

**Fascinating Patriarchy:**  
**An Analysis of Family Roles in Chinese Films in a Patriarchal Society**

**Dissertation Question:**  
**How do Chinese family films represent patriarchy?**

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Thanks that there are still films in this world.

## **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research and works focusing on Chinese family films. These works cover multiple domains and dimensions, including patriarchal culture, female perspectives, and emotional expression. However, due to subjective and objective factors, traditional patriarchal culture persists in Chinese family films. The media's portrayal of family members tends to be stereotypical, one-sided, and influenced by the male gaze. I believe that this phenomenon needs to be addressed.

The shot is a crucial carrier of visual information and serves as the fundamental unit in the composition of a film. Montage, on the other hand, constitutes an essential element in cinematic narration and expression. The analysis of film language allows audiences to better understand the thoughts and emotions expressed in a film, as well as the creator's style and structure. This provides an excellent means for audiences to comprehend the cultural context, background and themes. Therefore, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Chinese family films and film characters through the film language, focusing on both shots and montage. The goal is to explore how Chinese family films represent patriarchy.

Through this research, I hope to provide insights for future Chinese family film, to break the limitations of Chinese family films and to raise societal awareness of issues related to patriarchal family rights and women's rights.

## **Introduction**

The definition of the concept of family film, in the Western context, refers more to movies with a family audience, in other words, movies suitable for all ages or even younger audiences (The Hollywood Family film, 2012). While in the Eastern context, family film refers more to the movie with the theme of family, i.e., the movie that explores the concept of family with the theme and main plot of family ethical relationship, family gender life and gender emotion, individual pursuit and social and cultural conflict or integration (Zheng, 2008). And the family film in this dissertation is also discussed under this context and concept.

Compared with the West, China's film creation started late. Around the 1990s, under the joint promotion and influence of the political, cultural and technological levels, family films began to gradually enter the public eye (Yan, 2019). In China, the broad definition of a family film is a film with a family theme, known as a family ethical film. Zheng (2008) suggests that a family film is a film in which the theme and main plot elements consciously explore the concept of the family, and that the most prominent feature of a family film is that it "often discusses the country in terms of the family, and refracts huge socio-political issues through interpersonal and emotional conflicts in the family, which has become an important feature of the epic narrative that is different from that of other nationalities". Yang (2017), on the other hand, suggests that when family film is defined as a genre, it refers to family ethical films, i.e. films made by professional producers whose content theme is about family.

The earliest Chinese family-themed television production dates back to the 1950s with the completion of *A Bite of Pancake* (1958). Around the 1990s, family films have gradually entered the public eye. Examples include the 1980s production such as *Yellow Earth* (1984), the 1990s films *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), the 2000s film *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), and the 2010s films *Einstein & Einstein* (2013) and *Four Springs* (2017), as well as the 2020s films *Song of Spring* (2022), *The Woman in the Storm* (2023). These films represent typical works within the genre of family films.

Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, emphasised the value system of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity", and used clan and blood relations as the core to build the family and establish society through the formation of the family, thereby forming and establishing a set of ethical norms and moral codes that have lasted for thousands of years (Peng, 2007). This also propelled the development of patriarchal society. In Confucianism, there is an emphasis on filial piety and loyalty, meaning that children should obey their fathers, and women are expected to maintain chastity. Men, on the other hand, exercise social control through their status in terms of bloodlines and clan relationships.

The family films created under the influence of this idea are keen to explore different family relationships and family concepts, and portray family members of different genders and generations. Their contents are closely related to Confucian

culture and epitomise the patriarchal society of China as a whole.

As I said above, Chinese family films emphasise the emotional relationships and concepts in the family. From the aspects of gender and generation, it depicts the growing generation gap and ideological conflicts between generations as well as the oppression and indifference towards women in a patriarchal society. For example, in *Einstein & Einstein* (Cao, (Director), 2013), it tells the story of the girl Li Wan in a male-dominated family. In *Dearest* (Chen, (Director), 2014), it reflects the social issue of female trafficking. In *A Sun* (Chung, (Director), 2019), it presents a distorted and oppressive father-son relationship in a patriarchal society.

The shot is a crucial carrier of visual information and serves as the fundamental unit in the composition of a film. Montage, on the other hand, constitutes an essential element in cinematic narration and expression. The analysis of film language allows audiences to gain a deeper understanding of the thoughts and emotions expressed in the film, as well as the creator's style, structure, and interpretation of the visuals. It can be said that the analysis of film language is an excellent means for audiences to comprehend the cultural context, background, themes, and the creator's perspective conveyed in a film.

Therefore, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of different Chinese family films and film characters through two aspects of film language, film shots and

film montage. The film language is used as a channel to analyse how Chinese family films represent patriarchal society.

I hope that through the study of this topic, I can give an overview and sort out the family films on this subject and provide insights for future film production. At the same time, I hope to break the limitations of Chinese family films, and to arouse humanistic concern for patriarchal family rights and women's rights in the society as much as possible.

## **Patriarchy Theory and the Chinese Family**

### **The Concept of Patriarchy: Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives**

Patriarchy is a commonly used term in several articles on patriarchy and feminism, but it still lacks a clear concept and its meaning.

Dalla (2023) defines patriarchy as institutionalised power relations, and the rights granted by men to women. She mentions that under patriarchy, men, by creating, developing and dominating social institutions, have forced women to be relegated to being the main bearers of child-rearing, while men have become economically dominant. Weber (2004), on the other hand, uses the term patriarchy to describe a social system and the system of management in which men use their patriarchal position within the family to dominate society.

However, whether defined as a power relationship or a social system, patriarchy emphasises the gender aspect, male control over women and gender inequality. Since the birth of feminism in the 1960s, in most of the articles on patriarchy and feminism between the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars put forward the concept of patriarchy, they usually compared the differences in rights between men and women due to gender differences.

