Orientalism and Self-Orientalization: A Case Study of Female Images in Chinese Films Awarded at the San Sebastian Film Festival

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Abstract
Since the 1980s, Chinese cinema has gained international recognition, with an increasing number of Chinese films receiving accolades overseas. The portrayal of women in Chinese films has emerged as a contentious and significant creative theme. This research focuses on 11 award-winning Chinese films showcased at the San Sebastian Film Festival, employing textual analysis and cultural interpretation within the framework of Chinese history and contemporary cultural context. By utilizing feminist film theory, gaze theory, gender studies, and semiotic studies, this study aims to classify and summarize the female images depicted in these films. Drawing on the theories of Orientalism and self-Orientalization, it critically examines the representation of women in the films under study. Additionally, it explores whether these films cater to the Western market's imagination of Chinese women. Through a comprehensive interpretation of the film texts, this research identifies various archetypal female images, including tragic victims of patriarchal systems, virtuous wives and mothers, objects of male desire, and damsels in distress. Despite women's attempts at growth and resistance in these films, they often meet with failure, death, or madness. By analyzing the multi-faceted cultural identities portrayed in these female images, this study not only presents a comprehensive understanding from the male "other" perspective but also sheds light on the transformation and continuity of Eastern femininity as perceived from a Western viewpoint.

Keywords: Female Images, Orientalism, Self-Orientalization, Chinese Films, Feminism

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of Chinese films have gained international exposure, earning recognition from numerous overseas film festivals and achieving popularity among Western audiences. According to incomplete statistics, five Chinese films have received nominations for or have won Oscars at prominent film festivals worldwide. Additionally, 24 films have been nominated for or have won awards at the Cannes Film Festival, 28 films at the Venice Film Festival, 48 films at the Berlin Film Festival, and 13 films at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Within this array of nominated and award-winning films, the portrayal of women in Chinese cinema has evolved into a contentious and crucial creative theme.

Researchers have yet to conduct detailed research on the San Sebastian Film Festival, and there are very few in-depth studies on the female images in award-winning Chinese films at the film festival. Regarding the topic of Orientalism, more research focuses on the presentation of the Orient from a Western perspective in Hollywood films. Little attention has been paid to Chinese films appearing in European film festivals. Especially the Spanish Film Festival.

After carefully reviewing the information, the author found that since the 1st San Sebastian Film Festival, a total of 13 Chinese films have won awards, and in 11 of them, female characters have played leading roles or important supporting roles.

Looking at the Chinese films that have won awards in San Sebastian, almost all of them have women playing the leading roles. Women with oriental charm and beauty are increasingly favored by the San Sebastian Film Festival. As one of the narrative elements, the female image is frequently recognized in film festivals and is worthy of our thinking and research. This study focuses on 11 award-winning Chinese films screened at the San Sebastian Film Festival, conducting textual analysis and cultural interpretation within the framework of Chinese historical and contemporary cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review

By utilizing feminist film theory, gaze theory and gender studies, this study aims to classify and summarize the female images depicted in these films. Drawing on the theories of Orientalism and self-Orientalization, it critically examines the representation of women in the films under study. Additionally, it explores whether these films cater to the Western market's imagination of Chinese women.

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* is an influential essay published in 1975 that applies psychoanalysis to film theory and criticism. It argues that mainstream cinema constructs a male gaze that objectifies women and positions them as passive spectators. It also proposes alternative modes of cinema that challenge this dominant ideology. The essay is considered a landmark of feminist film theory.

Edward Said proposed in *Orientalism* that Western knowledge about the East does not arise from facts or reality, but from preconceived stereotypes, that is, the East is described through comparing the characteristics such as science, democracy, rationality, the notion of progressing, and civilian population which is assumed that the West possesses. The East is stationary. Every region of the East is the same for the orientalist discourse (Bulut, 2002:25).

