feng pays to Li's character. Feng transforms the sadism trend that Mulvey describes as an avenue to release castration anxiety. This sadism originally refers to male characters forcing changes in women and subjecting female characters to punishment (Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure" 22). In *Madame Bovary*, Li becomes the subject of the sadism because of her attempt to kill her ex-husband and some officials. At this point, Feng has mapped out a standoff between Li and the other male figures in the film.

The devastated Li takes another course: the legal system. However, her decades-long journey seeking justice is doomed to fail. In other words, her suit cannot lead to what she desires. The argument between Li and Qin originates from a fake divorce, which is immoral though it has lasting legal effects. Li is embarrassed, but her legitimate rights are not violated. Additionally, Li

[30] See footnote 28. In the original novel, Li talks to Hu about her killing plan twice. But in the film, Feng combines the two conversations into one.

believes that the slur "Pan Jinlian" imposes a negative effect on her life. Then, how does the title "Pan Jinlian" change her life? What does Li lose after Qin calls her "Pan Jinlian?" Does anyone despise her because of the slur? What does she want? Qin's apology or the absolution of the divorce? The audience may ask these kinds of questions and keep these questions in mind while they watch the film. Oddly, none of these questions is answered, not by the novel nor by the film.

A comparison between *Madame Bovary* and its counterpart might well shed light on the flaws of Feng's film. *Madame Bovary* reminds many audience members and critics of a film made twenty-five years ago—*The Story of Qiuju.* The two films closely resemble each other in storylines and characters. *The Story of Qiuju*, directed by Zhang Yimou, is a film adaptation of Chen Yuanbin's novel *The Wan Family's Lawsuit*. Qiuju, the heroine, is a poorly educated but determined woman, much like Li. Her husband, Wan Qinglai, is kicked in the groin by the Chief of the county during an argument. Qiuju believes that the Chief should apologize for his behavior, so she takes her suit all the way to the city government. Waiting for the judicial decision, Qiuju goes into labor on a cold winter's night. However, her labor is obstructed. The Chief organizes a group of men to take her to the hospital, despite the severe weather. When she returns from the hospital with her baby, Qiuju decides to reconcile with the Chief because he saved her life. However, at this moment, the local policemen come to the village and arrest the chief for the charge of "intentional tort."

Although *Madame Bovary* and *The Story of Qiuju* both center around a woman's lawsuit, *The Story of Qiuju* makes more sense regarding the law. The charge she claims is "intentional tort," which is an official legal term and refers to an intentional act of hurting. During this process, she hires a professional attorney to help her bring the case. At the beginning of the film, everyone believes that Qiuju's husband, Wan, has suffered an injury to his groin. But when

Qiuju brings her complaint to the city's court, Wan has X-rays taken, and the results show that the Chief's kick broke his rib as well. The examination transforms the argument between Wan and the Chief into a crime. Although Qiuju is confused about the result since she has changed her mind about the Chief after he saved her, she wins the case at the end of the film.

The Story of Qiuju was widely acclaimed and discussed after it was released to theaters. The film was seen as promoting the "*Fazhi*" or "rule of law" in China at that time. The story of a peasant woman using the law to protect her rights had a dramatic effect on audiences. As Geor Hintzen argues,

> Zhang Yimou's film suggests that the introduction of the new legal procedure will bring about a change in the relationships between the average Chinese citizen and the authorities, especially in the courtyard, where traditional practices of reconciliation and mediation are still deeply rooted. (48)

Zhang's film can also be interpreted from a feminist perspective. John Dragon Young articulates the meaning of the film to Chinese women, "The adventure of Qiu Ju, an upbeat one, however, shows that Zhang-after his psychological probing of the inner world of the Chinese female-still insists that the hope of a revitalized China must include an awakening of its womenfolk" (1160). The film introduces the concept of a woman obtaining justice through the legal system of China.