For example, in *Ways of Seeing*, art critic and novelist John Berger (2008) suggests that because the mass media overemphasises women's sexual service roles, film and television productions based on this are in fact a male gaze on women. Women themselves are influenced to view themselves and other women through a male shots (Berger, 2008). Berger compares and emphasises the differences in rights between genders. This emphasis on gender is also reflected in Chinese scholars' discussion of patriarchy. Mo (1981) suggests that under the development of society, men have become the main producers of agriculture, animal husbandry and handicrafts, while women have become the bearers of household chores and child rearing. Therefore, the right to dispose of property for the family fell into the hands of men, and this was the beginning of the development of patriarchy (Mo, 1981). Similarly, Song (1979), in his discussion mentioned that the change of society and family into a patriarchal system is, first and foremost, a structure of the development of the productive forces of society and is the result of profound changes in the position of men and women in economic life. These studies illustrate scholars'

emphasis on gender factors when defining the concept of patriarchy, reflecting their tendency to equate patriarchy with gender inequality in rights between men and women.

However, with the passage of time and in-depth research, many scholars have begun to define the concept of patriarchy in more detail, while Chinese scholars have redefined the concept of a patriarchal society in China in the context of China's unique culture, without treating it as an unnecessarily abstract term, and have reflected on the social issues that patriarchy encompasses.

In fact, Chinese patriarchy includes not only male domination over women, but also the domination of the older over the younger. In Chinese patriarchal society, older or married women who accept and defend a patriarchal society tend to morally condemn and behaviorally insult all single women. And this behaviour is precisely the result of male oppression. Female relatives, for example, talk about the older single women in the family, believing that such non-marriage brings shame and dishonour to the family (Tang, 2021). This is a niche but impossible to ignore inequality of rights generated under a patriarchal society. Therefore, many Chinese scholars in later studies have regarded Chinese patriarchy as an inequitable mechanism composed of two intersecting and opposing aspects, gender and generation. This distinguishes it from Western patriarchy with its unique components rooted in Chinese culture.

Shen (2011) believes that the study of patriarchy in the Chinese family and society should be reinterpreted and redefined in the context of China's unique culture. He mentioned that age and age-related generations are equally important to Chinese identity and status compared to gender. Similarly, Maria (1994) mentions that one of the characteristics of Chinese patriarchy is that women are often the subject of oppression against another woman. Although this phenomenon often occurs in the West as well, such as competitive relationships between women due to their appearance, body shape, etc., but this kind of oppression between women with age generations is unique to Eastern families. Therefore, in order to decipher patriarchy in China, it is necessary to raise two dimensions of patriarchy, namely gender and generation.

In most of the studies conducted by Western radical feminist scholars, the concept of intergenerational equality has not been addressed. This may be due to the cultural difference that generation difference is not regarded as a patriarchal social issue in Western countries. However, for individual members of the Chinese social group, which is deeply influenced by Confucianism, although gender differences in rights are very important, intergenerational differences in rights are equally important. Because people in Chinese society have both gender and age identities. Both of these identities will affect his/her status and rights in the society.

In a nutshell, Chinese patriarchy is not created in the male and female social

gender identity, but in the difference of rights with men and women of different ages and generations. Therefore, this dissertation measures the discussion of patriarchy into the family members of a Chinese family and analyses the gender division of labour and power relations in the family as a way of demonstrating the family structure and power relations of a Chinese family under the influence of patriarchy.

The intricacies of power dynamics within Chinese patriarchal society and family structures are notably multifaceted, as alluded to in the preceding narrative. This complexity encompasses not only gender difference but also generation difference. These two differences are equally important, and it is gender and generation that make up the social identity of each Chinese family member. To undertake a comprehensive analysis of the influence of patriarchal culture within the context of Chinese family cinema, it becomes imperative to acquire a nuanced understanding of the comprehensive spectrum of Chinese patriarchal culture. Consequently, the ensuing discourse will pivot towards a focused exploration of gender disparities within the Chinese familial milieu, which constitutes a salient byproduct of the broader framework of Chinese patriarchal society. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that the ideation of gender differentiation finds expression within various strata of Chinese media, notably exemplified by the concept of the "male gaze."

## **The Male Gaze in Media: Projection of Desire**

The fundamental meaning of gaze refers to a prolonged act of looking. As an important concept in 20th-century Western cultural studies, the gaze also signifies a mode of viewing imbued with power dynamics or desire. It was introduced by film critic Laura Mulvey (1975) and is described as the tendency of visual arts to depict society from a predominantly male perspective. In the process of the gaze, the viewer is endowed with the privilege of looking as a means to establish their own subject position through this action. Meanwhile, the object being looked at becomes the target of the gaze, experiencing the oppressive weight of the viewer's authority (Mulvey, 1975).

This phenomenon is not exempt in media, as it's impossible to evade the language of cinematic visuality. Within this film language, men become subjects of the gaze and wielders of authority, while women are objectified in the visual arts as subjects of male viewing and desire (Xiao, 2018). The gaze belongs to the male, while women merely serve as objects of observation. Mulvey categorizes the male gaze in media into three distinct perspectives. The first is the creator's gaze. In the context of filmmaking, all creators view the women in the film through the lens of the male gaze, whether they be cinematographers, editors, screenwriters, or directors. The second gaze is that of the characters within the film, which can be male or female, as long as the gaze they employ is male. The third form of gaze is that of the audience, which tends to align with the male gaze of the creators (Mulvey, 1975).

The essence of the male gaze is not only the objectification of women but also the desire and pleasure it brings. According to Lacan's description, males become aware of their sense of self in relation to the differences in female bodies. In this process, women are gradually constructed as the other (Cavallaro, 2001). In order to evade the threat posed by the other, males further reaffirm their own subjectivity and power. Through voyeurism and observing the female body, males successfully expel the anxiety stemming from the other and obtain further validation of their authority (Cavallaro, 2001). Throughout this process, desire for the female body and the pleasure of viewing it emerge. It can be argued that this pleasure is obtained with the male gaze, and that the action of the male gaze is also gendered in that it satisfies, first and foremost, male desire and pleasure.

The opposite of the male gaze is the female gaze and the gay male gaze. While the gay gaze is about creating a male form through the shots to fit the aesthetic preferences of gay men (Wood, 2004), the female gaze is about expressing female emotions and fulfilling female desires through the shots (Christina, 2020). Lisa (2021) explores how female directors can express and present their female identity through the shots. Unlike Laura Mulvey's theory, Lisa believes that every filmmaker possesses a self-perspective, and gender is only one aspect of it.

Both the gay male gaze and the female gaze challenge Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze by no longer assuming that the viewer is a heterosexual male

perspective, breaking down, challenging and subverting the traditions of patriarchy and heterosexual male hegemony; they embrace and normalise different sexualities, desires and genders, representing and presenting a diverse group of people with different identities (Wary & Tim, 2003).