This discussion establishes the antagonistic relationship between “East” and “West.” Said related the binary opposition of West and East to the binary opposition of male and female. Orientalism itself is a thoroughly male field, and it uses sexist colored glasses when examining it. "Women are usually the product of male power illusions. They represent endless desires and are more or less stupid," and most importantly, they are willing to sacrifice."

3. Methods

The research method of this article is mainly a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Use the literature research method to conduct a systematic and in-depth study of the female images in the award-winning films, and select individual cases for specific analysis. On this basis, we will specifically and in-depth interpret the female images in the award-winning films to make them more typical.

3.1 The literature Research Method

The literature research method involves collecting, identifying, and organizing literature to form a scientific understanding of the facts under study. The literature gathered for this dissertation comprises several key components. Firstly, it includes video footage of the films selected for this research, along with interview videos featuring relevant award-winning directors. Secondly, it encompasses domestic and foreign newspapers, journals, master's and doctoral dissertations, and monographs related to the San Sebastian Film Festival and the study of women's images within the film festival. Thirdly, it encompasses relevant theoretical books, such as *The Second Sex* in Feminist Theory, the Orientalist monograph *Orientalism*, Feminist Film Theory *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, and other specialized theoretical books pertinent to this research.

3.2 The Qualitative Analysis Method

The qualitative analysis method employed in this study involves analyzing the object of study. It utilizes methods of induction, summary, and analysis, allowing for the thoughtful processing of collected materials to recognize the essence of the phenomena studied. This method is the primary research approach adopted in this paper. By summarizing and categorizing the images of women in films, the research aims to explore the reasons behind their portrayal and survival within their respective contexts.

Furthermore, the case study method, another qualitative analysis approach, is employed as a primary research method. This involves analyzing representative films and works. For instance, movies like *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker*, *Sunflower*, *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, *Nanjing Nanjing*, and *Wuhai* are scrutinized to provide in-depth insights into the themes under investigation.

4. Findings

In the film, both visually and semantically, the orientalist discourses bases on the distinction between I / Western and other/Oriental is reconstructed and the stereotypes related to this duality are repeated. In the analysis, to a certain extent, it is concluded that the images of the “East” is created in accordance with the ideology of San Sebastian film festivals and Western society and represented as the “other” (AVCI, İ. B., & ERGÜNEY, M., 2022:23).

4.1 "The Other" Four Images of Chinese Women

Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex*:

> The reference that defines and distinguishes women is men, but the reference that defines and distinguishes men is not woman. She is a subordinate person, the essential. The inessential. He is the subject, the absolute, and she is the other. (De Beauvoir, S.2007: 29)

In the Chinese films that won awards at the San Sebastian Film Festival, women's status and living conditions are in a subordinate position. The male perspective that men invariably form the hegemony of male subject discourse, while women are often in a position of being watched, marginalized, and oppressed as the other. For a long time, men have defined themselves as the subject, and women have become the other. In the discourse of others, although the female image appears as the protagonist in film and television works, she has to accept scrutiny from the patriarchal cultural center. Women have to exist according to the rules set by men. Although they have struggled, it is difficult to escape from the shadow of patriarchal society.

Through a comprehensive interpretation of the film texts, this research identifies various archetypal female images, including tragic victims of patriarchal systems, virtuous wives and mothers, objects of male desire, and damsels in distress. Despite women's attempts at growth and resistance in these films, they often meet with failure, death, or madness.

By analyzing the multi-faceted cultural identities portrayed in these female images, this study not only presents a comprehensive understanding from the male "other" perspective but also sheds light on the transformation and continuity of Eastern femininity as perceived from a Western viewpoint.