Compared with *The Story of Qiuju*, Li's opposition to the slur "Pan Jinlian" hardly compares with the intentional tort described above as it seems only to evoke Li's reaction. But other people present at the scene seem to stand by Li. Qin's friend, Zhang, who is drinking beer with Qin, stands up and rebukes Qin for his inappropriate words. "That's going too far, Old Qin. That's not what this is about. Don't forget the saying, 'Don't hit people in the face and don't

point out a weakness in an argument' (Z. Liu 54)."[31] Moreover, throughout the rest of the novel and the film, neither Liu nor Feng ever presents the negative effect of the slur "Pan Jinlian." Concerning the law, Li's suit is anything but a real lawsuit. Although Li's search for justice has lasted for over ten years, she has never articulated any actual charges, such as slander. She never asks for professional help from an attorney. Telling her story to powerful men is the only tool she uses.

Feng changes the ending of the story as well. In the novel, Li's story concludes with an unsuccessful suicide. The last time we see Li in the novel, she tries to hang herself in a grove but is saved by the guard who has been observing her. The guard asks her reason for wanting to commit suicide, but Li refuses to answer. Instead, they have a conversation that satirizes the selfishness of human nature:

> LI. I'll die if I want to. It's none of your business.
>
> …
>
> GUARD. If you're dead set on dying, then help me with something. See that hill over there, the other grove where the peach trees are blossoming? Old Cao has that contract, and he and I are rivals. As they say, if you can't hang yourself from one tree, try another. You won't lose much time doing that. (Z. Liu 199-200)[32]

The grove guard saves Li, not for the sake of life, but to avoid a corpse being found by his clients who pay to pick fruit in the grove. Moreover, when he knows that Li is determined to kill herself, he even suggests that she go to Old Cao's grove so that he can steal away his rival's business after her death scares Old Cao's clients. Li may feel grateful for the guard, but her savior does not care about her life. She is not an innocent victim, though she goes through such an arduous

[31] See footnote 28.
[32] See footnote 28.

journey to search for justice. The story begins with Li's selfishness. Interestingly, in the end, she is saved by another selfish person. In Li's story, everyone is an egoist, including the guard, who is a minor character.

However, in the film, Feng keeps the plot and changes the ending. After being saved, Li stays in Beijing instead of going back to her hometown and opens a small restaurant with her cousin in the railway station. In the restaurant, she meets Weimin Shi, who is dismissed in Li's case. They talk in an amiable atmosphere about their recent lives. Shi does not seem to blame Li for making him lose his job. At the very end of the film, the voiceover says,

> The past may fade, but people told her the story the way they told a joke. First, behind her back, and then to her face. Eventually, she got used to it. She even laughed along with them as if it was someone else's story, not hers.

The above ending added by Feng, suggests that Li abandons her lawsuit entirely. Hence, the quote transforms her identity again. She becomes an observer projecting "male gaze" on herself as she even laughs at her own story. The voiceover creates a didactic commentary, echoing Feng's long-lasting narrative pattern that he has repeated in *A Sigh*, *Cell Phone*, and *The Banquet*: the liberated woman who challenges patriarchal orders will fail.

When Mulvey analyzes the Western *Duel in the Sun* (1946) by King Vidor according to her male gaze theory, she captures how the central role of a woman shifts the narrative as follows: "Thus, the symbolic equation, woman = sexuality, still persists, but now, rather than being an image or a narrative function, the equation opens out a narrative area previously suppressed or oppressed" ("Afterthoughts" 37). Similar to Vidor, by showing Li's interior drama, Feng introduces her to the center of the story as Vidor did in *Duel in the Sun*. Li's battle with patriarchal society can be seen as a sign of Chinese women's awakening sense of

independence. However, Li naïvely believes that among the men in society, there must be someone who can perfectly understand her request and rescue her from her plight. She is betrayed by her ex-husband, her partner in defrauding the government. According to Chinese ethics, Li is a victim of her ex-husband's disloyalty. However, in terms of the law, Li's crime is taking advantage of the divorce policy to earn a profit. She is not innocent as she claims to be. Her second request regarding the name Pan Jinlian can hardly warrant any legal remedy. Ultimately, she manages to use the modern legal system to deal with her moral dilemma.

During the second phase of Li's lawsuit, she encounters officials from all levels of the political system. Because all of the governors in the film are male, creating a gender conflict, the government also represents the masculinity or patriarchal order in China. In *Madame Bovary*, Feng's attitude towards Chinese bureaucracy, a male-dominant system, is ambivalent, too.