The exploration of different gazes is an endeavour to provide a voice for women and homosexuals. Unfortunately, however, such gazes have not yet become mainstream and have not yet escaped the binary framework of gender. This gaze stems from the power dynamics underlying the act of viewing, that is, the relationship between "seeing" and "being seen", and for China's patriarchal society, men are still the centre of power in the whole society.

The male gaze is a product of patriarchal society. As a film with a patriarchal social and cultural background, Chinese family films cannot escape the language of the male gaze. In the next section, I will introduce different shots in family films and analyse typical shots with patriarchal culture and the male gaze.

## **Family Film Shots and Montages**

### **Analysis of Shots in Family Films**

The shot is an important carrier of information on the screen and is the basic unit that constitutes a film. It is also a key element of the film's narrative. Through the use of different shot types, the audience can experience the different ideas,

information and emotions expressed by the creators (Rao, Wang, Xu, Jiang, Huang, Zhou & Lin, 2020). In the special genre of family film, the shots carries the role of character relationship and emotional narrative. Through these shots, the audience can truly see the meaning and deep emotions behind the family film. At the same time, the viewer also gets a glimpse of the patriarchal culture and the male gaze that it carries.

Film shots are divided into seven basic shots according to their size, namely the extreme wide shot, the wide shot, the full shot, the medium shot, the medium close-up shot, the close-up shot and the extreme close-up shot (Contis, 2022). In this dissertation, I will analyse three of the most common and basic shots used in family films: the full shot, the medium shot and the close-up shot as well as the patriarchal culture and the male gaze that they carry.

### **Full Shots: Narrative Building**

A full shot is a camera shot that extends a character's entire body from the top of the frame to the bottom of the frame (Bowen & Thompson, 2012), which frames the character from the bottom of the frame to the top of the frame frames the character from head to toe. In such a shot, the audience can clearly see the actors' costumes, movements, mannerisms, and character relationships, and such a shot is also useful for providing context and establishing a narrative (Bowen & Thompson, 2012).

For example, full shots are used in family films to build and refine the

narrative. In *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993), a full shot of a family eating together is presented. In this shot, only Mr.Gao is facing the camera, while everyone else is facing the camera sideways. Such a presentation actually implies that in a Chinese family, the role of the father is the most important and dominant, a kind of presentation of a patriarchal society. Through the establishment of this shot, the audience can learn about a traditional Chinese family with a class system, setting the stage for the subsequent plot of concealing the parents' fake marriage.

**Figure 3.1.**

A full shot from *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993).

The Gao family is eating at the dinner table.



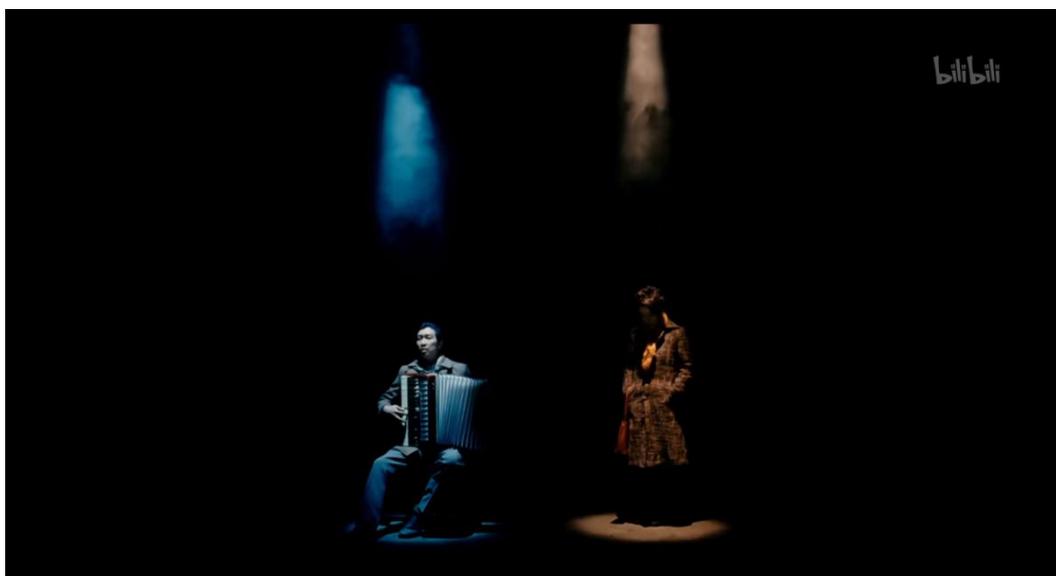
Furthermore, in family films, full shots are also used to depict different character positions, relationships, and emotions. For example, in *The Piano in a Factory* (Zhang, (Director), 2010), there is a full shot where the male protagonist,

Guilin, and his girlfriend, Shuxian, play music in an abandoned factory. In this shot, Guilin plays the accordion while Shuxian sings. The surroundings are depicted in black, with each of them having a different colored spotlight above their heads. Although the two characters appear to occupy roughly equal parts of the frame, their poses, the lights suggest different statuses between them. Guilin is seated with a bright blue light, and the audience can clearly see his face. In contrast, Shuxian stands with a dim orange light, looking down, and her face remains obscured. Such portrayals of different gender members within a family reflect a class-based structure in a Chinese household. Men are depicted as noble; they sit, proudly lift their faces, and are illuminated by bright light. On the other hand, women are portrayed as humble; they stand in dim light, and their faces are often hidden, emphasizing their subordinate position within the family structure.

**Figure 3.2.**

A full shot from *The Piano in a Factory* (Zhang, (Director), 2010)

Guilin and Shuxian are playing music.



## **Medium Shots: Communication of Relationship Emotions**

A medium shot is a film shot in which the subject is shot from the waist (or occasionally the knees) to the top of the head (Bowen & Thompson, 2012), and is the most commonly used shot in film. The medium shot takes on many roles in cinematography. It can clearly capture the dialogue of the characters, reflect the characters' costumes and backgrounds, and show the different body languages, providing the audience with a more intimate visual experience (StudioBinder, 2023).