4.1.1 The Tragic Victim of the Patriarchal System

The first image, the tragic victim of the patriarchal system, is like *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker*. In a sprawling family dedicated to the craft of making firecrackers, the absence of male heirs positioned Chunzhi, the lone daughter, as the exclusive inheritor of the family factory. Raised under the guise of a boy and addressed as Young Master in her childhood and later as Dongjia, Chunzhi confrontes a stringent familial decree: to secure her position as the future matriarch, she is mandated to forgo marriage throughout her life. Despite this, Chunzhi remains to be venerated as the lord of the manor, her subordinates, spanning all ages, treating her more as a symbol—Dongjia—almost overlooking her identity as a woman, a young girl replete with emotions and desires. The entrance of a painter from elsewhere disrupts the tranquility of the ostensibly antiquates manor, introducing an element of dynamism. Within this narrative shift, Chunzhi discovers an unexpected connection with the capricious painter. As their love blossoms, the once orderly life of Chunzhi is thrust into disarray, challenging societal norms and expectations.

The film focuses on the repressed sexual culture in deep mansions. The host who disguises herself as a man carries the objectified image of women. The love affair with the hired painter ends tragically, just like the women in the shadows, who can never escape the clutches of patriarchy. This is a typical Oriental spectacle film, creating a Chinese film that is culturally coded according to what Said calls Westerners' "Orientalism."

4.1.2 A Virtuous Wife and Mother

The second image is that of a virtuous wife and mother. In 1976, poet and feminist Adrienne Cecile Rich introduced the concept of "Institutionalized Motherhood" in the book *Of Woman Born: motherhood as experience and institution* characterizing it as an expectation imposed on motherhood by patriarchal society. Rich articulated this notion, stating, "Institutionalized motherhood requires women to have motherly instincts rather than wisdom, to be selfless rather than self-actualizing, to build relationships with others rather than create the self."

This myth of motherhood intentionally accentuates the role of mothers in childbirth and child-rearing, emphasizing their loyalty to motherhood while obscuring their individual personality traits and inherent gender consciousness as women. Consequently, the portrayal of mothers under the guise of this myth becomes an alienated image, marked by a compromised sense of individuality and a diminished experience of female gender consciousness. This distorted image is a consequence of the enduring influence of the subtle yet pervasive impact of patriarchal culture.

This type of female image like *Sunflower* is the most common in Chinese movies, as a mother. These characters selflessly give up their own desires and sacrifice themselves for their families, husbands, and sons.

4.1.3 The Object of Male Desire

The third image is the object of male desire, such as *I am Not Madame Bovary*. The film narrates the tale of Li Xuelian, an unassuming rural woman, and her husband Qin Yuhe, who engage in a "fake divorce" to secure a residence and, clandestinely, to facilitate the birth of a second child. However, complications arise when Qin Yuhe refuses to acknowledge the "fake divorce" and promptly weds another woman, disavowing any recognition of their prior arrangement. In pursuit of justice, Li Xuelian takes Qin Yuhe to court, seeking a ruling that would declare their divorce as falsely claimed and mandate their remarriage. Disheartened by the legal defeat, she opts for a genuine divorce from Qin Yuhe, whom she denounces as an "animal."

The narrative takes an unexpected turn when Li Xuelian, in an effort to clear her name from the derogatory association with "Pan Jinlian," embarks on a decade-long journey to address her grievances. Her quest spans from the town to the county, from the city to the province, and eventually to the capital city.

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*, provides a comprehensive exploration of the historical evolution of women's status from primitive to contemporary society, delving into biological, psychoanalytical, historical, and mythological perspectives. In the film a recurring theme is the dynamics of male "seeing" and female "being seen," captured visually through the use of round shots that evoke a sense of voyeurism in the audience.

Within Chinese culture, Pan Jinlian symbolizes the archetype of the "bad" woman, embodying societal disdain when women deviate from established moral norms. Li Xuelian, the protagonist, challenges this archetype by fundamentally differing from Pan Jinlian—she is not a womanizer, seducer, or murderer. However, the male-centric concepts persist as neutral, and the discourse surrounding them is inherently legitimized. Li Xuelian's

decade-long petition is driven by the imperative to shed the stigmatizing label of "Pan Jinlian" and defend her dignity.