On the one hand, Feng satirizes these officials by hinting at their incompetence in Li's lawsuit. All of the administrators' names are homophonic words, which makes them sound more like slogans rather than real names. For example, the name of the county court judge is Gongdao, which means "justice" in Chinese. He rejects Li's request to overturn her divorce under China's Marriage Law. The encounter between Li and Gongdao contributes to the absurdity of the story. A woman searching for justice gets a righteous judgment at the very beginning of the film, but she insists that she is a victim. Dong Xianfa, which means "understand the Chinese Constitution," serves as a standing member of the judicial committee. He refuses Li's request rudely and curses her as a "troublemaker." The way he treats Li goes against China's Constitution, which states "All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people" (PRC. Constitution ch.1, article 2). Therefore, Li, as a Chinese citizen, has the right to ask for Dong Xianfa's help, but his behavior betrays his ignorance of the Chinese constitution. Xun

Zhengyi, which means "search for justice" in Chinese, is the chief of the local courts. He is drunk when he meets Li. In a hurry to get rid of the woman, Xun says the same words as Dong Xianfa, cursing Li as a trouble maker and asking her to get out. Therefore, in this scene, a man named "search for justice" rudely and ironically terminates Li's search for justice. Shi Weimin, which means "for the people all the time," is the county chief. Shi used to be a county governor and was dismissed due to Li's case. Li kneels before his car, lifting a board reading the character for "injustice". To send her away, Shi lies and tells Li that he is Shi's secretary, then he leaves in the car abandoning Li, a representative of the *people*, in the cold. Jia Congming, which means "false intelligence," is the one who devises the plan to trick Li with a proposal from Zhao Datou. But the plan fails, which proves that he has nothing but false wisdom as his name suggests. All the officials have names except for the one Li encounters in the Great Hall of the People. Feng uses only a general word, Leader, to name the representative of the Central Committee. The Leader is the only one who helps Li in her journey, but the vague name implicates that he may not exist in reality but simply represents hope for justice.

On the other hand, Feng puts the members of the male-dominated government in a position to judge Li and her case. Feng designs a conversation between two cadres involved in Li's case, Mayor Ma Wenbin and County Chief Zheng Zhong. Mayor Ma reflects on Li's case and reveals "the elephant in the room," the reason that why all the officials refuse to help her.

> MAYOR MA. I've been thinking of Li Xuelian's case over the past few days. The government and officials are not malicious. They all wanted to do a good job and help Li. So why did they make things worse and worse? Why did it drag on for ten years? If we get down to the case, Li hasn't got the point. The court didn't make a mistake in its judgment of her

> divorce. So why are all of them afraid of her? Did we want to help her or just protect our positions? In my opinion, it's more the latter. Someone who only cares about himself isn't going to take responsibility. He's only responsible for his superiors. Not answering to the people is the worst thing we can do for our superiors.[33]

The above conversation transforms Li's case into a frequent conflict between an ordinary person and governors. As Mulvey explains, "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" ("Visual Pleasure" 15). Feng transforms Li's identity by referring to her with the term "people," a word belonging to China's political rhetoric. As China's constitution declares, "The people administer state affairs and manage economic, cultural and social affairs through various channels and in various ways in accordance with the law" (Constitution of PRC ch.1, article 2), The word "people" is thus given political implications and leads the narrative to a context far beyond Li's story. It seems that Mayor Ma and County Chief Zheng are rethinking Li's case and conclude that their earlier decisions were mistakes caused by their inappropriate working methods and procedures. As mentioned above, Li's most important motivation is to clear her name and save her reputation in the patriarchal society. However, the two cadres claim that her problem can only be solved by "correct" working procedures and methods. In conflict with the two cadres' summary, Li believes that it is the wrongdoing of a particular governor that has caused the suffering and injustice. Therefore, when

[33] I have fixed the grammatical errors in the English subtitles of the film, so the translation of the film's quote is slightly different from the original English subtitles.

Mayor Ma calls Li "people," he ignores her unique identity in this context. She becomes a bearer of meaning, a representative of Chinese people, but not a *woman*.