In family films, medium shots serve the purpose of showcasing character backgrounds, relationships, and emotions. For instance, in *A Sun* (Chung, (Director), 2019), there is a shot where the father, Ah-wen, comes to give a book of encouragement to his eldest son, Ah-hao. The director employs a medium shot in which the audience can not only observe the characters but also take in the surrounding background. The father gazes at his son, while the son looks down at the book, with prestigious university admission notices displayed as a backdrop. This arrangement not only portrays the father's expectations for his son but also reflects the pressure and oppression the father exerts on him. This form of oppression is intangible, extending beyond mere academic expectations and embodying a power dynamic within the family, where authority figures dictate the goals one must achieve.

Simultaneously, the father and son are positioned on opposite sides of the frame, not physically close. This composition implies an intimate yet distant

relationship between them. Though they appear close, they remain emotionally distant, resembling a dynamic between acquaintances rather than close family members. As mentioned earlier, the concept of patriarchal control in Chinese households is not solely about male oppression of females; it also encompasses the authority of elders over the younger generation, such as fathers/mothers over sons/daughters. This visual portrayal effectively presents the hierarchical structure of patriarchal households to the audience.

**Figure 3.3.**

A medium shot from *A Sun* (Chung, (Director), 2019).

Ah-wen is giving a book to his son.



In *Einstein & Einstein* (Cao, (Director), 2013), when the daughter Li Wan attends a family gathering with her father and newborn brother, a medium shot is employed to portray the relationships and family status of the three individuals. The

father, as the core and authority figure of the family, is positioned in the center of the trio, with one arm around the baby brother and the other hand holding onto Li Wan. The father maintains a close proximity to the newborn son, while Li Wan is positioned at a certain distance from both of them. This presentation indirectly showcases the family's emphasis on and fondness for the son, shedding light on the prevalent practice of favoring sons over daughters in Chinese patriarchal society. Through such shots, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the unequal status between males and females in a patriarchal society.

**Figure 3.4.**

A medium shot from *Einstein & Einstein* (Cao, (Director), 2013).

The family is celebrating their youngest son's birthday.



**Close-up Shots: Reproducing Real Emotions and Details**

Close-up shots are film shots of subjects or objects at close range, which

capture an actor's facial expression and present details of an object through the shots, allowing the viewer to understand important information and emotions (StudioBinder, 2022).

In family films, close-up shots are often used to convey characters' emotions, while close-ups often feature the male gaze. For instance, in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991), the film begins with a close-up shot of the female protagonist, Songlian, who is about to be married off to a wealthy man in exchange for financial gain. In this shot, Songlian's face remains expressionless, but tears slowly trickle down her cheeks. Her eyes are filled with resentment, unwillingness, and anguish. This type of shot vividly portrays the tragic circumstances faced by women in a patriarchal society. Songlian is unable to choose her own husband and is powerless to alter her fate. This shot effectively conveys these emotions to the audience, bringing them into Songlian's emotional experience.

At the same time, this shot is also a typical male gaze shot, a shot that exposes the emotions of the woman and satisfies the male's voyeurism and curiosity. The fact that the woman is crying because she has to marry a male she does not love satisfies the male's desire for conquest. The fact that even a female who does not love her can be conquered by means demonstrates precisely the arrogance of the male.

**Figure 3.5.**

A close-up shot from *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991).

Songlian is crying.



In addition to expressing emotions through character close-ups, creators also utilize close-up shots to convey essential details and information. For example, in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991), there are close-up shots depicting foot massage. Feet, in various cultural contexts, often carry sexual connotations, as seen in the late Victorian fascination with ankle exposure in England (Dabhoiwala, 2012). In China, women's feet have held even greater sexual implications. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, there was an obsession with lotus feet (Zhang, 2020), where concubines were commanded to bind their feet with cloth into a crescent shape, dancing on lotus flowers made of gold.

In this film, foot massage serves as a reward from a husband to his wife.

Whichever wife the husband chooses to spend the night with, that wife earns the privilege of a foot massage. This is in fact a metaphor for power in disguise, and a typical male gaze shot, which fulfils the male's voyeuristic desire for the female body. In a patriarchal household, men hold absolute authority, and women gain influence by providing satisfactory sexual services. Such close-up shots not only convey crucial information and symbolic imagery to the audience but also artistically depict the dynamics of a male-dominated society and the objectification of women.

**Figure 3.6.**

A close-up shot from *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991).

The servant is giving Songlian a foot massage.



**Exploration of Montages in Family Films**

In addition to film shots containing patriarchal culture and the male gaze, in the process of filmmaking, one of the most fundamental steps is to re-edit and

rearrange shots to create a narrative. This involves providing a substantial amount of information and plot within a short span of time while overcoming constraints of time and space (Reisz, 2017). This is where montage comes into play, requiring multiple instances of shot editing. Montage is not only a technique of splicing and editing shots together, but also a technique that can show different emotions, ideas and enlighten the audience. In Chinese family films, montage is often used to show the traditional patriarchal culture and oppressed women's lives.

In the 1910s, 1920s, and early 1930s, a film movement known as Soviet Montage emerged in Soviet Russia. Lev Kuleshov, while teaching at the Moscow Film School, established the Soviet Montage theory. This theory revolutionized film editing techniques and made significant contributions to the French New Wave movement.

Unlike Hollywood continuity editing, montage editing doesn't necessarily occur in the same time and space, nor does it strictly adhere to continuity and the 180 degree rule (Zia, 2013). Hollywood continuity editing guides the audience's focus towards characters and the story, rather than the editing techniques employed (John, 2014). Montage, on the other hand, encourages the audience to establish connections between shots on their own, eliciting emotions and interpretations. Kuleshov believed that the crucial part of a film is not the individual shots themselves but how they are assembled together (Metz, 1974). Narrative is developed through juxtaposition, and

the meaning created by different combinations and sequences of shots goes deeper than the meaning of individual shots (Metz, 1974).

According to Kuleshov's classification of montage, there are roughly five different types: metric montage, rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtone montage, and intellectual montage (Eisenstein, 2010). In this dissertation, we discuss tonal montage and intellectual montage, which are often used in Chinese family films.

