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Gender Configurations in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*: Male Feminism and Its Limitation

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ABSTRACT

Although critics have traced inscriptions of feminist consciousness in the works of modern male writers, such as Mao Dun, Lu Xun, Rou Shi, Bai Xianyong and Huang Chunming, they indicate a constant condescending attitude, ambivalence, uneasiness and allegorical use of women in such writings, which mitigate their feminist intent. Feminist theory indicates that it is the distance between the male intellectuals as privileged "investigators" and the underprivileged female "objects" of their investigation that prevents them from speaking with an unadulterated feminist voice. Can a man imbued with Confucian values produce genuine feminist works? The modern Chinese film *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* (1993) seems to provide a positive answer, though with some reservation. The film is adapted from a novella based on the life experience of the novelist Zhou Daxin, whose tragic failure in his first love engendered deep empathy for his high school sweet heart, and then women in general. The deprivation of women's sexual rights that Zhou laments in his novella mirrors his own loss. The spiritual kinship between the male "investigator" and his female "object" enables him to present an ardent plea for women's salvation from a genuine feminist position. However, when Zhou turns to portray the heroine Huan-huan's victimizer, the vicious Sister Gao, he

subconsciously succumbs to the conventional stereotype of malicious matriarch, that compromises the feminist intent of his work. Ambivalence also features the gender stance of Xie Fei, a screen auteur noted for his sympathetic portrayal of women in his films. While Xie artistically creates a feminist point of view on the screen with his cinematography to reinforce the feminist strength of his film, it is, however, unintentionally weakened in his attempt to allegorize his tale. To project his view that China is enslaved by the feudalistic values that it refuses to give away, and to transform his heroine into a cinematic personification of China, he deliberately creates a "flaw" in Huan-huan's perception which leads to her own ruin. In so doing, however, the zero distance between the male investigator and the female object in Zhou's novella gives way to a condescending distance in Xie's film, which results in weakening his feminist position. In the large context of male feminism in modern Chinese literature, this study indicates both the possibility of genuine male feminism and the causes of its limitation. While personal experience, injury of personal interest, political/ideological alienation and liberal outlook may lead male scholars to take a genuine feminist stand, they tend to shift to traditional positions when their personal interest is uninvolved, as shown in Zhou's acquiescence of the misogynist stereotype of malicious matriarch and Xie's instinctive inclination for allegorical use of women. This limits the feminism in their works.

KEY WORDS

male Feminism, marginal man, allegorical intent, emotional empathy, malicious matriarch, feministic concern, feminist point of view, literary stereotype

A recurrent scene in Fifth-generation Chinese films is the wedding procession, which appears with some variations in *Yellow Earth* (1984), *Red Sorghum* (1987), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). With a girl caged in a sedan helplessly dispatched to an alien household for a loveless marriage, these scenes seem to epitomize the enslavement of Chinese women in its age-old patriarchal convention, yet feminist critics have insightfully pointed out the symbolic function of such abused women, who play the "roles of timeless characters" and serve as "the scapegoats of history" in the male composition of national allegory (Dai, "Rewriting Chinese Women" 198).[1] One critic labels such suffering female images "empty signifiers," for they "bear no relationship with the actual living conditions of real women" in contemporary China (Dai, "Invisible Women" 266). Presented often as an object of the lustful gaze of the male voyeur, such imagery of tormented beauty may even undermine the feministic concerns that it ostensibly projects.

Seemingly identical to these familiar images is the wedding scene in a Fourth-generation production *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* (1993), which also turns out to be the most artistically elaborate and ideologically compelling. In an ornately decorated boat six hefty men with stern expression forcefully ply oars in unison with the accompaniment of jubilant wedding music, played also by an all-male orchestra, to carry an unwilling girl Huan-huan to her epileptic husband. While the low angle shot of the boatmen in execution of the mission projects a bloated image of patriarchal power, the medium close-up of the bride, tears in eyes against a desolate blank, presents an emblem of female alienation. With such a prominent feminist motif, the scene,

however, belies a striking fact that seems to question the ostensible feminism it preaches: the orchestrator of such an anti-feminist show turns out to be a woman. To gratify the sexual libido of her epileptic son, the heroine Sister Xiang resorts to her wealth to tear away the beautiful Huan-huan from her lover and then traps her in a doomed marriage with her son Dunzi, despite the agony that she herself has suffered in abusive matrimony with a cripple. With female enslavement presented in juxtaposition with female malice, the film's ostensible feminist theme seems to be undercut by its misogynist undercurrents.

The complexity of the gender issue in the film, in a way, reflects the ambivalence of the gender position of Zhou Daxin's novella "The Women with Scented Souls" (huayuan 1–32), from which the movie is adapted. Zhou Daxin's work raises a passionate plea for the liberation of enslaved women through the characterization of his heroine Huan-huan. It distinguishes itself from the three aforementioned Fifth-generation filmic productions in its realistic, rather than allegorical, mode in presenting female exploitation: the story is set in contemporary China, bears a direct relationship with the actual living condition of women and is even based on Zhou's personal life experience. However, in conceiving Huan-huan's victimizer, Sister Xiang (Sister Gao in the novella), Zhou Daxin inadvertently succumbs to the cultural convention of the malicious matriarch. The novelist's feministic concerns over modern women's plight discernable in Huan-huan's victimization, therefore, may just be as genuine as his subconscious acquiescence in the entrenched misogynist discourse perceivable in Sister Xiang's characterization. Ambivalence also characterizes the gender stance of the screen auteur Xie Fei, who artistically creates a feminist point of view on the screen to reinforce Zhou's feminist message. Yet, as the following discussion will demonstrate, his intent to allegorize the tale through his adaptation, a political impulse that seems to have passed down to his Fifth-generation students, unexpectedly tones down the ardent feminist appeal in Zhou's fiction.

The word "feministic" used in this study calls for some clarification at the outset, since the term "feminism" may conjure up

multiple connotations in current gender studies in China. In her introduction to *Gender Politics in Modern China*, Tani E. Barlow hence raises the question: "What are the basic orientations of feminisms now in China?" (11). (Note the plural form that she uses here.) While most female critics' writings tend to relate feminism in contemporary China with the movement to awaken women's collective consciousness and to affirm female subjectivity, they acknowledge the exploration of women's existential plight and the indictment of female exploitation as one orientation of the discourse. It is in the light of such an orientation that I perceive the affinity of the *Scented Souls* to the feminist discourse. In the following examination of the gender configurations of the film, I first analyze the novelist Zhou Daxin in search for the source of a male compulsion to inscribe feministic concerns in his text; next, I turn to the screen auteur Xie Fei to investigate how the feminist messages in Zhou's text are reinforced by the cinematography in Xie's film. Then I will trace the literary, political, historical and cultural precedents of Sister Xiang's characterization in the age-old figure of malicious matriarch to suggest both Zhou's subconscious submission to the misogynist discourse and his endeavor to distance himself from it as an enlightened man. Finally, I will analyze the male feminism of the film in the light of contemporary feminist theory to demonstrate both its merits and the causes of its limitation.

I. The Feministic Concerns of a Marginal Man: The Case of Zhou Daxin

In recent criticism of Chinese literature, the seemingly feminist inclinations of male writers have often been suspiciously put under scrutiny. Many feminist scholars "deconstruct" and "revise" traditional readings of Chinese literature by exposing the patriarchal import in ostensibly sympathetic or heroic portrayals of women. In her study of a character type of valiant women, "the heroes among women" (nüzhong zhangfu), in *Strange Tales from Make-do Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi), Judith Zeitlin indicates that such a heroine "violates social norms to

accomplish a goal that itself embodies the highest social ideals," so that "she can be contained under the old rubric 'exemplary woman' or treated as an honorary male" (130). Likewise, in discussing a woman warrior, Lin Siniang, in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), Louise Edwards remarks that such an Amazon is "primarily instrumental in ensuring its [patriarchal power's] continued existence because the deeds she performs are undeniably consolidating the existing Confucian social and moral order" (92). Similarly, in her reading of the contemporary novel, *The Red Sorghum Family*, Zhu Ling sees in Mo Yan's celebration of female desire a foil for the glorification of a male conquest and masculinity (124–25). What lies behind these feminist readings is an assumption that works composed by men often carry a patriarchal bias, or what one might term "political unconsciousness." In her study of contemporary new wave fiction, Tonglin Lu perceives in such a patriarchal bias a new form of revived misogyny (14). Although David Wang once traced feminist consciousness in modern Chinese male fiction, he indicated a constant condescending attitude and allegorical use of women in their works that mollify their feminist appeal (236–56). In the light of such contemporary feminist scholarship, let us proceed to explore and designate the complex gender stand in the *Scented Souls*. One question that we must ultimately grapple with is whether a Chinese man imbued with patriarchal values in his education and cultural upbringing is capable of producing genuine, unadulterated feminist writings.

