

Transforming Families in Chinese Melodrama under the Influence of May Fourth

Yiyuan Zhang, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

One of the most important dates in twentieth-century Chinese history is May 4, 1919. It is a day of a spate of patriotic demonstrations, led by students and intellectuals, chiefly in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, objecting to the Treaty of Versailles. However, May Fourth Movement is a lasting significant movement that is not just for political demands. It has long-lasting effects on Chinese cultural and intellectual activities up to the present day. Intellectuals in that time were not only asking for political reform, but also calling for culture reform in western style. The May Fourth Movement is broadly left-leaning in politics and advocate a strong cultural nationalism, its influences spread across cultural production from literature to film. In Chinese tradition, the family rather than individual or the state was the most important social unit, and it was against in the May Fourth Movement. This paper will focus on several family melodramas from 1920s to 1930s, examining how they represent families during this transitional era. Then this paper examines the films today, to see their similarities and differences. What does a modern family look like in film, in visual representation, and how does it differ from literature's representation. Finally, the paper will examine whether the influence of May Fourth still exists, and how it and will impress the modern China.

Keywords: Chinese Melodrama, May Fourth, 1920s - 1930s

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

One of the most important dates in twentieth-century Chinese history is May 4, 1919. It is a day of a spate of patriotic demonstrations, led by students and intellectuals, chiefly in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, objecting to the Treaty of Versailles. However, May Fourth Movement is a lasting significant movement that is not just for political demands. It has long-lasting effects on Chinese cultural and intellectual activities up to the present day. Intellectuals in that time were not only asking for political reform, but also calling for culture reform in western style. May Fourth Movement brings the most profound social thought and cultural change to modern China. It is both an ideological revolution and an ethical revolution. The May Fourth intellectuals opposed the feudal ethics and men's respect for women, advocated personality independence and individual liberation, and the dynasty of marriage ethics became the breakthrough point for intellectuals to promote social change at that time. With the progress of the women's liberation movement, issues concerning social openness, virginity, freedom of marriage, divorce and remarriage, and illegal marriage and celibacy have aroused widespread concern in society. Under the catalysis of the ethical change of marriage, the issue of marriage and love has become the main creative theme of the May Fourth intellectuals. Its creations include freedom of love, intergenerational conflict, marriage ethics, divorce, runaway, celibacy and homosexual love.

Not only in literature but also in film, they echo the demands of the marriage ethics revolution in the May Fourth Movement. In the early 20th century, many domestic film companies established, including Mingxing, Tianyi, and Minxin. By 1927, there were 106 theaters in China, and film-going was becoming a new lifestyle in urban life (North, 1927). Most films were martial art films and family melodramas. Many films represent the oppression of female and youth by the patriarchy family and society. The narrative of marriage and love bears the responsibility of the “new democracy”, participates in the social ethical transformation and reconstruction through the new form of art, and expands the marriage ethics revolution through the media. The influence promoted the modernization process of marriage ethics during the May Fourth period. The discussion on the narrative of marriage ethics in the May Fourth Movement is not only the concern for the modernization of Chinese traditional marriage ethics, but also the analysis of the subjective consciousness, spiritual appeal, traditional ethics and personality structure of the May Fourth intellectuals.

Melodrama is now both widely acknowledged as an important dramatic genre, with its own coherent set of conventions, and also understood more broadly as a mode of apprehension, behavior, and social action (William, 2012). The word “Melo-” is actually from the Greek which closely related to songs and music. Therefore the Melodrama was defined firstly in the early 19th century as the show that contained songs and music in order to enhance the situations presented on stage (Dissanayake, 1993). However, the meaning had been changed as a drama of “excess”, which is rather a mode of high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict than a tragic or a comic (Brook, 1976). The audience can be part of the process of both experiencing the world and creating it. As mentioned by Marcantonio, melodrama represented the democratic and industrial societies in 19th century, and the melodrama retained a flexibility to adapt the modernity to engage with the cultural, social, technological and political change (Marcantonio, 2015). The main purpose of a melodrama is to give

sensationalism and arise the emotions (Han, 2015). However, the melodrama in Asia, especially China, differs from the melodrama in Western, because the theme of the melodrama is more related to the family as a whole rather than the individuals in a family (Dissanayake, 1993). Pickowicz indicates that melodrama was not the only genre that existed in the thirties, but it was by far the most dominant. And it was a genre especially well suited to the task of popularizing and dramatizing basic Marxist ideas (1993: 301). The family is considered to be the connection between the state and the individual. In the Chinese melodrama this connection could be either maintained or challenged. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese melodrama became prosperous, reflecting the imperialism, nationalism, social hierarchy and gender conflict (Hays, Nikolopoulou, 1999).