### **Tonal Montage: Lyricizing Time and Visualizing Emotion**

Tonal montage involves editing a film based on the emotional tone of scenes and cuts. It assembles a series of shots, visuals, and audio to convey emotions and feelings. This technique is often used to create strong sensations and evoke emotional resonance in the audience. Tonal montage might utilize specific editing, cutting, and sound techniques (Dancyger, 1993). A common approach is to edit together two shots with similar thematic elements or emotional tones, intertwining them to create a unique emotional experience (Dancyger, 1993). In Chinese family films, tonal montage is often used to express the tragic fate and painful life of women in a patriarchal society, and at the same time to show the pain, confusion, uncertainty and despair of women's hearts, which are unique and strong emotions.

For example, in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991), at the end of the movie, the director arranges a sequence of shots:

**Figure 3.7.**

Shots from *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang, (Director), 1991).



1



2



3



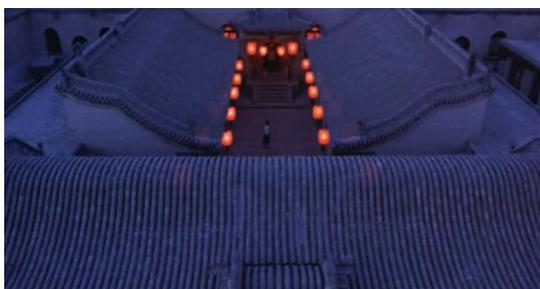
4



5



6



7

1. A close-up shot of the new concubine, Aunt Five, who has entered the Chen household.

2. A wide shot of a servant talking to Aunt Five about the mad Aunt Four.
3. A close-up shot of Aunt Four, who has already gone insane.
4. A wide shot of Aunt Four pacing back and forth in her room.
5. A wide shot of Aunt Four walking in her room until it gets dark.
6. A wide shot of Aunt Four's room.
7. A extreme wide shot of Aunt Four's room.

This sequence of shots vividly portrays the tragic fate of women and the oppression they face in a patriarchal household. The overall pacing shifts from slow to fast, aligning with the emotions of the central character. Shots 1 and 3 are close-ups of the faces of two women: Aunt Five, who has just entered the Chen household, and Aunt Four, who has been marginalized and driven to madness. These shots suggest their shared destiny and experiences. Shots 2 and 4 are structured in a similar manner, both wide shots with a strong metaphorical effect, indicating the shared unfortunate fate of women in a patriarchal society. It can be said that Aunt Four, who is now neglected and abandoned, will be Aunt Five's future.

On the other hand, shots 5, 6, and 7 carry profound subjective emotions and symbolism. The surrounding dark eaves resemble a cage. Aunt Four paces within her room, unable to escape the confines of the small courtyard. This symbolizes the constraints and oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society, illustrating that despite their efforts to fight and change, they remain bound.

When filmmakers employ tonal montage in film editing, they emphasize the inner emotions and subjective feelings of the subjects, amplifying the film's themes and emotional resonance (Dancyger, 1993). Simultaneously, filmmakers convey this emotional expression to the audience, enabling them to feel a more intense emotional conflict.

### **Intellectual Montage: Thought Conflicts from Neutral Segments**

Similar to tonal montage, intellectual montage involves editing different segments together to create new meanings and metaphors (Dang, 2022). However, unlike emotional montage, the segments in intellectual montage are mostly neutral, devoid of subjective emotional color (Dancyger, 1993). Intellectual montage focuses on conveying logic, thinking, and concepts. It showcases processes of thinking, associations of concepts, and logical reasoning through editing and cutting (Dang, 2022).

In Chinese family films, filmmakers often use intellectual montage to present more meanings and significance beyond the camera, such as suggesting the tendency of entitlement in a patriarchal society, metaphorically referring to male oppression of women, presenting generational differences in the family, and so on.

For example, in *A Sun* (Chung, (Director), 2019), after the eldest son, Ah-hao, commits suicide and his story of going to the zoo with a girl is mentioned, the director

presents a monologue by Ah-hao, employing intellectual montage.

**Figure 3.8.**

Shots from *A Sun* (Chung, (Director), 2019).



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1. A long shot of Ah-hao standing at a bus stop.

2. An empty shot of the zoo.

3. A medium shot of Ah-hao and his girlfriend at the zoo.

4.5.6. Empty shots of animals in the zoo hiding in shadows.

7. An empty shot of the bus stop.
8. A close-up shot of flowing water.
- 9.10.11. Empty shots of the city.
12. A full shot of Ah-hao walking on the street.
- 13.14.15 Empty shots of the city.
16. A long shot of Ah-hao standing at the bus stop.

Voiceover lines:

"The fairest thing in the world is the sun. Regardless of latitude, every place on Earth, throughout the year, receives equal spans of day and night. We went to the zoo a few days ago. The sun was blazing...so strongly, that the animals couldn't stand it. They all found ways to hide in the shade. I had a hazy feeling, I couldn't put into words. I also wished, just like those animals, that I could hide in the shade. But looking all around me, it wasn't just the animals that could hide in the shade, but you, my brother, even Sima Guang. You could all find dark corners with shade. But I couldn't. I had no water tanks, and no hiding places, but only sunlight... 24 hours, uninterrupted, radiant and warm, shining on all things."

Each individual shot in this sequence is neutral and devoid of emotional color. However, when combined and accompanied by Ah-hao's monologue, the audience can easily perceive metaphors and meanings within these shots.

Ah-hao, as the highly-expected eldest son in the family, is portrayed as

eternally positive and cheerful, seemingly basking in the sunlight. But, conversely, others seem to have hidden sides. This dichotomy is literalized as sunlight and shadow.

However, the audience gradually gains a second layer of understanding. The shadow here doesn't represent hidden or unknown places not touched by sunlight; it signifies the free and unbound inner world of each individual. In shot 3, the producer hints to the audience that Ah-hao's inner world is different from others. Furthermore, the frequent appearances of animals in the shadow and Ah-hao under the sunlight in shots 4, 5, and 6 deepen this metaphor. Contrarily, in shots 1, 12, and 16, Ah-hao is always walking in the sunlight. This indicates that Ah-hao's entire life is exposed to the sunlight, meaning he has no privacy or freedom. Simultaneously, the recurring shots of empty urban spaces in shots imply his inner world of loneliness and suffering, where no one understands him.

This sequence is rich in metaphors and meanings, arranging different shots of animals and cityscapes to imply Ah-hao's inner pain and solitude. Through interpreting this sequence, the audience can understand Ah-hao's tragic and painful experience as the oppressed one in a patriarchal Chinese family.