During the final encounter between Li and the government in the film, Li is besieged by a group of male governors in the market and told that her ex-husband Qin has died. She bursts into tears because her journey has come to an abrupt end due to the defendant's death. The scene visually shows that she has battled with not only Qin, but also the patriarchal culture, ethics, and society surrounding her.

Distinct from the sumptuous epic scenes in *The Banquet*, the visual spectacle of *Madame Bovary* is more realistic and alludes to the social context in which the film is situated. Mulvey elaborates on three subjects of gaze by defining three views associated with cinema, "…that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" ("Visual Pleasure" 26). The spectators of the visual elements in the film include the camera and the director, the audiences, and the characters within the film. In *Madame Bovary*, Feng visualizes his agenda from the perspective of the audience and the characters.

One of the most noticeable techniques audiences can find in *Madame Bovary* is the use of the circular frame which refers to multiple aspects of Chinese culture. First, the contrast between the round and the typical square shot invokes an old saying in China: Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards ("Feng Xiaogang jiedu").[34] Feng uses the circular frame to capture the story occurring in Li's hometown, a place where regulations are flexible,

[34] From "Li Lou I" of *Mencius*: Mencius says: 'Even with the sharp eyes of Li Lou and the skill of Master Kung-shu, you need a compass and square to render circles and squares true. (95)' Li Lou and Gongshu are accomplished artisans in ancient China, so Mencius cites their examples to illustrate the importance of disciplines.

and human relationships are stressed over laws, in the place where Li believes she can easily overturn her divorce (Wang and Li 72). But when the location is switched to Beijing, the circular frame becomes a perfect square, alluding to the hierarchal organization of the central government. Beijing, a metropolis rich in influence, culture, and variety has served as the capital of five dynasties throughout history, including the Liao Dynasty (916-1125), the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234), the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) ("Liuchao gudu zhiduoshao"). As the capital of the People's Republic of China, Beijing is today considered the symbol of supreme power and leadership. The shift to the square frame highlights the difference between Beijing and Li's hometown and awakens Li's hopeful view of Beijing. Feng uses a voiceover to capture Li's aspiration regarding bringing her suit to Beijing, "She had tried the county to the city. Suddenly, she decides to take her suit to Beijing. The local officials are fools. She can find wise people in Beijing."[35] It seems that Feng visualizes the impression of Beijing on the audience and on Li. However, Li confounds the prominent position of the city with the actual justice for which she yearns. As Wang and Li argue, "In Li's mind…Beijing is fraught with rules that are systemic and social orders that have remained for over five-thousand years, but not the 'justice' many audiences expect" (my trans.; 72). Feng visualizes her entry into an inhumane system, as symbolized by the square frame.

In addition to the contrast between Beijing and Li's hometown, the circular frame also evokes the pictorial experience of traditional Chinese landscape painting—fan painting ("Wo bushi panjinlian"). This visual experience brings another contrast into the interpretation of the film: traditional ethics and the modern rule of law. Hence, Beijing represents modernity in this sense. During the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), silk fans with paintings of flowers, birds,

[35] See footnote 33.

or landscapes were popular. Painting on the circular canvas gradually developed into a genre itself (Fig 1).

Fig 1: Zhang Xunli. *Fan painting: Spring Mountain and Fishing Boat*

Liu's original novel does not mention the exact location of the story, but Feng sets the story in Jiangxi Province, a place well-known for its beautiful southern scenery: watery green fields and brassica campestris flowers. Therefore, when Feng captures the landscape in a circular shot, it appears to be as if a fan painting is coming to life on the silver screen (Fig 2).

Fig 2: a still from *Madame Bovary*

These shots bring audiences intensively back to the contradiction of Li's request and her endeavor: she attempts to erase the label of Pan Jinlian, a malicious slur in traditional Chinese patriarchal society, through the system of modern law.

Last but not least, the circular frame also allows for a peeping experience when Feng captures just the figures rather than the appealing surrounding landscape. As Mulvey states, viewing a film mirrors scopophilia. "Moreover, the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" ("Visual Pleasure" 17). In *Madame Bovary*, spectators are put into a position from which they can watch Li's life through a peephole in the way Mulvey describes. This demonstrates a satire with respect to Li. Although the film narrative centers around her character's movements, she is an object of scopophilia. The circular shot defines the audience's view of the film. The shift between circular and square repeatedly reminds audiences of Li's decreasing control over the storyline and her inevitable failure in the end.