Because melodrama is historically tied to the rise of the nation-state, I take it to be a useful angle to consider and visualize the relationship between family and the nation. In Chinese tradition, the family rather than individual or the state was the most important social unit, and it was against in the May Fourth Movement (Cui, 2003). In the play *The Greatest Event in Life* (Hu Shi, 1919), the female protagonist rebels against her parents and walks away from her family home in her pursuit of free marriage. Such a plot of 'walking away' also became a common theme in May Fourth literature. Hu Shi, Lu Xun also tried to raise the status of the human/individual, encouraged individualist expression by depicting young (wo)man rebelling against the family (Yang, 2010). In this paper, I will focus on several family melodramas from 1920s to 1930s, exam how they represent families during this transitional era. I will from the angle of romantic relationship and modern family to discuss the transforming families, especially through feminism perspective, to see how these theories affect the representation of families, female and male characters in family melodramas. Then I will compare them with recent melodramas to see if May Fourth's ideas of gender, female liberation, liberalism and individualism well delivered in the film world of today, and do we step over the debate of feminism and individualism made in the May Fourth Movement?

1. Romantic relationship

When it comes to the relationship between men and women, freedom of love seems to be a nature social phenomenon. Love must be based on freedom. In fact, the freedom of men and women and love are the concepts established in modern times. In the feudal society of thousands of years, the ethical premise and norms of Chinese feudal marriages were "the order of the parents" and "the words of the matchmaker." Through the intermediary role of the matchmaker, emphasize the difference between men and women, to prevent obscenity, in line with the provisions of Confucian rites. In the non-autonomous marriage made by parents and matchmaker, the parents and the matchmaker become the subject of marriage, while the young men and women only exist as supporting roles and objects. Young men and women do not have any marital autonomy and independence consciousness. They can only obey their parents. It is an important way to practice the core value of filial piety in Confucian ethics. If the Children that do not obey their parents' arrangements for their marriage, they are a violation of Confucianism.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the authoritarian marriage ethics of "the order of parents and the words of the matchmaker" was questioned and challenged by modern

marriage ethics. Kang Youwei criticizes traditional marriage and argues that both men and women have the right to independence, and they have the freedom and right to get married and divorce (Kang, 2007). He further indicates that although the marriage is a combination, husband and wife are still independent individuals (2012: 129).

In May Fourth, the position of women had been enhanced with the awoken of sexual pleasure and the coercion of fertility had been undermined. As Giddens described, the sexuality becomes decentered since women claim for the sexual pleasure, and the sexuality has been set free from the rule of phallus; only under this circumstance the sexuality can be emancipated and lead to pure relationship (Giddens, 1992). These changes were focused on the autonomy, equality, pleasure needs and romance. To some extent, the May Fourth shares some similarity with the Renaissance, when the Religion Force can no longer dominate the marriage and fertility. The May Fourth movement engaged in the reconstruction of modern Chinese ethic of marriage, as well as the movement researched on the basement of love and family. Though occasionally there were many different interpretations about the freedom of the marriage, the May Fourth abided by achieving the liberty and freedom. The traditional arrangement for marriage had been criticized as “plundering” or “transaction”. The marriage should be only decided by the young lovers. Moreover, the couple should also be free of divorcing. As Chen Wangdao said in the journey “Female Comments”, the freedom of marriage is equally important as the freedom of divorce (Chen, 1979). During the May Fourth, the right for women to engage in the education and social activities had been admitted gradually. Some women even participated in the politics. Therefore, May Fourth strengthened the female status by fighting for the freedom and equality.

However, the whole process of changing had been developed gradually. As depicted in the film *Laborer's love* (Zhang Shichuan, 1922), Carpenter Zheng had fell in love with Doctor Zhu's daughter. However, Doctor Zhu rejected Zheng was far from matching his daughter. Doctor Zhu pointed out publicly that anyone who could increase his benefits from his business would marry with his daughter. Then Carpenter Zheng secretly modified the stairs of the club and the gamblers were injured by accidents. Therefore, the Doctor Zhu had to agree the marriage between Carpenter Zheng and his daughter to fulfill his oath. The film showed the conflicts between traditional Chinese culture and the new tide of changing. Carpenter Zheng was able to fall in love with the lady freely, and there was even a line “Will you marry me?” However, on the other hand, it was not a true free marriage. Doctor Zhu represented the guardians of Chinese traditional culture. He tried to prevent the marriage, but he was not unbreakable. The daughter is negative in this relationship like a trading chip. The film illustrated the situation that the traditional culture had been retreating but still played an important role.