The film, based on Zhou Daxin's novella, was originally inspired by the author's personal life experience. Growing up in an impoverished family, Zhou once expressed worship for his mother whose endurance of hardship in destitution enabled him to pick up education and eventually to establish himself as a writer (Guo 95). Both Sister Xiang's and Huan-huan's nuptial tragedies are based on that of Zhou's high school sweetheart, an intelligent and beautiful girl, who ranked with him as the two top students in the class. But before the two lovers had a chance to unveil their mutual affection, the girl was obliged to quit school to marry an invalid for a family debt in an "exchange marriage." [2] In deep frustration Zhou soon left his

hometown to join the army. In a chance encounter with her years after her marriage, he discovered to his dismay that his high school angel had quickly deteriorated into a charmless wreck under the burden of a loveless marriage and two children with hereditary disease. In deep sorrow, Zhou picked up his pen to pour out his grief into the sensational novella.[3]

Reading Zhou Daxin's works, one feels constantly haunted by Huan-huan's shadow. A recurrent heroine in his corpus is a peerless beauty deprived of love pining away in the yoke of patriarchy. In "The Discovery of Twilight" (huanghun de faming), a lovely girl Si-si is torn away from her lover, who is a mason, to marry a wealthy man, whose abuse soon ends her life. Pathetically, when her lover carves the epithet on her tomb tablet, he engraves "My Dear Wife," claiming a wishful union that only throws in relief the agony of their loss.[4] In "Strangling" (lei), a nameless heroine, or a gendered symbol, "She," is trapped by scheme and violence into a marriage with an ugly man, who then deserts her. Having suffered endless trauma, she finally strangles her "second husband" to death when he is intent on selling her after tricking her into prostitution.[5] Sundered apart from her lover, an army officer, by the insurmountable barrier of class division, Doulin, the delicate heroine of "The Anecdotes of Butterfly Town" (hudiezhen jishi), forges wedlock with a homely bum to cover up her pregnancy. After giving birth to the son for her lover, she commits suicide to end the travesty of her marriage as well as her own wretched life.[6] In "Silver Jewelry" (yinshe), a stunning beauty, Bilan, is deprived of sex after she marries the effeminate son of a county magistrate. In her defiant pursuit of love and sexuality, she falls into a trap viciously laid out by her father-in-law, inadvertently poisons her lover and then loses her own life.[7] Nearly in all his stories the downtrodden, enslaved and traumatized heroines are beautified, idealized and eulogized. In one way or another, they all suffer a loss of love owing to economic necessity, class division, political imperatives or patriarchal conventions. In this context, Huan-huan in the "Scented Souls" emerges as a typical Zhou Daxin heroine; she and her suffering sisters in Zhou's works can all be taken as literary reincarnations of the

author's lost high school sweetheart. In composing a series of elegies for women, Zhou Daxin conveys his deep compassion for the fair sex.

In modern Chinese literature the lament over woman's fate is a recurrent feminist motif in the writings of women. As one of the most resonant pioneer feminist voices, Ding Ling, through her characters, repeatedly moans in "When I Was in Xia Village," "How miserable it is to be a woman," "It is a real tragedy to be a woman" (270, 273). In contemporary Chinese literature, Zhang Jie reiterates this motif in the epigraph to her controversial novella "The Ark:" "You will be especially unfortunate because you are a woman" (113).[8] Although this motif is also visible in the works of May Fourth male writings, such as Lu Xun's (1881–1936) portrayal of Sister Xianglin and Roushi's (1901–1931) characterization of the nameless heroine in "The Slave Mother," the allegorical intent of these works compromise their feminist significance. More relevant to Zhou's case is the sympathetic female characterization in Xu Dishan's (1893–1941) works. As if to echo Ding Ling, Xu addresses a female character through the voice of a male narrator in "The Merchant's Wife": "Your life is really full of misfortune" (50). Critics believe that Xu's sympathetic portrayals of women may be based on the model of his own mother (Hsia, 1981, 40). Likewise, Zhou Daxin's gratitude and veneration for his mother and his abiding bond to his lost lover may well have engendered his spiritual affinity to women and stimulated his feminist sensibility. The lament over women's existential plight latent in Zhou's novella is more pronouncedly spelt out in the following song that emerges in the sound track at the beginning of Xie Fei's cinematic version:

> Green are the reeds, pure is the water,
> Autumn goes and spring comes; yet my plight remains.
> Birds are flying in the sky; the boat is racing in the water,
> No way ahead, no way ahead, yet I have to move forward!

Viewed from the vantage point of contemporary feminist theory, the lament over women's fate in Zhou Daxin's writings may even carry a personal dimension. Defining gender in terms of positionality,

feminist theory indicates that "femininity" is that which "is marginalized by patriarchal symbolic order." Not only women, but also men, can be constructed as marginal, or feminine, in the symbolic structure of patriarchy (Moi 166). In recent years scholars in the Ming-Qing field have applied this relational definition of femininity for novel interpretations of literature. Indicating the social/political marginality shared by the frustrated scholar Feng Menglong (1574–1646) and the courtesan heroine Du Shiniang in his story "Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewry Box in Anger," Shuhui Yang asserts that Feng deliberately makes Du Shiniang morally and intellectually superior to assume vicariously a superior position himself (Yang, *Appropriation* 134). Similarly, pointing out Cao Xueqin's (ca. 1715–1763) empathetic identification with women as a marginal man in his study of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Martin W. Huang sees in the fictional celebration of female talents the author's spiritual need to alleviate his own frustration (Huang 94–95). This reading strategy can be applied to explore Zhou Daxin's gender stand in his female characterization.

Like Feng Menglong and Cao Xueqin, Zhou Daxin was a marginal man until he established himself as a major Chinese writer in very recent years. One of the only two children in his family who received a high school education, he experienced abject poverty in his childhood and youth. In his prose essays and prefaces to his collections, there are ubiquitously unabashed admissions of the hardship that he suffered in his early years. During his junior high school years, there were times when his monthly allowance consisted of merely fifty cents, not even enough to cover the meals. He once stole unripe wheat crops in the fields and cooked them to allay his unbearable hunger; a bowl of beef soup that a classmate treated him to remains in his memory as the most delicious food in the world (Zhou, *Cunbian shuitang* 165). His marginal status facilitates a spiritual affinity to the feminine, which is further consolidated by his bond to his high school sweetheart, the very specimen of female enslavement. The deprivation of women's love that he first witnessed in her life echoes his personal loss. In women's suffering he must have seen a mirror image of his own emotional scars

and spiritual wounds. The deprivation of a past love so haunts Zhou Daxin that in one of his stories he even creates an imaginative "Meeting Station" where souls of past lovers were granted a spiritual reunion. But before the hero and his sweetheart consummated their love, the magical illusion faded away, forcing him (or maybe the author) back to reality to despair over his lost love. In lamenting women's fate, he is, in a sense, also relieving his own frustration. His empathy for his lost lover turns into deep sympathy for the fair sex as a whole, as he wrote on the title page of a book that he sent as a gift to a friend: "In life the woman I loved was ruined by fate, so I bestow all my good wishes upon the woman in this novel, hoping her fate will never defeat her" (Guo 98). Zhou's gender identification and spiritual affinity to females lead to his following "feminist" confession:

> Comparing women with men, I see more virtues and merits in women. Their kindness, forbearance and endurance move me. I will sing praises for them, show concern for them and grant my help to them. I am not willing to create too negative images of women in my writings. (Zhou, *Cunbian shuitang* 169)

Reminiscent of Jia Baoyu's witticism that men are made of mud and women are made of water, these words convey a pro-feminist gender stand bordering on women worship. Viewed in the context of Zhou Daxin's social marginality and spiritual affinity to the feminine, his passionate elegy for women's fate in Huan-huan's characterization is not only charged with a genuinely feminist intent, but may also echo a lament over personal agony and emotional loss. To use Yuejin Wang's terminology, Zhou was in fact occupying a "feminine space" despite his male sex.[9]

II. Creating a Feminist Point of View on the Screen: The Cinematic Contribution of Xie Fei

Xie Fei, the prominent filmmaker who adapted Zhou Daxin's novella to the screen, is noted for his "fascination with female

situations that take on different forms influenced by social, cultural surroundings" (David 14). As a matter of fact, his three most well-known films in the west, *A Girl from Hunan* (1986), *Scented Souls*, and *A Mongolian Tale* (1995), all explore women's identity in modern China. In many ways the feministic concerns that Zhou inscribes in his text are cinematically intensified through Xie's cinematography.