Beyond the themes of "seeing" and "being seen," the film is enriched with imagery surrounding Li Xuelian's body. Deep-rooted prejudices against women often subject their bodies to negative biases, portraying them as symbols of evil, desire, and sin. Li Xuelian's body becomes a powerful element in the narrative as she seeks "revenge" by bargaining with it at the butcher's shop. In patriarchal societies, women's bodies are perceived as controllable, their representation becoming intricately tied to the discourse of power.

Judy Butler's theories on the body's relationship with power find resonance in the film, as Li Xuelian becomes a tool of production and an object manipulated by those in positions of power. The antagonist, Big Head Zhao, cunningly seeks control over Li Xuelian by manipulating her body, illustrating the exploitation of the body as a means of asserting dominance. Li Xuelian's initial resignation from her petition, driven by the belief that she could lead a peaceful life, is disrupted when she discovers the deceitful machinations of those around her. Her relentless pursuit of justice is rekindled, revealing the intricate interplay between gender, power, and societal expectations in this cinematic narrative.

As Laura Mulvey said, the heroine Li Xuelian in the movie is treated as an object of desire, which is also the reason for her tragic fate. She wanted to file a complaint and clear her name. She uses men and is used by men. She awakens the subjective consciousness of lower-class women, but her tragic fate of lifelong loneliness also hints at the difficulty of modern women seeking identity in a patriarchal society.

4.1.4 Damsels in Distress

The fourth image is the girl in distress, such as *City of Life and Death, Wuhai,* etc. The women in this type of film try to resist male oppression and gain freedom, but are unable to get out of their predicament.

City of Life and Death is a cinematic portrayal rooted in the historical context of the Nanjing Massacre, wherein the theatre of war becomes a crucible for feminist and nationalist contestations. At the epicenter of this ideological struggle lies the female body, wielded as a tool in a complex dance of rivalry and salvation. This dual function manifests as women employ their bodies for the simultaneous rescue of others, their nation, and ultimately themselves.

The film unfolds a narrative wherein women emerge as both saviors and victims, their destinies intricately entwined with the power dynamics of men. While initially positioned as agents of salvation, the conclusion reveals a nuanced reality where women, despite their instrumental roles, remain tethered to the dominion of male influence. The portrayal of women as the "second sex" underscores an inherent limitation in their ability to transcend this categorization, compelling them to grapple with the inexorable fate of being authored by societal norms.

In this cinematic exploration, *City of Life and Death* delves into the multifaceted dimensions of war, highlighting the intricate interplay between feminism, nationalism, and the female body. The film prompts contemplation on the enduring challenges faced by women, their

agency, and the complex negotiation of identity within the constraints of a historical narrative that often dictates their roles as either victims or survivors at the behest of male power.

These types of female images reflect the living conditions of Chinese women to a certain extent, but being able to win awards in the West is in line with the West's imagination and recognition of China. They are chosen by some film creators who aim to win awards. In his hands, he is constantly shaping it intentionally or unintentionally, constantly using it to repeatedly show China under the Western imagination.

4.2 "The Other" of Chinese Film

From a comprehensive perspective and in the context of historical development, the Orientalist discourse within the realm of overseas Chinese film studies is not an isolated phenomenon. Its primary source lies in the typological distortion of China's image within narratives of foreign films. Despite significant changes in China's national image and the portrayal of its people since the era of reform and opening up, they continue to face Orientalist distortions in the image responses of overseas films. These distortions are not only ethically questionable in terms of image portrayal but also compromise the authenticity of these expressions.

In his exploration of Orientalism, Said identifies a paradox encountered by Oriental artworks. European Orientalist scholars emphasize the value of these works, yet simultaneously insist that "Oriental's itself ought not to be taken in its entirety." (Said, E. W., 1979:128) This duality involves the selective interpretation of Oriental texts, constituting the theory of Fragments in Oriental Studies. Said always made it plain why the "Orient" on its own could not survive a European's taste, intelligence, or patience. What said was really saying was that literary works had to be properly transformed by the Orientalist before it could begin to be appreciated. The Orient, as depicted, becomes subservient to Western culture in these fragmented interpretations, existing merely as a reference that affirms the values of Western culture.