When filmmakers employ intellectual montage, they often use visual metaphors to convey meanings. Intellectual montage can be used to depict inner

monologues, explain complex plots or scientific concepts, and showcase characters' rational thinking (Aldredge, 2021). It might utilize various elements like text, symbols, and images to prompt deeper contemplation from the audience.

## **The Crying Female:**

### **Women Image under the Male Gaze and Patriarchy**

#### **Case Study : *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful***

Anyone who has seen a Chinese family film will be particularly impressed by the women portrayed and their experiences (Lin, 2013). In family films, although they are portrayed differently, they are always emotional. This emotion is not only a kind of pathos of women's status in a patriarchal society, but also a glimpse of women's emotions under the male gaze of the media.

Next I will introduce *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director),2017) a Chinese family film, and analyse the different female images in it through the shots and montages I have mentioned above. As well as analyse the typical male gaze shots and the film language with its patriarchal culture.

#### **Analysis of Shots for Representing Female Characters**

When showing female characters in Chinese family films, producers usually use close-up shots. In close-ups, the character's features and demeanour are enlarged and more details are presented to the audience. Female characters often appear in

close-ups in the media more than males, not only because close-ups can convey emotion and impact, but also because producers are happy to use close-ups to show the pain of female portrayals. And some of the close-up shots are also typical male gaze shots. It can be said that the display of female characters' emotions satisfies men's desire to pry into women's emotions, while the pain, sadness and despair of female characters' expressions also satisfy men's desire for conquest, protection and even sexual desire.

In *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017), the makers use close-ups several times to show the suffering of the female figure. When Tang Ning is coerced into a sexual transaction with Liao, and the creators present a close-up shot of them engaging in intercourse. In this shot, viewers can clearly see the mixture of pain and pleasure on Tang Ning's face. Conversely, Liao, being male, is shown with his back to the audience, making it impossible to discern his face or emotions.

This type of shot presentation not only amplifies Tang Ning's feelings of suffering, reluctance, and torment, but also exemplifies a classic male gaze. The close-up on the female expression, in fact, thrusts pornography into the audience's view in a public, rather than private, manner, with women as the primary carriers of this. Conversely, men are unwilling to gaze at other men's bodies, thus the portrayal of male intercourse is shown as exposed backs. This gaze is male-centric, and the

pleasure derived from it also holds gender-specific characteristics, catering to men, while women are relegated to the status of sexual accessories.

**Figure 4.1.**

A close-up shot from *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017).

Tang Ning is having sex.



Apart from close-up shots, the makers are also good at using medium shots to imply the positions, affinities and status between the female figures. For example, in this shot, the viewer can very visually see the expressions, mannerisms, movements and dresses of the three generations of mothers, daughters and granddaughter. Although all three are wearing very similar dark blue cheongsams, their stances and movements are different. The mother, as the head of the family, sits at the table and introduces herself to the visitors; while the daughter stands against a pillar with an

impatient look on her face; and the granddaughter sits beside mother. This shot hints at mother's control over her daughter and granddaughter as the person in charge of the family; it also hints at daughter's disdain and defiance towards mother, and the estrangement of the two, as well as the close relationship between granddaughter and mother, a closeness that goes beyond that of even daughter.

**Figure 4.2.**

A medium shot from *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017).

The mother is talking to guests.



**Analysis of Tonal Montage for Representing Female Characters**

Montage, as a visual language form involving the editing and organization of shots and images, has the ability to greatly enrich a film's plot and enhance its narrative quality (Zhao, 2023). In family films, the technique of montage is frequently

employed to edit and splice shots, enriching the narrative and constructing new worlds or emotions based on reality.

For example, in *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017), the filmmakers utilize tonal montage to create a specific emotional experience. When Tang Zhen confesses her love to Mark on a train and subsequently Mark rapes her, a sequence of shots is presented to convey this emotional journey.

**Figure 4.3.**

Shots from *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017).



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1. A full shot of Mark leading Tang Zhen into the train's freight car.
2. A close-up shot of Mark forcefully kissing Tang Zhen, who resists.
3. A medium shot of Mark forcefully kissing Tang Zhen, with her resisting.
4. A medium shot of Mark pushing Tang Zhen down onto the ground.

5. A close-up shot of Mark covering Tang Zhen's mouth and raping her.
6. A close-up shot of Mark removing Tang Zhen's underwear.
7. A close-up shot of Mark covering Tang Zhen's mouth.
8. A close-up shot of Tang Zhen's feet.
9. A medium shot of Mark leaving.
10. A full shot of Mark departing.
11. A full shot of Tang Zhen struggling to rise from the ground.

This sequence of shots vividly portrays Tang Zhen's inner emotions during the traumatic experience of being raped. The overall pacing shifts from slow to fast, effectively conveying Tang Zhen's internal turmoil. Shots 2 and 3 are repeatedly cross-cut, imbued with a subjective quality that vividly captures Tang Zhen's helplessness and anguish. Similar to shot 7, shot 5 depicts the male figure positioned above while the female is below, ostensibly representing sexual positions but inherently implying the inequality between male and female roles. Shots 6 and 8, focusing on the pink underwear and the feet, respectively, carry distinct metaphoric implications, suggesting the woeful fate of oppressed women relegated to serve as sexual objects for men. Shots 9, 10, and 11 starkly contrast the aftermath of their sex. Mark gets up swiftly and departs, while Tang Zhen struggles to stand, accentuating not just the societal inequality between genders but also mocking the commodification of women as disposable objects for male pleasure.

Beyond this, by observing these shots, the audience can glean additional layers of meaning beyond the frames. The audience is just a vessel, with the true focus being the director's shots. The provision of these shots becomes a manifestation of the male gaze in the media. In shots 5 and 7, Tang Zhen's expressions of pain are vivid, while the assailant Mark's face is only partially visible. Additionally, shots 6 and 11 feature the recurring motif of pink underwear, and shot 8 accentuates the female ankle, all laden with potent sexual innuendos. These elements, laced with sexual implications, are presented to the audience, primarily satisfying the voyeuristic desires of the male gaze. It can be said that the director approached this rape scene from a male perspective, viewing Tang Zhen through a male gaze.

From this, we can perceive an invisible oppression of women. Women are mere products of a patriarchal culture, even the female characters on screen largely exist to fulfill the desires of male audiences and creators.