2. Modern family

In the traditional Chinese marriage, the emphasis is on patriarchal supremacy, husband's supremacy, male superiority, and unequal marriage. The purpose of marriage is to have the next generation, and the wife is only a tool for the male family to give birth to future generations. In the family wife is subordinate to the husband, the wife can only follow the monogamy system in marriage, and the husband can achieve the purpose of polygamy in many ways. For a long time, Chinese women are dominated by the feudal patriarchal ethics. Women can only teach children in the

family and act as good wives and mothers because of the economy. Women cannot participate in political affairs, social intercourse, and they can only become vassals and slaves of men and be trapped at home.

Modern marriage ethics is a kind of contract, emotion and ethical relationship. This is different from the traditional Chinese marriage relationship, the patriarchal clan. In marriage, the husband and wife are individuals and communities, independent and open. A unified and harmonious marriage requires both to undertake and fulfill their respective rights and obligations. The maintenance of love in marriage requires both moral support and responsibility, as well as the cultivation and management of love between the two parts in order to achieve physical, psychological and emotional match. The understanding of the essence of marriage ethics by the May Fourth Writers involves the communication and understanding of husband and wife, the creation and renewal of love, the moral responsibility and self-discipline in marriage. This is questioning and ethical thinking of the marriage life after confronting the May Fourth freedom of love.

In the film *The pearl necklace* (Li Zeyuan, 1926), it depicts a modern city in China. This film is adapted from Maupassant's novel *The Necklace*. It involves a middle-class family. The wife Xiuzhen is invited by her friend Meixian to a Lantern festival party. However, she does not have any jewelry and feels embarrassed. Her husband Wang Yusheng borrows a pearl necklace from the jeweler friend Zhou Quan. In the Lantern Festival party, Xiuzhen shows off this piece of jewelry to Meixian. Meixian is very fond of it, so her boyfriend Ma Rulong steal it for her. Because of unable to return the necklace, Wang Yusheng uses the public funds to buy the necklace and returns to his friend. His boss finds out and Wang Yusheng is imprisoned. Xiuzhen moves to a suburban area to make a living by sewing clothes. After being released from prison, Wang Yusheng finally working as workers at a Yarn Factory. At the end, they find out the truth, and redeem their house back. Two families both live a happy life.

Family in this film is transforming. It is not a traditional Chinese family, but a combination with western lifestyle. The decoration of the house is a hybrid of Western and Eastern. They have sofa and fireplace, but they also have Chinese style wood furniture. They drive cars and wear suits. These also seem to be symbols of their identities. Women can go out for social, and attend parties, while men can stay at home for babysitting. Husbands try to satisfy their wives and meet their demands. This film depicts two modern families. Both are equal in love. The two husbands are loyal to each other's wives and take the responsibility of the families. In particular, the "good guy" Yusheng pays a painful price for his wife's vanity: he was imprisoned; Ma Rulong is entangled, slandered, and threatened by the thieves because he steals the necklace to please his wife. This two families are in a transforming status. They are influenced by the criticism of patriarchy in May Fourth, but it still has inequivalence between man and women. Men make mistakes, but they are described as victim. The whole tragedy is caused by women's vanity.

Thus, in this film, the families are not traditional patriarchal families. They are love marriage, women can go out and social, while women still depend on men. Moreover, misogyny still hide in this film or even the whole society.

In another film *Little Toy* (Sun Yu, 1933), female protagonist Sister Ye and her family lives in a rural village. In contrast of *The pearl necklace* (1926), Sister Ye is the head of the family. She does housework and makes handmade toys as the mainstay of the family income. Compared with sister Ye's beauty and intelligence, her husband is a little inferior; but she is not unsatisfied with him, and the man is not depressed. In their marriage, their relation is equal. In the village, Sister Ye often sews clothes for the men in her village, and it is likely to be shaped into a slut in the hands of other directors. However, in this film, we saw only the simplicity of the neighbors in the countryside, and the happiness between men and women also became natural. In this film, female characters have the spirit of independence and resistance. When a rich man demonstrates his affection to Sister Ye, she refuses him and encourages him to study abroad and fund manufacturing. Sister Ye's daughter sacrifices in the Anti-Japanese War. Through the lens, what we see is not a stereotype of an oppressed women, but a warm, independent, tough woman.