Among the Chinese films selected for the San Sebastian Film Festival, awards are bestowed upon films that embody Orientalist themes, appealing to Western society. These films often portray images of China and Chinese women, typically depicting women from less developed regions or rural areas, emphasizing their sacrifices.

On the other hand, the films that won awards at the San Sebastian Film Festival have always been in the position of the Other under the Orientalist scrutiny of Western society. The issue of Orientalism in award-winning films overseas has always been a source of concern. However, film and television are not benign forms of entertainment, but are imbued with power as makers of meaning and identity (Hughes, M., 2019. 02). In order to win awards, filmmakers' self-Orientalism has become increasingly obvious. The film festival stands from the perspective of the first world, emphasizing the pain and helplessness of women in the third world. Through the construction of differences, it highlights the bad habits in the traditions of the third world. Orientalism quitted being the issue of East and West as Said stated and turned into an internal matter of East. The actors of Westernization aren't the Westerners any more. The Eastern societies Easternize themselves through their elites possessing the western values. The Eastern people make the social marking on the other Easterner. In fact, the East reproduces the West inside it even when it resists to the West through the arguments of "theirs" (Bezci and Çiftçi, 2012:160). The employed or vocally

articulated orientalist images aren't incidental. The producer and directors has chosen intentionally the "bad" characters of the films among the regressive, feudal China and revealed his perspective and intention (Mert, A., 2015:24.). Within this constructed cinematic landscape, women emerge as deliberate objects of expression, embodying the mystique and wonder associated with the Orient.

Inside China, some scholars or critics attack film directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige whose successes in various international film festivals depend largely upon their being recognized by Western scholars and critics because their films are regarded as a version of Orientalism, or more exactly, as images made exclusively for a Western audience (Wang, N. 1997. 57).

5. Conclusions

It has been nearly 30 years since 1994, when director He Ping's double hit knocked on the door of the Golden Shell Award and Chinese films entered the world stage. Chinese films are increasingly recognized by world film festivals.

Through the analysis of female images in Chinese award-winning films at the San Sebastian Film Festival, this article can see that the women created by China are more stereotyped images from a male perspective. The West's acceptance of Eastern women is more from the perspective of Orientalism. Although the spread of female image culture has spread Chinese culture to a certain extent and promoted the development of feminist film theory, it has also caused Chinese filmmakers to create in order to win awards and cater to the West, and the degree of self-Orientalization has deepened, making women in movies The one-sided image will affect the true and objective dissemination of the image of women and the image of China in China.

Judging from the history of film festivals and Western mainstream society's acceptance of Chinese films, works that meet Orientalist expectations seem to be more popular. Investigating the reason, the temptation of Orientalism to mainstream society is a reason that cannot be ignored.

Directors' cultural criticism in movies cannot help improve the image of China and Chinese women, but it can further strengthen the West's positional advantage in the comparison of East and West, and the evidence to prove this advantage comes from an "insider." The seriousness of the West is more convincing and will naturally be welcomed by the mainstream.

Appendix

Film	Year	N	Director
Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker	1994	42	He Ping
Together with You	2002	50	Chen Kaige
Letter from an Unknown Woman	2004	52	Xu Jinglei
Sunflower	2005	53	Zhang Yang
Thousand Years of Good Prayers	2007	55	Wayne Wang
Exodus	2007	55	Peng Haoxiang
The Equation of Love And Death	2008	56	Cao Baoping
City of Life and Death	2009	57	Lu Chuan
I Am Not Madame Bovary	2016	64	Feng Xiaogang
Wu Hai	2020	68	Zhou Ziyang
Kong Xiu (A Woman)	2022	70	Wang Chao

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