In Mulvey's theory, women's bodies are subject to male gaze as erotic signifiers in the mainstream Hollywood narrative cinema. But Feng presents Li's body in a mixed way. At first, it

seems that Feng allows Li to escape the male gaze. In the original book, Liu depicts Li's beauty directly, "She had large eyes, an oval face, and was slim-waisted with a nice bust; why else would pig butcher Hu be attracted to her like a fly to blood" (49-50). Moreover, "she'd been quite pretty as a young woman, and had caught the eyes of many men, several of whom she had dated before marrying Qin" (Z. Liu 53). However, in the film, we can only see a woman with a bulky body, a face covered by dust and messy hair. Feng eclipses Li's sexual attractiveness in the film to make a more realistic Chinese peasant woman so that the story can speak to a broader audience.

However, as the story unfolds, Feng increasingly emphasizes Li's body, especially her sexual attractiveness. After Qin betrays Li, Butcher Hu intends to take advantage of Li's trouble and tries to possess her body, but Li's revenge plan scares him. Zhao Datou, Li's classmate in high school, once pursued her when they were very young and maintains a long-lasting friendship with Li. When his wife dies, he suggests Li give up her suit and marry him. Zhao helps Li evade the surveillance of the county police and goes to Beijing with her. They have a sexual relationship on the way to Beijing. However, it turns out that Zhao is trying to stop Li from bringing her lawsuit.

Zhao, who seems to be one of the few male characters who treats Li favorably, cooperates with government officials, which becomes the most critical suspense of the film. During Li's first trip to Beijing, she goes to the place where Zhao works, a hotel. Zhao accommodates her warmly and shows Li around the city. Zhao still has a clear memory of Li and makes stir-fried tomato and egg for dinner because this was Li's favorite dish when she was in middle school. Zhao gives his bed to Li and sleeps in the storeroom. At night, Zhao slips into the room where Li is staying. Believing that she is asleep, Zhao stares at her face in the dark. In this

scene, the interaction between Zhao and Li is typical of the male gaze and female objectification. According to Mulvey, the action of peeping would lead to the male character's voyeurism and scopophilia ("Visual Pleasure" 17). Therefore, the female character functions as the bearer of being-looked-at. "As the active male gaze dominates the narrative and the woman," Cui Shuqin remarks, "the male figure occupies a position through which a sadistic voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia is satisfied" (135).

However, in the film, Li is still awake. So when she realizes that Zhao is peeping at her, she asks him to do what he came to do. Zhao refuses immediately and asks angrily, "I wonder what kind of man you take me for" (Z. Liu 65).[36] Ethics and friendship replace the pleasure brought by peeping. When he looks at Li, the first thing he thinks of is their friendship, not sexuality. As far as Li is concerned, Zhao has taken two days off and spent a lot of money to travel with her to Beijing, so sex is what he deserves from her. However, when Li takes the initiative to sleep with Zhao, he rejects the temptation. It seems that Zhao is different from Old Hu, who only desires Li's body. He respects her as a woman and a friend. Both Li and the audience believe that Zhao is a trustworthy man due to his reaction in that situation. Zhao does not take advantage of Li when she needs help.

The trust that Li has in Zhao leads to fury when she learns that Zhao is cooperating with the government to prevent her from suing. The deal Zhao has made with the government is that if he can successfully persuade Li to stop the lawsuit, his son will become a full member of the local Bureau of Animal Husbandry. Zhao does not accept Li's suggestion to do "what he wants to do" at night. But the deal between Zhao and the government reveals Li's subservient position in his eyes. Now she becomes an object that he can make use of to help his son. In her argument

[36] See footnote 28.

over the male gaze in *Judou*, directed by Zhang Yimou, Cui Shuqin highlights the complicity of the act of looking by the male protagonist in the film by stating that, "the protagonist's social positions, however, prevent the establishment of pleasure in looking and identification with the female image" (136). Similarly, Zhao's gaze upon Li in the earlier scene is complicated by his attempt to take advantage of her trust in him. The male gaze embodies multiple meanings in the contexts of Chinese films beyond erotic pleasure, as Mulvey defined it.