### **The Silent Male:**

#### **Men Image under the Male Gaze and Patriarchy**

##### **Case Study : *The Wedding Banquet***

Most audiences who watch family films have a preconceived notion that the male figure is the one in power, the centre of the family and the woman's dependence, but this understanding is one-sided. As I said above, the construction of masculinity is also complex and requires a lot of guesswork, as it involves not only the one who is

actually in power (the father), but also the disempowered and oppressed men (the grandfather/son/etc.). What kind of cinematography should be used to portray male characters with different identities and statuses is something that every filmmaker should think about.

Meanwhile, in the portrayal of male characters, no matter what social and family status and economic situation they are in, they will be more silent than female characters, and they may lack outgoing emotional expression and intense body language as well as intensive dialogue. This is not only a stereotype of masculinity, but also a male gaze, whereby men do not want to see other people who are of the same gender showing too much intensity and expressing inner emotions, which can make male viewers feel uncomfortable. And in the face of male figures with patriarchal culture, what kind of film language the makers should take to present their outside and inside is what every film maker should pay attention to.

Next I will introduce the different images of males under patriarchal society in a Chinese family film, *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993), and analyse it through the shots and montages I mentioned above.

### **Analysis of Shots Representing Male Characters**

When portraying masculinity in family films, producers tend to use some full shots to show what the characters are wearing, how they move, their demeanour, the

environment they are in and their relationships. Under the influence of patriarchy, male characters tend to have absolute power in the family and the core of the whole family (Shen, 2011). Therefore, through the presentation of different male characters' dresses, actions and the environment they are in, the audience can learn very accurately about his and even the whole family's social status, cultural cultivation, economic situation and so on. At the same time, these shots are created by the creators on the side of men. Therefore, male characters are often on the decent, suited and active side of the male gaze shots.

In *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993), the filmmakers use full shots to show the male figure's leadership and power in the family. For example, in this shot, the bride, Wei-wei, the protagonist of the wedding, is kneeling with her back to the camera, the groom, Wai-tong, is standing with his back to the camera, and the groom's mother is seated, with half of her face blocked. But unlike the three of them, the groom's father sits at the very centre of the shot. This shot is not only for the establishment of the story narrative, but also for the portrayal of male roles and family relationships. It suggests that the role of the father is the most important and dominant in the Chinese family. It is a presentation of a patriarchal society. Through this full shot, the audience can visualise a traditional Chinese family with a class system and the father figure who holds the ruling power of the family.

**Figure 5.1.**

A full shot from *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993).

Wai-tong is marrying Wei-wei.



Besides, when presenting the male figure, producers are also good at using medium shots to show male behaviour, actions and dialogues, and at the same time reflecting the male's social status and family relationship.

For example, in *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993), the Gao's family meets Mr.Gao former subordinate, Lao Chen, while they are having dinner in a restaurant. During Mr.Gao's conversation with Lao Chen, the producer uses a medium shot to show Mr.Gao. In this shot, everyone is in suits, with Lao Chen standing and Mr.Gao sitting, while the son, Lao Chen, and everyone else's eyes look towards Mr.Gao. Such a shot not only implies that the family is financially strong and socially well-established, but also suggests that Mr.Gao is the one who holds the power of

speech and is the centre of the whole picture. Through the presentation of this kind of shot, the audience can obviously understand the social status of Mr.Gao and the confidence between his hands and feet, as well as the economic strength of the family, and moreover, the discourse and dominance of the father's role in a Chinese family.

**Figure 5.2.**

A medium shot from *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993).

Mr.Gao is talking to Lao Chen.



**Analysis of Intellectual Montage for Representing Male Characters**

When filmmakers aim to convey an abstract concept through a film, they often employ a series of shots to explain and elaborate on the idea. In the process of editing and splicing these shots together, viewers engage in a mental brainstorm to gradually understand the connections and metaphors between the scenes (Eisenstein, 2010).

In family-oriented films, when filmmakers intend to depict abstract concepts like patriarchy or male chauvinism using film shots, they often resort to intellectual montage. Viewers can gain insights and reflections by observing the presentation of various male characters within the frames and noting the differences between male and female characters. This allows the audience to ponder and comprehend the metaphors underlying these abstract concepts.

In *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993), the filmmakers utilize the following series of shots to depict the wedding of Wei-wei and Wai-tong.

**Figure 5.3.**

Shots from *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993).



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1. A full shot of a group of men playfully bumping into a wedding pillar while horsing around.
2. A medium shot of a man bursting into laughter.
3. A full shot of a man lifting a bridesmaid's dress on the wedding stage.
4. A medium shot of a man explaining while laughing.
5. A close-up shot of several men taking turns to kiss the bride, as she tries to identify her husband.
6. A full shot of a mother carrying a child onto the stage.
7. A close-up shot of the child kissing the bride.

8. A medium shot of the groom's parents laughing heartily.
9. A full shot of the crowd erupting into laughter.
10. A medium shot of the crowd collectively laughing.

This sequence of shots vividly portrays the traditional Chinese wedding custom of playfully teasing the bride and bridesmaids, showcasing both Chinese cultural features and distinct characteristics of a patriarchal society. Laughter is a recurring element throughout these shots. In shots 2 and 4, medium shots capture men of varying ages laughing heartily. Moreover, shots 8, 9, and 10 repeatedly depict a crowd laughing together. While laughter generally signifies joy and happiness, the editing and juxtaposition of laughter with other shots convey nuanced messages and metaphors to the audience.

In shots 1, 3, 5, and 7, the filmmaker depicts various wedding pranks: men playfully knocking down a wedding pillar while grabbing a slingshot, lifting a bridesmaid's dress, and different men and a child kissing the bride's cheeks. Following each of these pranks, the filmmaker immediately transitions to a shot featuring laughter. These are shots with the male gaze. The metaphor here becomes apparent: women unwittingly become subjects of amusement and mockery for men. In this process, women are objectified, satisfying male desires and providing amusement. Even in the context of a grand wedding, the bride becomes an object for the guests' enjoyment.

Moreover, in shots 3, 5, and 7, there are varying degrees of sexual innuendo. Whether it's lifting the bridesmaid's dress or having the bride guess which kiss is from her husband to prove her loyalty, these moments subtly reinforce the idea that women are relegated to being objects of desire and sexual service for men.