This film inherits the spirit of May Fourth about female independence. Women work, social and fight for the country as men did. Li Da argues that the acquisition of women's rights to work is a prerequisite for eliminating all inequalities between men and women in society (1981:45). Chen Duxiu also claims that if a woman can really get independent on economy, she will not be oppressed by men (1981:82). Hu Shi states that women should establish an ideal that transcends the limitations of good wives and mothers, advocates Chinese women to learn from Western women, and advocates women to get rid of family shackles.

However, similar as May Fourth, women in the film is to promote left wing's idea. They represent some Chinese women but not all of them. Their status is raised by men, and they are used to fight against feudalism and capitalism. From this point of view, women are still oppressed and exploited by the patriarchal society.

Though the May Fourth has passed for one hundred years, the debate raised in the May Fourth is still existing. Chinese people have never stopped thinking and changing. By understanding the change from the May Fourth to today, it is very necessary to continue illustrating the successive progress to nowadays.

So long, my son (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2019) depicts the story between three families in decades. When Liu Yaojun and Shen Yingming were young, their sons Liu Xing and Shen Hao always played together. However, Liu Xing was dead suddenly in an accident. Therefore, Liu Yaojun and his wife were grieved, and they left the hometown desperately and secretly. They could not have another baby because Liu Yaojun's wife had been forced to accept an abortion for she had had the second baby, and this operation had deprived her ability of pregnancy. At that moment, family planning or birth control had been mandatory so they could not fight against it. Ironically, because of their chagrin, they had been named Achievers of the Year at the factory for setting the example of a one-child family. When they moved to a small village where they even could not speak the dialect, they adopted an orphan boy, whom they gave the name Liu Xing, as same as their dead son. Liu Xing became gloomy and rebellious, so he decided to abandon this family one day. Liu Yaojun and his wife were not able to find their son even though they had tried their best. At this moment, they received a news that Shen Yingming's wife was dying. They got on that bumpy plane and returned to the hometown that had changed so much. Shen

Yingming's wife regretfully confessed her offense that she had been the leader to force Liu Yaojun's wife to have the abortion. Liu Yaojun and his wife accompanied Shen Yingming's wife till she died. They went back to the small village, and Liu Xing came back with his girlfriend eventually.

This film starts at the period of culture revolution and ends in nowadays after the reform. In the almost forty years, three ordinary families face state authority, and trap into the traditional Chinese culture and morality. The whole story unfolds with an accident, in which Yaojun and Liyun lost their child. Afterwards, the audience realize that the "Losing Child" is the theme of this family tragedy. They experienced four times of "Losing Child", and each of them represents different powers that the family was not able to neglect. The abortion represented the state authority, which could reflect that people were desexualized when facing the ideological state apparatuses. The crowd worn boring clothes with dark green or gray color and there was nearly no decoration on the dresses. The family and individuals had to yield in front of the state authority just like the women had to receive the abortion. Then the death of the child who drown accidentally signify the unavoidable conflicts among the society. In traditional China, millions of family bond together to survive, which handed down for thousand years as the agricultural society. However, in the film, Yaojun's family was able to move away from their hometown after the Reform. It indicated the single family became more independent than before. The third "Losing Child" was vaguely implied in the film but it was also very meaningful. Yaojun was tempted to have sex with Moli, Yingming's sister. Moli let Yaojun decide whether she could give the birth to the baby. It did not clearly indicate in the film, but the hybrid child who was born by Moli later showed that Yaojun decided not to have his child with Moli. This represents the ethic argument in a family. Yaojun had affairs but he had rather to lose the child rather than live with guilty. The sense of traditional moral had been still playing a very important role in the family. The last "Losing Child" is relatively moderate and it is the mainline of the story. Their adopted son left the family angrily, because he thought he was only a substitution of the dead boy, and they nurtured him by traditional patriarchal oppressed way. But he came back eventually. This represents the conflicts between two generations. The conflicts undoubtedly existed but finally can be reconciled. Though there are plenty of differences between the traditional family and the contemporary family, the main purpose remains the same that the family members should carry on. Such plots seem to show strong traditional male obsessions and male selfishness.