Li's sexuality is increasingly important in her relationship with Zhao. During the trip to Beijing, Li and Zhao have sex. The scene includes a presentation of Li's body, which is a shot of Li's bare back. The presentation supports Mulvey's argument that "conventional close-ups of legs or a face integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism" ("Visual Pleasure" 20). Moreover, the sexual relationship is the reason for Li's fury when Zhao's plan is revealed. She originally sues to clear her name from being associated with sexual immorality, but now she has become a real Pan Jinlian, proving her ex-husband right. Liu's original novel explains her upset feelings: "Being tricked was bad enough, but then she'd let Zhao have his way with her. Tricks were easily avenged, but how could she cleanse a sullied body? A soiled bowl can be washed, but not a besmirched body" (Z. Liu 176-177). The close-up of her back blatantly reveals the regression in the concept of a woman's function. Once a pursuer of justice loses control of her own identity and reputation, she becomes no more than a body to male spectators and characters in the film.

In *Madame Bovary,* Feng attempts to depict Li as a fighter against China's patriarchal society. However, compared to the original fiction, Feng's film adaptation puts less emphasis on the resistant consciousness of the heroine. Her reaction to the oppressive circumstances drives

the story, but her subjectivity is controlled by the male characters. Eventually, *Madame Bovary* becomes a film about China's bureaucracy and political culture, presenting Li Xuelian as a representative of the people.

Feng's portrayal of Li reveals his lack of understanding of female identity and his wrangle with government censorship. If the film had focused on the battle between Li and the group of governors, it would not have been released. Therefore, deemphasizing their battle and stressing the governors' care towards people probably allowed the film to survive the censorship system. As a commercially successful director, Feng has dominated the Chinese film market for years. Despite his vast popularity, he still does not have the luxury of being able to express his own ideas freely in the context of cinema.

Chinese censorship is a complicated and undeniably obscure process. In 1997, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) issued *Dianying shenchatiaoli* or The Tenth Clause of Regulations of Film Censorship. As Xu Shuo explains, "the Regulations introduces a film censorship scheme: ban certain content, regulate the import, export, distribution and screening of films through licensing and registration…and impose penalties on the ones breaching the Regulations" (42). In addition to specific forbidden elements, such as obscenity, ethnical violence, and superstition, attention has been paid to subjects touching on political and ideological concepts. The censorship committee in SAPPRFT includes both film practitioners and party cadres, so that ideology overrides artistic values. Chinese film censorship aims to restrain film's inconsistencies with the Chinese government's policies. Particular attention to politics and ideology blurs the boundary between government regulations and market demands (R. Zhang 26). The pressure on the

shoulders of filmmakers thus comes not only from issued regulations, but also from unspoken rules.

The inevitable modifications as a result of the censorship tend to distort a film. Feng's *Madame Bovary* was considered politically too sensitive. Therefore, Li's confrontation with an official at the national level was cut out of the film. The deletion undermines Li's image of a woman struggling for her reputation. The audience cannot see her incredible adventure in the film. In the original novel, during Li's first trip to Beijing, she blunders into the Great Hall of the People, the place where the most significant national meetings are held. Li meets a state cadre and tells him her story. Later on, the cadre attends a work conference in Li's province, and he harshly criticizes all the officials who once stood in Li's way to stop her from seeking justice. His speech at the conference results in the dismissal of all of the officials involved in Li's case. However, in the film, Li's encounter with the cadre has been deleted but the scenes of the conference and the dismissal are kept. This change also suggests that within the existing socio-political system, Li can count on only her "luck" to obtain the justice she desires. But the lack of a visual presentation of Li's triumph obscures her resistant spirit, which readers of the original novel can find in her actions.