Interestingly, in this set of wedding shots, the filmmaker doesn't focus heavily on the bride and groom, who are typically the central figures. Instead, the focus is on the guests, particularly the male guests. Virtually all the male characters are captured in a state of laughter, deriving pleasure from teasing women. This indirectly reveals aspects of male character. The laughter of the male characters often implies superiority and contempt towards women, echoing the unequal status between genders in a patriarchal society.

Such use of montage not only provokes the audience to contemplate hidden meanings but also provides insight into the male characters' psychology. Especially in the context of interactions between the genders, the male characters confirm their dominant position by ridiculing women, showcasing disrespect and disdain for them. The shots provide a glimpse into male attitudes towards women in a patriarchal society, revealing a sense of male entitlement and superiority.

## **Discussion and Critical Analysis**

### **Similarities**

Both women and men are important family roles in a family. In the previous, I have already analysed how female and male characters are portrayed in family films through the use of shots and montages, and it is undeniable that, despite their gender differences, creators use some of the same techniques and technologies to portray the characters in their portrayals.

Among the shots, creators use the medium shot to portray both female and male characters. The medium shot is very conducive to reflecting the characters' movements, gestures and dress, and it can also be used to emphasise the characters' relationships (Bowen & Thompson, 2012). It can be said that the medium shot is a very popular and important shot in characterisation.

### **Differences**

Although the creators will use the same shots and montages in portraying female and male characters, we have to admit that due to the differences and discrepancies between the two physically, emotionally and in terms of their status, there will be a little difference in the characterisation techniques.

In terms of shots, when portraying female characters, producers prefer to use close-ups to capture the richness of women's facial expressions and gestures. Since

women have more externalised emotional expressions than men, their emotions are relatively easier to capture. In addition, in family films, as women are on the weaker side of the patriarchal society, producers tend to use more shots to show their negative emotions, which is why close-ups are more often used when portraying female characters. When portraying male characters, producers tend to use full shots to show their clothes, movements, mannerisms, environment and relationships. Under the influence of patriarchy, male characters tend to have absolute power in the family and are the centre of the whole family. They seldom express their emotions outwardly, so the producer pays more attention to the depiction of male characters' clothing, actions, and environments. Through the presentation of different male characters' clothes, actions and environments, the audience can accurately understand his and the whole family's social status, cultural cultivation, economic situation, and so on.

In terms of montage, similarly to what was discussed earlier, filmmakers also rely on tonal montage to shape female characters, emphasizing the combination of shots. This approach is effective in conveying emotions and feelings, as well as creating intense sensations and resonating with the audience's emotions. It allows the audience to more deeply perceive the oppressive experiences of female characters within patriarchal households. Conversely, when shaping male characters, rational montage is more commonly employed to achieve metaphorical effects.

Furthermore, in the portrayal of female characters, filmmakers often

unconsciously employ the male gaze, which includes close-ups of the female face and body, as well as the juxtaposition and combination of shots with sexual implications. In contrast, these types of shots and montage techniques are not utilized in the portrayal of male characters.

### **Critical Evaluation of Similarities and Differences**

Media image is the most important expressive effect given by the media to the object, and media communication will present different roles in different groups of people (Laughey, 2007). And family films are not only a reflection of real life, but also a revelation and presentation of the future society. Although we have to admit that in order to portray characters of different genders and personalities, producers need to use different shots and montages to portray different family members. However, we also need to reflect on whether the different means and methods of portraying female and male characters are also indicative of the unequal power of men and women in Chinese families.

For example, in shots, women always have more close-ups of their faces and emotional expressions than men, while men have more physical portrayals. And in montages, women tend to have more subjectively colored tonal montages. Additionally, women's portrayals also include numerous instances of the male gaze.

These differences in techniques not only reflect the unequal distribution of

power within Chinese families but also highlight the unequal gender identities prevalent in Chinese film production and society at large. Women continue to be presented with a characteristic tied to sexual servitude on the movie screen, serving as a secondary and subservient presence to men who remain at the center of power. Chinese family-oriented cinema remains a product of patriarchal culture, conveying predominantly male perspectives (Xiao, 2018).

Although films are not static, Chinese family films also have undergone multiple iterations and many changes. For instance, *The Bold, The Corrupt, and The Beautiful* (Yang, (Director), 2017) has emerged with an all-female cast. By portraying various female characters and depicting different aspects of women, they challenge the audience's stereotypes about women. Additionally, *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, (Director), 1993) has been created to explore homosexual relationships, contrasting a domestic, cooking-loving male character with a carefree, creative female character, thus subverting traditional stereotypes about the roles and professions of men and women. These films provide character development and storytelling from various gender perspectives, such as those of women and the gay community.

However, even in these films, we can still identify traces of male-dominated culture. For example, there are scenes of sexual violence and dining scenes that reflect a strict class system. Despite filmmakers avoiding a male-centric approach in their work, it seems they still cannot entirely escape the influence of patriarchal culture,

sometimes unintentionally creating content that caters to the male perspective to satisfy male audiences.

Amid the rigid dichotomies imposed by class systems, distinguishing between the strong and weak, male and female, or even father and other family members, these binary oppositions are clearly subject to criticism (Xiao, 2018). To replace such viewpoints, women must establish their own sense of feminine agency, voice their opinions, and possess their own aspirations and careers (Xiao, 2018).

Western family films excel in this regard, whether it's Jo, the female protagonist in Hollywood's *Little Women* (Gerwig, (Director), 2019), who, in the face of challenging circumstances, continues to passionately pursue her hobbies and dreams of achieving her career aspirations in her chosen field, or Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, (Directors), 2013), who relies on her own bravery to overcome obstacles and no longer needs a prince's assistance as in traditional fairy tales. These characters are all contributing to the deconstruction of male-dominated discourse, with fluidity, diversity, and openness at their core, reshaping the discourse system that represents women.

Patriarchy is a path of slavery to the abyss of existence for both women and men (Liu, 2005). The concept of *Bisexuality* proposed by *Virginia Woolf* may be the realm that we should pursue (Barrett & Cramer, 1997), that is, to achieve the balance,

harmony and co-operation of the power of both genders. Breaking the binary societal gender model, erasing stereotypes associated with gender roles, establishing diverse gender spaces, and creating a balance of rights between men and women are all aspects that should be achieved in both literary and cinematic works (Barrett & Cramer, 1997).

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