A camera resembles a man in that it observes and presents reality from a certain point of view. While cinematic scenes are often shot from an objective point of view with the camera remaining static to record the action in a "straightforward" manner, it shifts occasionally to project scenes through the "eyes" of a character, or the perspective of the director, with what is called a subjective point of view. Such special positioning of the camera, by circumscribing the viewers' point of view, can trigger their emotional and ideological identification with the character or the director. In exploring the gender configurations of the film, this optical point of view offers us a useful angle.

The film opens with a scene of an expanse of water against a gray sky; the emergence of reeds on the sides indicates the presence of a river. On the sound track, a woman's sad song, cited in the preceding section, drifts in that laments her existential dilemma and perpetual plight. Recurrent later in the movie, the scene of her journey on the river projects her unrelenting quest for meaning and love in an unfulfilled life. The backward moving water in the scene suggests that the camera is located in a vehicle, most likely in a boat, advancing slowly on the river, whereas the lament on the sound track transmits the inner voice of a nearby woman. In combination, they strongly suggest the presence of Sister Xiang in what Noël Burch calls the "sixth zone of off-screen space": behind the camera on the boat.[10] The film opens, therefore, with Sister Xiang's symbolic journey in quest for love, a mise-en-scène motif of the work, although her presence is concealed from our view. Relevant to our discussion here is the subjective point of view that the director adopts in this scene. The murky bushes, obscure water and the hazy shores in the distance on the screen, shot beyond focal length, and probably through a gray filter, present a dismal view of the river seen through the heroine's lens, which is

further beclouded by her gloomy mood. Symbolically, the grim landscape on the screen mirrors the bleak prospect in her life journey. The camera eye is, therefore, identified with the heroine's eyes. The subjective point of view of the scene is reinforced by the sound track, which gives voice to the lament in her inner mind. Through such use of "first-person camera," [11] the viewers are made to look at the symbolic setting through the heroine's "eyes," to identify with her viewpoint and are induced to share her emotions.

The river/water image in the scene, with its *yin* connotations, carries strong associations with female sexuality. Despite the complementarity of *yin* and *yang* principles in Chinese metaphysics, Confucianism strongly valorizes *yang* over *yin* in moral terms. [12] Male fear of female sexuality, which they often blame for their own failure, leads to a negative association between women and water imagery in the patriarchal discourse. Women are believed to be endowed with an unstable "watery deposition" (shuixing yanghua), sexually fickle and wanton. A woman who overwhelms men is often called a *pofu*, a shrew, literally meaning "spattered" water (McMahon 65–66). The cultural assumption of women's lascivious nature gives rise to a popular term *yinfu* (licentious women). With a water radical constituting one part of the word *yin* (lasciviousness), the term indicates another pejorative association of water imagery with female sexuality. In classical Chinese literature sexually possessive women, such as Xue Sujie in *The Bonds of Matrimony* (Xingshi yinyuan zhuan), are often associated with liquid filth, the most pejorative water imagery;[13] only in pro-feminist works, such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), does water turn into an emblem of spiritual purity and female superiority. In their different treatments of river/water imagery Chinese scholars inscribe their ideological stands, particularly their attitudes to women and female sexuality, in their texts. The female sexual connotations of the water/river imagery are also widely visible in modern Chinese literature. In Zhang Xuan's much-anthologized story "A Corner Forgotten by Love," the heroine Cunni, upon the exposure of her love affair, plunges into a river to seek eternal peace. In Su Tong's novella "Wives and Concubines," a well serves as women's

final destination when they offend the patriarchal codes of chastity. In both cases, the female body returns to water after asserting its sexuality in violation of patriarchal codes.

With camera as a vehicle for composition, Xie Fei inscribes his gender stand, not in literary metaphor, but in the manner he projects water/river imagery on the screen. His strong interest in the feminine connotations of water/river imagery can be traced to an earlier work, *A Girl from Hunan* (Xiangnü Xiao-xiao). Adapted from Shen Congwen's story "Xiao-xiao," the film depicts the traumatic experience of a teenage wife, who was seduced, impregnated and then deserted by a farm hand during the agonizing years when she was waiting for her baby-husband to grow up. Similar to the *Scented Souls*, it explores the issue of the deprivation of a woman's sexual right and her brave assertion of such a right. Cinematically, female sexuality is presented in a recurrent image of falling water, which drives a primitive pestle in its perpetual movements. Just as the primitive machine, the scene suggests, human mechanism is propelled by sexual drives, which are projected in the image of the plunging water. Magnified in the sound track, the thunderous hammering of the pestle gives voice to the heavy pounding of a human heart upon sexual arousal. This striking mise-en-scène appears four times in the film: it arrests the viewers' attention in the opening scene to set the motif of female sexuality; it emerges in a night scene with the heroine holding her baby husband in her arms in a travesty of nuptial embrace to project her longing for sexuality; right after her love affair with an adult farm hand it turns up to signal the affirmation of her sexuality; and in the wake of her child-delivery it reemerges as if to celebrate the fruition of her sexuality. Xie Fei conveys his sympathy for the assertion of female desire in the composition of this powerfully provocative scene: the cascading water drawn by gravity signals the irresistible female sexuality propelled by a natural impulse, which is as primitive as the age-old pestle. The solemn tone of the scene seems to convey the screen auteur's philosophical pondering over the inevitability of human sexuality.

The symbolic link between Xiao-xiao's sexuality and water/river

imagery is explicitly established in a girl-in-the-river scene. In presenting the heroine's return from the town in a boat with her would-be lover, the camera cuts from her holding the love token of a red flower in a boat to a long take of the undulating waves scintillating golden sparkles in the river, signifying the germination of her love. The poetic touch of the shot conveys cinematic affirmation of her awakened libido. Through such lyricalization of water/river imagery, Xie Fei interprets Xiao-xiao's extramarital affair as an inevitable outcome of human impulses, thus tacitly endorsing and defending her cultural transgression.

The recurrent river scene in the "Scented Souls" indicates Xie Fei's continued interest in exploring the cinematic potentials of this charged imagery. The name of the river, "Scented Souls," is derived from the martyred death of the two girls in the Qing dynasty, who plunged into the river to resist arranged marriages. The river is, therefore, intrinsically associated with the feminist value of self-independence. Throughout the film the river is presented with strongly poetic touches, either projected through a pink lens filter in celebration of heroines' pursuit of love or shown in gray color in lamentation of their suppressed love. The lyricism both in naming the river and in presenting its imagery, by throwing in relief the charm and gloom of this symbolic landscape, conveys the filmmaker's sympathy for the feminist values that it embodies. The sexual connotation of the river is revealed in an early scene of love ritual, in which two groups of boys, some with naked bodies, fight ferociously in the water for a girl, the "river queen," a scene that foreshadows two young men's contention for Huan-huan. The river's symbolic association with female identity is sustained throughout the film: its course provides a path for their search for love; its water soothes their wounds; its body offers a bed for their eternal peace and its misty imagery projects their unfathomable future. With its connotations of female sexuality the river/water imagery contributes to establishing a feminist subjective point of view not only in the prelude, but also in a number of later scenes.