Furthermore, the sense of posterity is extremely important in this film. Liyun tried to suicide since she lost her boy and her fertility. Liyun still had some traits as the traditional woman though from the surface it appeared like she shared the same hierarchy with Yaojun in the family. She was still obsessed with the role that she could give birth to a baby. The imputation should be the dominant power not individuals. Same stubborn thinking can be found on Haiyan. Haiyan, on her occasion of dying, said to Yaojun and Liyun: "We are rich now so you can have a baby again." Haiyan is a typical character that she seeks for her position under the state authority. When she was the officer of family planning, she could be so ruthless that she ordered Liyun to have the abortion. However, this did not change the relationship between two family. This reflected the traits of that specific time. Liyun and Yaojun knew that there would be someone else, if not Haiyan, to force Liyun to accept the abortion. Haiyan was only the one that had been chosen to follow the instruction. Before

Haiyan died, she thought she could fix what she had done by offering money. If Liyun is a character to show that how a woman painfully lives in the contemporary society, Haiyan can be considered as an extreme example of how a woman could be lost on the way of purchasing the power and status.

In the film, besides Yaojun's family and Yingming's family, there is a third family which are Gao Meiyu and Zhang Xinjian. Xinjian was arrested because he went to dance in the night. He was accused as obscene in public area. Meiyu said she was willing to wait for him. After Xinjian was emancipated from the jail, they married and went south. They had no kids at the end of the film. Unlike Yaojun's family and Yingming's family, though they also could not fight against the state authority, they lived freely rather than haunted by the idea of having offspring. This family represented the so-called "DINK". "DINK" is an abbreviation of "Double Income, No Kids". This idea is very rebellious from the traditional Chinese culture perspective. Normally DINK will receive many doubts and hostility, either from their family or from the society. In the film, it does not clear depict how Meiyu and Xinjian live together, but it shows that they were very unweaving and firm.

This film describes three families during forty years. In the time of culture revolution, families are powerless facing state authority and government doctrine. After the reform, people choose to become diaspora to flee from the trauma. This trauma comes from the oppression of the individual in the patriarchal society and the oppression of women. Their yearning for a son shows strong traditional male obsessions and male selfishness. The reunion at the end implies a return to conservatism. The only happy family in this film is Mingyu and Xinjian which does not follow the tradition.

Conclusion

China in the 21st century has been in turmoil, and various political changes have had a major impact on film production. The family as a link between individual and society and the country, is a lively space of ideological competition. The daily life scene in film implies social change. In this paper, I analysis Chinese melodramas in two periods. In the 1920s to 1930s, under the influence of May Fourth movement, families in melodramas represent some modernity which are raised in the movement, such as love marriage, monogamy, freedom of individuals and feminism. However, this modernity has limitations. Women in this time are used as an ideological tool to spread the spirit of democracy and science of May Fourth. Misogyny still exists in many films to conceal men's faults. In nowadays, the appearance of family is modernized, people have the freedom of getting married and divorced. However, facing the patriarchal family and society, individual seems still powerless. Women still be treated as a tool in some cases. We still trap in the debate that May Fourth intellectuals argues.

References

- Brooks, P. (1976) *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Chen, D. X. (1981) *Women's issues and socialism*. Selected Works of Women's Issues during the May 4th Movement. Beijing: Joint Publishing company. p.82
- Chen, W.D. (1979) *Female Comments*. P.73.
- Cui, S. Q., (2003), *Women through the Lens*. University of Hawai' I Press.
- Dissanayake, W. (1993) *Melodrama and Asian cinema*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Polity Press. Oxford, United Kingdom.
- Han, Q. (2015) *The portrayal of family in early Chinese melodrama films*. *Critical Arts* 29(3):419-436.
- Hays, M. and Nikolopoulou, A. (1996) *Melodrama: the cultural emergence of a genre*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kang, Y. W. (2012) *Datong Shu*. Zhonghua Book Company: Beijing p.129.
- Li, D. (1981) *Women's Liberation Theory*. Selected Works of Women's Issues during the May 4th Movement. Beijing: Joint Publishing company. p. 45
- Marcantonio, Carla. (2015) *Global Melodrama: Nation, Body, and History in Contemporary Film*. Palgrave Macmillan; 1st ed. 2015.
- North. C. J. (1927) *The Chinese motion picture market*. Washington DC: U.S. Govt. print. off.
- Pickowicz, Paul G. (1993) *Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, p. 301.
- William, C. (2012) *Melodrama, The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*. Edited by Kate Flint, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Yang, L. F. (2010) *The Absence of Gender in May Fourth Narratives of Woman's Emancipation: a Case Study on Hu Shi's the Greatest Event in Life*. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*. 12 (1), June 2010. pp. 6-13.

Contact email: 18481450@life.hkbu.edu.hk