Madame Bovary is not Feng's first drastic modification due to film censorship. In 2013, the China Film Directors Guild named Feng "Director of the Year." However, in his testimonials, Feng described the censorship as a "great torment" (Montefiore). As Zhang Rui emphasizes, "Feng's often implicit expressions of his agenda—to make the voices of the underprivileged 'small characters' heard and to question the rapid paces of globalization and economic reform—reflect the hardships of survival under the constraints of tightened ideological control" (14). Despite their long-time friendship, Feng and Liu Zhenyun's attitudes towards

China's censorship is divided. In an interview in June 2015, when asked about Chinese censorship, Liu said "There is not a country that does not impose censorship on artistic and literary works. Additionally, in China, the situation has improved noticeably in recent years (Ouyang)." Liu also mentions that, "In a sense, one could view censorship as an important factor in the creation of great writers and directors in China. Pressure is not necessarily always a bad thing!" (Ouyang) Feng projects the male gaze onto Li, and this gaze is shared by the audience and the system that created her situation.

In *Madame Bovary*, Feng approaches the conflicts between the two genders in terms of narrative and visuality. After Jia Congming tells the County Chief that their plan to stop Li fails and she flees, the scene cuts to the performance of an ancient Peking opera *Sanchakou* or *Divergence*. What draws attention from the audience is not only the performance but also the similarity between the plots of the Peking Opera and the film. In *Sanchakou,* the hero, Jiao Zan kills Xie Tingfang, a treacherous governor, and is exiled to Shamen Isle. During his trip to Shamen, Jiao stays in an inn opened by Liu Lihua. A general named Ren Tanghui comes to protect Jiao by secret order. However, in the night, Liu mistakes Ren for a killer, and he wages a battle against Ren in the darkness. At this moment, Jiao shows up and puts an end to the combat by clarifying all of the misunderstandings. The battle occurs because neither character knows each other's identity. Similarly, the years-long conflict between Li and the governors derives from mutual ignorance, which is like the darkness sweeping over everyone in *Sanchakou*. This ignorance can be interpreted from various perspectives. Li, firmly believing that she is the victim of her ex-husband's infidelity and the governors' wrongdoings, is ignorant of the law. Those

officials, although bothered by Li for years, have never lent an ear to Li's request. The story can also be considered a gender war, concluding with the woman's defeat.

However, Feng does not play the role of Jiao Zan, the peacemaker. He tells the story from an outsider's perspective and continues the oscillation as he does in his previous films. His attitude towards women is still a mixture of sympathy and controlling tendency. Li drives the entire story and the male fantasy on the screen. Although all of the male characters in the film try to stop her, the battles between these men and Li move the story forward. However, in the second half of the film, she eventually becomes an erotic object for male spectators as well as male characters within the film. The newly created ending even negates her identity as a woman. Neither the director nor the institution of Chinese film censorship can accept the image of a powerful woman challenging the government.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

If Feng's films are put in a broad context, it is apparent that his ambivalence and oscillation regarding female characters correlate with that of the Chinese film industry and even the entire nation at large. Feng is a director marked by a host of contradictions: commercial success and little critical attention, modern trends and traditional ethics, personal expression and government censorship, strong female characters and domineering male figures, and feminist perspective and male gaze. All of these conflicting forces determine his depiction of women in his films. Mulvey's male gaze theory makes it possible to discern Feng's mixed attitude towards women, which contributes to the uniqueness of his works.

As one of the most high-profile Chinese directors, Feng has made significant contributions to the Chinese film industry. Due to the broad popularity of his New Year films, Feng adds "going to the theatre" to the list of routine activities during the Chinese New Year holiday. However, Feng has failed to attract sufficient attention from film critics because of the "lack of depth" in his light-hearted comedies. With respect to this unfortunate phenomenon, Zhang Rui strongly defends Feng's films, arguing that his achievements fit the auteur theory because he features some of the hallmarks of a traditional auteur, such as recurrent themes, individualized cinematography, and a sustained desire for self-expression (12). Based on the concept of "authorship" by Andrew Sarris and Janet Staiger, Zhang argues that Feng is a good example of a director who works under certain constraints and pressures but also insists on expressing himself (7,13).

In the early years of his filmmaking career, Feng focused on stories of unheroic ordinary people. He implicitly expressed his commentaries on contemporary social problems in China, including extramarital affairs. Unlike ancient Chinese women who were subject to their husbands' rule, modern women are free to end their marriages (Liao and Heaton 414). In his films regarding a husband's infidelity, Feng depicts the women who bravely divorce but are penalized by traditional ethics or financial difficulty. These films tend to mirror the marriage trends in China in the late 1990s.