One such scene emerges in Sister Xiang's first nocturnal journey

on the river in quest for love. Accompanied by a deeply emotional tune played on an *erhu* solo, the camera first captures a close-up of an oar dancing rhythmically in water, and then cuts to Sister Xiang's upper body swaying gracefully while rowing the boat. With the association of water and female sexuality, the scene of an oar gently pushing water signals the heroine's command of her own sexuality. The camera then cuts to a lotus and reeds in the river, creating a lyrical touch that celebrates her determination in asserting her sexuality. Meanwhile, a halo-like, illuminated patch moving cheerfully across her on the screen projects her elated spirit, her longing for love.[14]

The river motif with its abundant pathos stimulates poignant compassion for female suffering in the first riverside scene after the wedding night. With shots/reverse shots, the camera cuts back and forth three times between high-angle long shots at Huan-huan soothing her wounds at the riverside and long take close-ups of Sister Xiang's face overlooking the scene, an emblem of bitterness. The close-up of her eyes then dissolves into images of lotus and reeds rocking vibrantly in the river. In a tight close-up like this, as Joseph Boggs indicates, "The eyes become a kind of window of the mind through which the camera 'reads' the character's thoughts" (Boggs 126). The lotus and reeds swaying powerlessly in the wind, images of her suppressed love, suggest women's helpless enslavement by patriarchy. As a part of the water/river symbolism, they serve as a visual indicator of the mother-in-law's realization of her shared status with the daughter-in-law. The feminist subjective point of view evoked by the water-associated imagery is reinforced by an off-screen song, a lament over women's fate.

The river motif is brought to a crescendo in Sister Xiang's last journey into the river to lament over her lost love, Xie Fei's cinematic extension from Zhou's novella. The image of the river, presented in a pink color in this scene, is again shot through Sister Xiang's point of view, reflecting its association with the romantic sentiments in her mind. The lyrical touches in conjunction with the mournful note of the scene deepen the poignancy of its tragic motif. In her deprivation of love and unrelenting quest for it, Sister Xiang embodies the valiant

spirit of the two martyred girls, the "Scented Souls." Her heart-rending wailing on the riverbank is echoed by the whimpering of the weeds amplified in the sound track as if nature were also lamenting for human suffering. Through human cry and nature's moan, the film sings an elegy for women's doomed pursuit in patriarchal culture as well as a eulogy for their unyielding quest for love.

The cinematic assumption of a feminist subjective point of view can also be traced to Huan-huan's presentation, most prominently in her first rooftop scene right before she falls into her husband Dunzi's killing embrace. This scene reveals a dismal world around her, which mirrors her gloomy inner state. From off-screen drifts in an actress's mellifluous, plaintive aria, which, redolent with romance and longing, echoes Huan-huan's suppressed yearning for love. When she moves to the edge of the roof, the camera following the direction her vision captures, in a high angle shot, a man sneaking into Sister Xiang's room, thus creating room for an imaginative picture of a love affair in the off-screen space. Both the sound and the view set off Huan-huan's loneliness and agony in the scene, which is accordingly cast in a depressively dim light. It foreshadows the most excruciating moment in her life, her incarceration in her husband's demonic clutch. In composing this scene, all the cinematic vehicles, the off-screen sound, lightening, camera angle and shooting position, contribute to the presentation of the psychological despondency, emotional depression, spiritual longing and visual impression felt and seen by the girl, leading to the creation of a feminist subjective point of view on the screen.

In the denouement of the film Xie Fei strengthens his feminist position through another point-of-view shot through Huan-huan's lens. In the final riverside scene, after the innocent girl is finally released from her clutch-like matrimonial bond by her mother-in-law, she utters a helpless moan over her wretched plight. The camera then, following her sight at the riverside, cuts to the scenes in the lake, presenting a sequence of misty, dim and gray images of the lake. Meanwhile, the following lines emerge from the sound track sung by a female voice:

Shining are the sun and the moon,

Before the eyes it is misty and blank.
Girls will have to marry,
And give birth to children.
Only the lamps in their hearts
Lead them to go ahead.

Parallel to the opening scene, the lake is presented here again as a symbolic landscape that reflects the character's inner world, while completing a structural balance in filmic composition. The only difference between the opening and the concluding scenes lies in the switch of the point of view: while the opening scene is shot through Sister Xiang's lens, the concluding scene is presented through Huan Huan's eyes. The blurry and hazy lake images in the distance mirror the gloom and uncertainty in the girl's mind about the perilous life journey ahead of her. The identification of the camera angle with the heroine's lens, while contributing to the "feminist point of view" of the work, stimulates the pathos of the film to a new depth at its denouement. Through his gender-conscious manipulation of the camera Xie Fei conveys his liberal outlook on women's issues in a series of innovative and penetrating imagery that he projects on the screen.

III. The Convention of the Malicious Matriarch and Its Transcendence in the "Scented Souls"

Despite Zhou Daxin's genuine empathy for abused women and Xie Fei's creation of a feminist point of view on the screen, the dramatization of female malice in Sister Xiang's characterization cannot but compromise, in a way, the feminist import of the work. To better locate the gender stand of the film, it is useful to examine Sister Xiang in the context of the Chinese malicious matriarch convention, which may have affected her conception and informed her identity.

With misogyny inveterate in Chinese orthodoxy it comes as an inevitable result that in the family of pre-modern society women were relegated to the subordinate status. Yet an avenue to power was open to them in their advanced age when the patriarch passed away and their

offspring, in deference to filial piety, felt obliged to succumb to their authority. The abuse of power by such women gives rise to a character type, the malicious matriarch. The recurrent presence of this character in Chinese history, legends and literature, where they are often censured, vilified and penalized, testifies to the intense hostility to female usurpation of power in Chinese culture.

As one of the archetypes of the malicious matriarch in historical records, Empress Dowager Lü (241–180 AD) of the Han dynasty, after her husband's death, mutilated his favorite concubine, plucked out her eyes and then threw her corpse into a privy (Sima 2:395–412). In Chinese legend, a typical case can be found in Zhao-yi, the Chief Consort of Emperor Cheng of the Western Han Dynasty (r. 32–7 B.C.), who unleashed malice upon her rivals by killing all the palace maids impregnated by the emperor. Jiang Qing (1910–1991), Mao's last wife, gives us a contemporary version of this stereotype: a former third-rate actress, she was notorious for ruthlessly purging her rivals once she rose to power. In modern Chinese literature, this character type is probably most graphically created in Zhang Ailing's masterwork, "The Golden Cangue," in which a beauty in a sesame oil shop, Qi-qiao, was sold by her brother into an upper-class family to marry its invalid son. After decades of loveless marriage when she finally acquired the long-coveted inheritance, she wielded her power and wealth, her golden cangue, to destroy her children's nuptial happiness.

The brief sketches of the malicious matriarch in Chinese history, legends, politics and literature traced here point to a recurrent pattern in her characterization: stemming from a humble origin this character rises to power with her beauty, connection, or ability; her abuse of power thereafter turns her from a victim into a victimizer. The validity of this pattern in social reality does not concern us here; it has apparently infiltrated into Chinese ideology that bears on the production of history, legends, literature, or even political discourse. Despite the political achievements of Empress Wu Zetian (624–705), post-Tang scholars were busy fictionalizing, fabricating or concocting her adulterous scandals in the production of pornographies, apparently to demonstrate the abuse of power by the only female ruler in Chinese

history. Notwithstanding the video image of Jiang Qing's self-defense and her shout, "Long live revolution," before she was abducted away from the court upon her sentence to death, [15] which in the view of a Westerner may suggest the suppression of individual freedom, few Chinese will question her culpability in contemporary Chinese politics with the cultural consensus that a matriarch in power tends to abuse her authority. This culturally entrenched stereotype of the malicious matriarch may have both informed the production of Zhou's novella and been transcended in it.

In literary genealogy, Second Sister Gao in Zhou Daxin's novella, Sister Xiang's literary origin, may well be taken as a direct offspring of Qi-qiao in Zhang Ailing's influential work, "Golden Cangue." Both heroines are beauties in sesame oil shops; both suffer a loveless marriage with an invalid; both are called "Second Sister-in-law" (*ersao*) and, thrown into the vice and evil of the patriarchy, both internalize its values and turn into "patriarchal matriarchs."[16] Even the title image "golden cangue" in Zhang's work can find a visual expression in Xie Fei's film, as my following discussion will demonstrate. Zhou Daxin, in fact, may well be inspired by Zhang Ailing in his conception of Second Sister Gao.

Following the stereotype of the malicious matriarch, Second Sister is created as a woman of great capacity and strong willpower. Although unlike most matriarchs she still has a husband, he is a cripple, a half-man, a drunkard, a dope, a good-for-nothing, and above all, a cuckold, who is overshadowed by her in capacity, intelligence and appearance. The woman earns the bread, manages the mill, hatches plans and controls the purse while the man runs errands and has to appeal for his odd money (as in the cinematic version). The husband's vulnerability and dependence are graphically projected in an opening scene of the film when, rushing home to see the Japanese visitor, he stumbles into the house, falls to the ground and has to rely on his wife's support to stand on his feet. Except for the sexual right that he vigorously defends and pugnaciously executes, the man recedes into the background on most occasions and yields nearly all the power to the woman, who functions as a virtual matriarch in the household. As a

participant into global economy and a beneficiary of foreign investment, Sister Xiang emerges as a successful entrepreneur. She acts like a man when she buys Huan-huan for Dunzi in a shrewd, manipulative business transaction. A gender reversal is clearly visible in the contrast between the husband's uneasiness over the illegality of his son's marriage with a healthy girl and the wife's reckless defiance of law. In discussing the role of such "phallic women," a feminist critic remarks: "No matter who actually assumes responsibility for operating the machine [of patriarchy], that person—even if it is the mother—will always represent the phallus" (Silverman 185).

What empowers Second Sister Gao is her wealth, a public allure in contemporary China. An early shot of a large pile of money that she has earned as business income creates an initial image of a goddess of wealth. The film repeatedly supplements the novel with brief shots to visualize her manipulation of money in her sinister cause: she stuffs monetary notes into the match-maker's hands to secure a faithful accomplice; she forces a bottle of sesame oil into the hands of the credit officer to convert him into a supporting force. When her daughter-in-law flees after a narrow escape from Dunzi's abusive embrace, it is with the threat of ransom that she subdues the penniless rebel/escaper. The vice-like lock of Dunzi's killing embrace that she repeatedly drives Huan-huan into with her money, ostensibly formed of the epileptic's rigid arms, is essentially forged with gold; it is a contemporary version of a golden cangue.

The malice that the matriarch unleashes on the innocent girl is cinematically projected through the changing colors on the screen when Huan-huan is shown at different stages of her life. Before Sister Xiang sets foot in her home, the camera presents a lyrical scene of Huan-huan's family life. In a long shot of the beautiful river dotted with flower-like islands, a boat slowly drifts into our view. The camera then cross-cuts between Huan-huan's father fishing in the river, with pelicans briskly fluttering wings on the shipboard, and the girl weaving a mat at home with a contented smile on her face. The slow tempo of the cutting conveys a mood of peace and leisure. A pink lens filter used for the whole sequence creates a halo-like effect on the screen, which

conveys the blithe tranquility of the rural life that her family is enjoying. This is reinforced by the graceful and slow-moving music of the sound track, which captures its leisured rhythm and serene mood. Yet, as soon as the matriarch steps on the site, the pink halo disappears, as if the presence of Mammon has driven away pastoral tranquility. A gray lens filter is used in two later scenes when the credit officer encroaches on the site to press for a debt, and the matriarch steps into Huan-huan's house to force the return of her escaped daughter-in-law, signaling the loss of pastoral serenity.

The guile and malice of the matriarch not only ruin Huan-huan's life, but also defile and corrupt her lover Jinhai. Three recurrent medium close-ups of the young man rhythmically moving a shovel in the workshop early in the film reveals the monotony of his labor. Reminiscent of the movement of robots and machines, these scenes provoke the familiar association of the loss of humanity in the accumulation of wealth. The changes of his images in his successive presences from a half-naked laborer in the mill, to a neatly clad company assistant in the city, finally to an elegantly dressed businessman in a spick-and-span suit, project his gradual conformity to a Mammon-like identity inscribed in his name, "the golden sea" (Jinhai).

While the film molds Sister Xiang in the traditional model of the malicious matriarch, it also presents her subjugation to patriarchal suppression in her own loveless marriage. Cinematically, the gray light that sets the chromatic tone in the scenes of her manipulation of Huan-huan's life also dominates her bedchamber when her crippled husband forces her into the role of a sex-provider. Her dual identity of a victim and a victimizer enables her to transcend the stereotype of the malicious matriarch for moral rejuvenation.

Despite her dominance over Huan-huan, the film repeatedly presents them in parallel scenes, or in adjacent shots, to suggest their shared fate in patriarchy. An early shot of Sister Xiang's rendezvous with her lover in the lake immediately cuts to a brief scene of Jinhai and Huan-huan's tryst beside the water, revealing their passionate yearning for love, their "scented souls." Under the roof of her house the

daughter-in-law's being bitten and pinched by the epileptic is matched by the mother-in-law's being beaten and "raped" by the cripple. The physical deformity of their male assailants, a father and a son, symbolizes the monstrosity of patriarchy. Even the third man involved in the love affair, Ran Shizhong, whose name in Chinese suggests honesty and loyalty, is cinematically presented as a human antithesis to the very virtues inscribed in his name. Though cast in a sympathetic light in Zhou's fiction, Ran appears in Xie Fei's film as a frivolous dandy who only seeks moments of fleshy pleasure in a relationship without spiritual commitment. His final desertion of his "concubine," another of Xie Fei's extensions from Zhou Daxin's fiction, presents a cinematic villainization of this third patriarchal figure, which puts Sister Xiang on a par with Huan-huan. Their parallel status is most artistically projected in the first rooftop scene where they almost simultaneously give out anguishing cries in separate spaces. The disheartening realization that in their decades-long relationship her "lover" has actually taken her as a concubine leads to Sister Xiang's heart-rending cry, which is echoed by Huan-huan's piercing wail off-screen on the rooftop when she falls into Dunzi's demonic clutches. The mother-in-law's spiritual abuse and the daughter-in-law's physical molestation presented in the two crosscutting shots constitute an ingeniously designed cinematic juxtaposition that reinforces their common fate in patriarchy.

It is this shared fate that forges a bond between the two antagonists, engenders their mutual empathy and leads to their rapprochement in the final rooftop scene. Cinematically, the spiritual barrier between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is presented in a thin, almost transparent, sheet that physically separates them in that scene. Huan-huan's identity is projected on the sheet in the form of a shadow, betokening spiritual alienation between them. It is her words, "Mother, you also pain in your heart," uttered on the other side of the sheet, that transcend their gap and seal their rift. With the removal of the sheet, their barrier is gone; their eyes meet and a spiritual communion is reached. It is the epiphany of their mutual agony in patriarchy that awakens the mother's conscience and dissolves her

malice. When Sister Xiang puts the cloth doll back into Dunzi's clutch-like embrace in a concluding scene, she symbolically releases Huan-huan from her "golden cangue" and successfully completes a spiritual odyssey of moral rejuvenation.

The matriarch's final gender/spiritual identification with her victim is cinematically projected in the slightly different framing of the riverside scene, which appears for the second time in the denouement of the film. The arrangement of characters' positions in a frame is an important cinematic technique. As David Bordwell indicates, "it [the framing] actively defines the image for us" (162). In the first riverside scene right after the wedding night, the camera cross-cuts between Huan-huan on a board at the bottom of the staircase soothing her wound with the water from the river and Sister Xiang at the top of the staircase melancholically watching her. The high-angle shot of Huan-huan suggests her subordinate, subdued status in the power relation with the matriarch, whose image is accordingly shot with a straight-on level angle.[17] The different heights of the platforms that they respectively occupy project a visual hierarchy, a gap and a distance, between the matriarch and her daughter-in-law. This gap is cinematically filled in the final shot when this scene re-emerges with a slightly altered format: the matriarch descends from the staircase to be on the same board, hence virtually on a par, with her victim, returning to the riverside position that she herself once took in her own suicidal attempt. With the feminine connotations of river/water imagery, her descending to the water edge may imply her renunciation of the "high status" of a malicious matriarch in her re-identification with the "low status" of the feminine and marginal. In her final approach to the waterside to reconcile with her daughter-in-law, the river now binds her and her victim as a symbolic reminder of their common womanhood enslaved in patriarchy. Sister Xiang's symbolic return to the feminine/marginal position, however, does not weaken the feminist thrust of the film, for the depiction of a deep subjectivity of this powerful woman is presented in the very preceding scene of her last trip to the island in relentless, though doomed, pursuit of forbidden love.