In the face of Hollywood's challenge, Feng shifts his focus from small, realistic themes to epic-scale dramas. *The Banquet*, adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* is his first Chinese blockbuster. The heroine, Wan'er, represents women who challenge the power and authority of men. By depicting Wan'er's physical beauty and martial arts skills as the driving force of the narrative, Feng expands Mulvey's idea of visual pleasure.

Feng's recent work, *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, seems to best illustrate his perspective on women because the imbalance between man and woman is central to the film's narrative. Li Xuelian is a brave and rebellious woman, who insists on a decades-long journey to clear her name from association with Pan Jinlian. Feng juxtaposes Li's courage with ignorance. Along with the compelling narrative, Feng's innovative shots in this film effectively capture the serious conflict in contemporary China between traditional ethics, represented by circular images, and modern trends, represented by square images.

Using the framework of Mulvey's male gaze theory, this thesis analyzes the narrative and visual elements of Feng's films to demonstrate his ambiguous perspective on women. He speaks for modern women who challenge the male-dominated Chinese society but maintains that they inevitably fail to achieve their goal. They play a central role in his films in many ways, but they

are restrained by the "exhibition" values, as Mulvey describes them ("Visual Pleasure" 20). Feng's indecisiveness echoes the complicated, ambiguous socio-cultural conditions facing Chinese women today.

In future research, the interaction between Feng and the Fifth Generation directors represented by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and other directors should be treated in much more detail. The Fifth Generation directors are more concerned with Chinese collective memory, including the Cultural Revolution, and prioritize aesthetics in their cinematic practice. Their experiences associated with the various political movements of last century, such as the abrupt ending of schooling and class struggles, play a crucial role in their artistic careers. In contrast, as a commercial filmmaker, Feng incorporates more of his personal experience and memory into his works. The shift from the collective memory presented by the Fifth Generation directors to the individualized course narrated by Feng not only sheds light upon Feng's uniqueness as a commercial filmmaker but also depicts the trajectory of Chinese cinema.

The comparison between Feng and the Fifth Generation directors underscores his tendency to present his personal experience. As mentioned previously, Feng's depiction of female characters can be traced in his autobiography. For example, the scene in the bathing room in *Youth* echoes Feng's memories of girl soldiers he met many years earlier. Further research could examine Feng's films through the frame of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Mulvey bases her argument on Freud's psychoanalysis theory. As she points out the sexual inequality in Hollywood films, Mulvey also notes that "in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem" ("Visual Pleasure" 22). Hence, research associated with psychoanalysis is of great help to reveal the influence of Feng's early life experience in his treatment of female characters.

The comparison also places Feng in a historical context. It would be overly simplistic to confine the research on Feng to his individual life experience. As one of the earliest commercial filmmakers in China, Feng faces a different challenge from his predecessors, including the Fifth Generation directors. The Fifth Generation directors, including Zhang and Chen, reflect on China by presenting the country's collective memory. Feng is more concerned with the story of the ordinary people in a China overwhelmed by increasing consumerism and materialism. This difference in the content of his films illustrates a trend in Chinese cinema: from collectivism to individualism. The depiction of the small figures takes the place of the grand narrative prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s films. In more recent years, Zhang and Chen have been competing with Feng in the sphere of commercial films. However, the well-known hallmarks of the Fifth Generation directors, including stunning images, grand themes, and elite characters, are kept in their commercial works. The Fifth Generation directors' participation in commercial practices complicates the generation transition among Chinese filmmakers. Thus, given the emerging trend in Chinese film industry, the comparison between Feng and the Fifth Generation directors provides a potential of more enriching interpretations.

Furthermore, Feng's oscillation is also a product of his encounter with social issues, including the Chinese government's censorship and market demands. For example, he deletes Li Xuelian's meeting with the state official in *I Am Not Madame Bovary* to avoid being politically controversial. Feng's treatment of female characters is thus also an outcome of his interaction with complex social issue that have arisen in a rapidly changing China. A further research, which takes into account the sociopolitical contexts Feng are situated in, will need to be undertaken.

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