The cinematic intent to elevate its heroine from the traditional mode of the malicious matriarch is also inscribed in her surname, which is changed from "Gao," a Chinese surname in Zhou's fiction, into "Xiang" (scent, fragrance), a nonexistent surname in Chinese society in Xie Fei's film. The absence of the name in real life points to its symbolic function in the film, where "scent" as a part of the river's name is associated with a feminist will for self-autonomy. As the personification of "fragrance," or "scented souls," Sister Xiang embodies women's unyielding will in pursuit of love. Correspondingly, her husband's name also undergoes a symbolic change, from "Second Uncle Gao" in the novella into "Second Uncle Cripple" in the film, which makes him close to the personification of deformed patriarchy.

IV. Male Feminism and Its Limitation in the *Scented Souls*

The strong feminist sentiments palpable in Zhou Daxin's characterization of Huan-huan and other abused women points to what we might term male feminism—the inscriptions of feminist consciousness in men's texts. In his study David Wang traces four modes of manifestation of such a phenomenon in modern Chinese literature: male exploration of women's dilemma, male challenge of anti-feminist conventions, male problematization of traditional view of women's position and male use of enslaved women as a symbol for political agenda (236–56). While Zhou Daxin's works may be ostensibly subsumed by such a generalization, it carries a distinct implication and suggests a new dimension of male feminism in modern Chinese literature.

In all the works under Wang's discussion, or in most male-produced literature of modern China, the male writers serve as investigators while the women are the objects of their study. The ability to speak and write grants intellectuals a "privileged position," which, as Rey Chow observes, "permanently separates" them from the objects of their study (37). Partly because of this gap, or gender difference, between the privileged speaking [male] subject and the underprivileged, spoken [female] object, David Wang observes condescending attitudes,

ambivalence, uneasiness or jealousy, in male writings even though they deal with women's problems in society (Wang, "Feminist Consciousness" 243–46). Similarly, Rey Chow uses the word "paralysis" in reference to intellectuals' spiritual status in May Fourth literature, when they deal with women's issues (37). For illustration she cites Lu Xun, in whose writings of female enslavement we can often sense guilt, remorse and helpless resignation.

It is against the norm of male subjects' distance from their female objects that Zhou Daxin's works stand out as a new and significant phenomenon that deserves our attention in the gender study of 20th century Chinese literature. Unlike most of his contemporary male writers and his predecessors in the May Fourth period, Zhou Daxin presents women's existential plight not as a detached observer, but as a fellow-sufferer personally involved in the very act of social violence. His works, as the above discussion indicates, reveal an obsessive anxiety over the deprivation of female sexuality, which, in fact, mirrors the deprivation of his own sexual right. The dichotomy between male investigator and female object traditionally characterizes male writings in modern Chinese literature is somewhat blurred and dissolved in his works. In a sense, he is both the investigator and the object of his own investigation. His portrayals of abused women carry as much "autobiographical" as "biographical" implication. It is this spiritual affinity with women that leads to his explicit statement of female superiority, a rare and exceptional phenomenon, indeed, in male writings. It also enables him to create an aura of lyricism, poetry and charm around his heroines, which significantly strengthens the power of his artistic appeal, leading to repeated adaptation of his works into films. As a consequence, distinct from most male "feminist" writings, his portrayal of Huan-huan is free from any trace of condescending attitude, ambivalence, uneasiness, jealousy, guilt or remorse. Charged with unadulterated feminist sentiments it reads like a woman's indictment of the patriarchy.

In modern Chinese literature probably only the intellectuals during the May Fourth period and the Fifth-generation filmmakers in the contemporary age share Zhou Daxin's preoccupation with female

oppression. Yet, unlike those who either write about women's problems to pose a revolutionary gesture or use women as a vehicle to create national allegory, Zhou turns to women's issues to vent out personal anxiety and frustration. His interest in women's issues per se points to a new dimension of male feminism in the context of pervasive political/ideological use of women in male productions both in the May Fourth period and the contemporary age.

In the literary arena of contemporary China, Zhou is probably the only male writer so deeply obsessed with women's issues. The feministic concerns so touchingly presented in his writings contribute to offsetting the reemerged misogynist sentiments, as traced by some critics, in the experimental fictions of his contemporary male writers, such as Su Tong, Yu Hua and Ge Fei (Lu 18–22). A contrast can be traced in the gender paradigms in their respective works: in experimental fictions men's search for masculinity is often built on the debasement of femininity, whereas in Zhou's novels the celebration of femininity is often thrown into relief against the vilification of men. It is interesting that they seem to resort to the same strategy to reinforce their antithetic positions.

Despite Zhou's painstaking exploration of the women's plight, the conception of Second Sister Gao on the traditional mode of malicious matriarch suggests his subjection to the cultural set view of women even though he may not be aware of it. This prevents him from producing a pure feminist work in this novella, which, in fact, indirectly reinforces some of the stereotypes that he would probably oppose were he aware of it. Zhou's unconscious submission to the misogynist stereotype may be related to the cultural ambience wherein the novella was composed. Recent study in sociology indicates that although a large number of Chinese women were engaged in household industry in the 1990s, once the household enterprises became more profitable than other productive activities, the males often took over the management (Jacka 155–56). The power and authority that Sister Xiang wields in the household enterprise are, therefore, atypical in Chinese society. Ideologically, the negative presentation of her masculinization can perhaps be attributed to the re-emergence of

patriarchal discourse in the post-Mao era.

Several studies in the west have pointed out a prominent shift in Chinese cultural imperative to female gender construction in recent decades. In its campaign for women's liberation CCP, after its take-over of power, vigorously preached sexual equality, which led to the erasure of female gender. This trend, however, was reversed in the reform era when the new consumer culture calls for and thrives on a sexualist return to gender differentiation (Yang, "Gender Erasure" 35–67; Dai, "Rewriting Chinese Women" 191–206). With the resurgence of the old notion of femininity, a woman's feminine charm has become more appreciated in post-Mao China when "fashion and cosmetics have become important and the hairdressers' and beauty parlors are always full" (Thakur, 1997, 59). The resurfacing of patriarchal ideology is also revealed in the intolerant attitude to gender equality in family relations. As feminist scholars have pointed out, the 1980s witnessed a proliferation of jokes of henpecked husbands who are alleged to have suffered from a disease called *qiguanyan*, a homonym for "strict management by one's wife" (Honig & Hershatter 257). The critical barb of the joke, ostensibly cracked by men, is in fact directed at powerful women for violating the traditional code of femininity. Likewise, the Iron Girls, who took on the most difficult and demanding tasks at work, the role models for young women in the Mao ear, were subject to mockery in the Deng age. Their identity was mocked in a crosstalk show in 1979 in which an actor expressed horror at the possibility of taking such a powerful woman as his bride (Honig & Hershatter 24–25). Such a stereotyped model of the bygone age became so unpopular that even Shou Yuanjun, the editor of a major feminist TV program on CCTV, *Half of the Sky*, cautions against presenting her images on the screen (Shou 266). After the downfall of Jiang Qing, in Chinese media the "strong woman" who "forges ahead in career" and "dominates her husband" was constantly presented negatively as "personally unfulfilled" (Yang, "Gender Erasure" 55). Commenting on the post-Mao popular antagonism to female arrogation of male gender, Marilyn Young observes, "But it matters that abuse of power is most easily denounced when it has been feminized. Evil itself

has been feminized, and the message to women is clear: there is something in the natural order of things that does not love woman exercising public power" (Young 262–63).

Composing his novella amidst such a social ambience Zhou Daxin was unlikely to be completely impervious to this masculinist undercurrent in contemporary Chinese culture. Despite his empathy for women's enslavement, as a man Zhou maintains a cultural distance from women when his personal interest is not involved. In an essay on literary creation he compares his conception of fiction to the courtship of a woman: she is all charm and beauty when he initiates his courtship, and yet after he is completely under the sway of love she suddenly changes into a freakish wife with tempestuous disposition, wagging her tongue all day long and making life miserable for him (Zhou, *Cunbian shuitang* 69). While such prejudice against married women may be traced to age-old Chinese thinking and it is presented in his essay only in a metaphorical sense, it may well reflect Zhou's tacit acquiescence in the traditional value. As a man living in a society where sexism reared its head, Zhou may not be completely immune to its subtle influence. In his decision to assign a female, rather than a male, identity to Huan-huan's victimizer, destined to be a powerful and villainous character, we may somewhat sense his subconscious surrender to the bias against female gender deviation latent in the cultural unconsciousness. In conceiving her character, the traditional stereotype of the malicious matriarch may have come as a ready-made model. As a marginal man who suffered abject poverty and shared emotional loss with a woman, Zhou must have felt sincere empathy for enslaved women; yet as a member of the stronger sex, he can be susceptible to the masculinist thinking against female gender deviation, which leads to the misogynist undercurrent in Second Sister Gao's characterization.

While the matriarchal figure is presented as a tool or a spokeswoman of patriarchal ideology, an embodiment of the evil of patriarchy, the stereotype on which she is conceived also serves as a poignant accusation against patriarchy, an accusation under the cover of misogyny. Zhou Daxin's unique arrangement of Second Sister Gao's own victimization in patriarchy, whose vicious power she recklessly

wields against another woman, effectively deepens the profundity of his cultural criticism.

Yet, in fact, the malicious matriarch has been such a staple character type in Chinese literature that her presence can be traced even to the works of the most "enlightened" writers. Lu Xun is generally acknowledged by feminist scholars to be a pioneer in presenting women's oppression in modern Chinese literature, yet in "The New Year's Sacrifice" (Zhufu) he creates a malicious matriarch in Sister Xianglin's mother-in-law who spares no efforts in reaping profits from the heroine's widowhood. This misogynist stereotype even informs the characterization in the works of acknowledged feminist female writers, such as Ding Ling. In "When I Was in Xia Village" Ding Ling presents women's parochialism and sanctimony in their self-righteous contempt for the innocent heroine after she suffered sexual abuse by the Japanese. A most notorious malicious matriarch, as we know, takes the shape of Second Sister under Zhang Ailing's pen. In conceiving Second Sister Gao, therefore, Zhou Daxin must have felt strong anxiety of influence over the precedents of his poetic predecessors, which he overcomes by creating a matriarch who purges herself of malice. Second Sister's moral redemption so lyrically presented in the denouement of his novella not only marks the narrative transcendence over the traditional mode of the malicious matriarch, but also signifies the author's feminist sentiments overcoming his misogynist impulses.

Zhou Daxin's ambiguous gender stance, as shown in his different treatments of Huan-huan and Sister Gao, points to the ambivalence in male gender identity, or their shifting gender positions under different circumstances. While male scholars may embrace feminist values out of personal need or spiritual alienation, they can easily shift back to the patriarchal position owing to the cultural milieu wherein they live, their own status as male members of society dominating over women and the patriarchal values that they have been imbued with. When the women's issue affects their personal interest or evokes their spiritual resonance, such as the deprivation of sexual right in Zhou Daxinkg's life, they may righteously pose as champions for the feminist cause. Once their self interest is uninvolved they tend to retreat to the traditional position

without even being aware of it, as shown in Zhou's easy subjection to a conventional stereotype in Sister Gao's characterization. Such conflicts among personal interest, liberal ideal, received values and cultural imperatives, often waging on in their sub-consciousness, lead to the ambivalence in male gender stance.[18]

If Zhou Daxin's feminist appeal so ardently voiced in his characterization of Huan-huan is mitigated by his subconscious acquiescence in a misogynist stereotype, Xie Fei's feminist impulses so graphically inscribed in the feminist point of view that he projects on the screen is, likewise, weakened by his intent to allegorize Zhou's tale in his film. The screen auteur's allegorical endeavor is most clearly visible in the concluding part of the film when he deviates from the fictional source, creates new plots and adds new lines to relate the tale to the large issues of the nation.

In the emotional climax of the final scene when Sister Xiang finally releases her victim from her golden cangue, Huan-huan repeatedly laments in despair, "Who will want me any more? Who will want me any more? " This line does not exist in Zhou's novella. According to Xie Fei, it originates from the real speech of five "contemporary concubines," who uttered it to rationalize their disinclination to divorce their husband, a business manager, after he was arrested for committing bigotry (Luo 164). These women's diffidence about their future reflects a distorted, gloomy view in society which keeps them from moving on in their lives. It also adumbrates the formidable social prejudice, a residue of feudalistic mentality, that they will inevitably encounter should they re-embark on a new search for love as divorced, hence "unchaste," women. The cinematic incorporation of the line, therefore, conveys the director's deep regret at modern women's conservative mentality, the "ghost of the feudal culture" (Xie Fei's term) hovering in contemporary China. Similar to the concubines', Huan-huan's lamentation, Xie Fei seems to suggest, reveals her blindness to a possible bright future, which he goes out of his way to create in the filmic version of the story in Jinhai's undying love for her, expressed in his final gift and his lingering gaze. In the scene of the two lovers' final meeting, another cinematic

extension of Zhou's novella by Xie Fei, a frontal shot of Huan-huan's lowered head to avoid eye contact with Jinhai followed by a symbolic back shot conveys her lack of courage to face her love. Her spiritual blindness and conservative mentality, which contribute to her own tragedy, are reinforced by the concubines' words that Xie Fei deliberately arranges in her concluding line.

Xie Fei's creation of a "flaw" in Huan-huan's perception may well be taken as a part of an allegorical pattern that he intends to impose on Zhou's tale. An allegorical intent can be traced to Xie Fei's interest in adapting Zhou Daxin's novella to the screen. Explicating the film's social relevance in an interview, Xie Fei first indicates the re-emergence of gambling, concubinage and mercenary marriage in Chinese rural areas after they turned wealthy in recent decades and then remarks: "The ghost of the feudal culture that has inhibited the Chinese nation stills hovers" (Luo 164). In producing this film he expresses the hope "to evoke a new national spirit through the tragedy of Second Sister Xiang" (Luo 164). Perceivable in such association of women with the nation is an attempt to use his work as an allegorical showcase of contemporary Chinese culture, in which women's suffering is emblematic of the nation's agony, women's conservatism mirrors the nation's ideological retrogression, and in women's spiritual emancipation he conveys a hope to rejuvenate the nation (in his words, "to evoke a new national spirit"). In a way, Xie Fei preaches the salvation of the nation through the salvation of women. In this allegorical agenda, women play a dual symbolic function: they not only personify the tormented, anguishing China under the burden of history, but also embody the returning ghost of its degenerative, feudalistic identity. In the cinematic narrative, this dual identity of China is allegorically bodied forth most prominently in Sister Xiang. Like Sister Xiang, China is suffering; and like her, it is tormented by its own age-old values which refuse to disperse in the contemporary age. Viewed in such a context, Xie Fei's insertion of five concubines' remarks into Huan-huan's lines may well be viewed as an attempt to attach some "feudalistic" component to this almost perfect heroine to fit her into the same allegorical pattern. Like her mother-in-law, and

China itself, Huan-huan in the cinematic version also, in a way, becomes a victim to the conservative values that she refuses to give up.

In her study of literary presentation of women, Yue Ming-bao observes an interesting phenomenon of the silencing of female voice in male-penned literature during the May Fourth period, which, she believes, does not match women's anti-conventional inclinations documented in sociohistorical studies (Yue 48, 61). But when Xie Fei does make his heroine break silence in his filmic text, he does not make her assert her self, but uses her voice to project his own view on contemporary China and transforms her into a component of the allegorical tapestry that he is weaving on the screen.

In his intent to elevate Zhou's fictional plea for women's salvation to a cinematic national allegory, Xie Fei poses himself as an "enlightened" investigator detached from the politically myopic object of his investigation. The "blindness" in Huan-huan's perception, which cannot exist in Zhou's novella owing to the author's complete identification with his heroine, can be easily incorporated in Xie Fei's film owing to the lack of such an identification. As a film-maker, rather than the composer of the original "autobiographical" tale, Xie Fei is not emotionally involved in Huan-huan's suffering. This non-involvement of the self may have led him to easily succumb to the temptation of allegorical impulses that are ubiquitously throbbing in male productions. As a consequence, a condescending distance emerges between him, the investigator, and the heroine, the object of his investigation. This cannot but mitigate the feminist plea so passionately put forward in Huan-huan's characterization in Zhou's novella, for the innocent girl is now made partly responsible for her ruin.

This case study of the "Scented Souls" indicates both the possibility of genuine male feminism and the causes of its limitation. While personal experience, injury of personal interest, political/ideological alienation and liberal outlook may lead male scholars to take a genuine feminist stand, they tend to shift to traditional positions when their personal interest is uninvolved, as shown in Zhou's acquiescence in a misogynist stereotype and Xie's instinctive inclination for allegorical use of women. This limits the

feminism in their works.

NOTES

[1] Zhang Yimou's statements in some of his interviews apparently support such allegorical interpretation of his female characterization. When asked whether he used women to make a statement, he replied: "This [to use female characters] fits in with my own sensibility. Somehow this is in the air. What I want to express is the Chinese people's oppression and confinement, which has been going on for thousands of years. Women express this more clearly on their bodies because they bear a heavier burden than men" (Yang, "Against the Lures of Diaspora" 300).

[2] In an "exchange marriage" a girl is betrothed to a stranger so that her brother can have a daughter from her in-law's family as his bride.

[3] For an introduction to Zhou Daxin's personal life experience in relation to his novella "The Women with Scented Souls," see Guo Linxiang, "Out of Basin," pp. 93–98.

[4] For the story, see *Zhou Daxin xiaoshuo zixuanji* (Anyang: Henan wenyi chubanshe, 1998), pp. 427–45.

[5] See *Zhou Daxin wenji: mijing*, vol. 2 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1996), pp. 362–90.

[6] See *Zhou Daxin wenji: huayuan*, vol. 1 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1996), pp. 80–128.

[7] See *Zhou Daxin wenji: mijing*, v. 2, pp. 1–57. For the English translation of the story, see Yu Fanqin, trans., *For Love of a Silversmith* (Beijing: Chinese Literature P, 1995), pp. 11–76.

[8] In her study Roxann Prazniak labels Zhang Jie's gender stand "neofeminism." Unlike the Western feminism which is embedded in liberal legal and political individualism, she argues, Zhang Jie calls for gender equality in people's thinking when socialist China has eliminated many outward signs of gender oppression. See "Feminist Humanism: Socialism and Neofeminism in the Writings of Zhang Jie," *Marxism and the Chinese Experience* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 269–93.

[9] For Wang's discussion of the feminization of Chinese men, see his influential essay "Red Sorghum: Mixing Memory and Desire," *Perspectives on*

Chinese Cinema, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1991), pp. 80–101. Xueping Zhong questions this male femininity complex for a lack of historical dimension; see *Masculinity Besieged* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), p. 33. Historical dimensions are, in fact, provided in Yang's and Huang's studies on Ming-Qing literature cited above, which suggest that male literati tended to identify with females when they were politically or ideologically marginalized.

[10] Noël Burch has pointed out six zones of off-screen space, one of them is the space behind the camera, see David Bordwell, *Film Art*, p. 167.

[11] I derive this expression from Bordwell, *Film Art*, p. 196.

[12] In his discussion of *yin-yang* hierarchy, the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu remarks, "*Yin* is the destructive element; *yang* is the virtuous element." See *Chunqiu fanlu* in *Sibu congkan*, vol. 10, juan 11, 6a.

[13] Xie Sujie dumps chamber pot water over other's heads as a way of punishment. For discussion of Sujie's associations with filthy and destructive water imagery, see Maram Epstein, 2001, pp. 145–46.

[14] In recent Chinese films the illuminated spots on the screen bouncing gleefully in front of a female character often externalize her aspiration for love. This technique is also used in a shot in Xie Jin's film *The Small Town Called Hibiscus* where the heroine Hu Yuying, having recovered from a fatal illness, was making bean curd to entertain her savior, the rightist Qin Shutian, in a ritual of love.

[15] The sentence of the "Gang of Four" and Jiang Qing's protest are recorded in a video production made by a British company, MacNeil Lehrer Gannelt Productions. It appears in the first series entitled "Remembrance" in a twelve-series program "The Heart of the Dragon." At the court Jiang Qing defended herself with the following well-known lines: "Everything I did, Mao told me to do. I was his dog; what he said to bite, I bit." See Ross Terrill, *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), p. 15.

[16] I derive the term from Louise Edwards, who uses it to refer to the senior women in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in *Men and Women in Qing China*, p. 59.

[17] David Bordwell and Kistin Thompson indicate that "It is tempting to believe that . . . framing from a high angle presents him or her as dwarfed and defeated," though they warn against assigning absolute meanings according to

shooting angles, distances, and other qualities of framing (*Film Art* 171).

[18] A similar case can be found in the writings of Kong Shangren (1648–1718), a well-known scholar in the early Qing. In *The Peach Blossom Fan* (Taohua shan) Kong celebrates the gender deviation of a famous courtesan Li Xiangjun in her heroic resistance to political decadence during Ming-Qing transition, a masculine gender stance that he apparently upheld, admired and spiritually identified with at that moment of national crisis. But in an essay dedicated to Lady Zuo, a friend's mother, he rebuked women for debating in the public, dominating over their husbands, and claiming to be guides for their sons, in other words, for arrogating male roles in society. For discussion on male scholars' shifting gender stance in late imperial China, see Zuyan Zhou, *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2003), pp. 207-09.

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試析電影《香魂女》的性別立場：兼論男性作家的女性主義立場及其局限性

摘 要

文學評論家曾經在現代男性作家，諸如茅盾，魯迅，柔石，白先勇及黃春明等人的作品中追尋出女性主義意識的蹤迹。但他們同時指出，這些男性作品又往往顯露出男性的優越感及矛盾心理，其女性主義的立場有失自然，並常將女子在作品中作為一種象徵符號。凡此種種，無疑削弱了他們女性主義的立場。女性主義理論認為，男性知識份子在社會中處於特權階層。在文學創作中作為對女性的「調查者」，他們與失去權益的「被調查」的女子之間存在著一道鴻溝。因此，男性作家不可能完全站在女性主義的立場上寫作。那麼，一位經受儒家價值薰陶的男性作家是否可能寫出純粹不二的女性主義的作品呢？對此，當代的中國電影「香魂女」似乎給予了一個肯定的答復，雖然其肯定中還帶著些許保留。該電影取材于小說家周大新的本人經歷。作者初戀的失敗誘發起對其戀人，並進而對整個女性的的深切同情。作品中周大新對女子性權利被剝奪的哀號流露出其本人對男權社會的控訴。男性「調查者」與其筆下女子的精神共鳴促使他站在真純的女性主義的立場上熱誠呼籲女性的解放。然而，在塑造女主角環環的迫害者高二嫂時，作者下意識地採納了「惡毒女家長」的傳統人物模式。這一構思無意中削弱了作品的女性主義立場。男性藝術家的這種矛盾心理同時見諸於電影製作人謝飛的性別立場中。謝飛的作品以同情女性而著稱影壇。在該片中他成功地利用攝影技巧在銀幕上創造出一種女性主義的視角，由此加強了電影的女性主義立場。然而，這一立場卻無意中被其本人企圖將女性角色演變成象徵符號的意圖所削弱。為了說明中國正在被其不忍舍去的封建殘餘所奴役，為了將他的女主角演變成中國的象徵者，謝飛有意識地在環環的穎悟力中構造出某種「缺陷」，而這一「缺陷」最

終導致她的沈淪。在周大新的小說中，男性作者與他筆下的女性主角心靈相通，氣息與共。一經謝飛的改編，電影製作者與女性主角之間出現了一種帶有男性優越感的心理隔閡。這勢必影響作品的女性主義主題。在現代中國文學男性作品中女性主義傾向的總體討論中，本文旨在表明男性作家採取真誠的女性主義立場的可能性及其局限性的種種緣由。男性作家由於本人生活經歷，利害衝突，政治異化，以及開明意識可能採取真誠的女性主義立場。然而當作品內容不再涉及本人利益時，男性作家往往轉向傳統的性別立場。周大新對「惡毒女家長」傳統模式的認可以及謝飛對女角色象徵性的利用都表現了這一傾向。這種傾向導致了他們作品中女性主義立場的局限性。

關鍵字：男性作者的女性主義立場，邊緣性男子，象徵寓意，精神共鳴，女性主義關注，女性主義視角，文學人物模式，惡毒女家長