

Analysis of the Cultural Symbol Behind Raising the Red Lantern

Liu Fangchi^{1,*}

¹*Pok Oi Hospital 80th Anniversary TangYing Hei College, Hong Kong, China*

**Corresponding author. Email: laufongchi123@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Film is no doubt a special media nowadays, which has become one of the most important social practices and mainstream cultural forms all around the globe. The symbols in the films do play a role researching human nature, sexual relationship, social change and power struggle. Contemporary movies[5] have doubtlessly affected our mind towards society, involving fine arts, modern sociology, and psychoanalysis. As a form of visual media, films are expanding its influence over a wide variety of people's previous and present life, which has also made an achievement when it starts exploring power relations about woman's status by using visual and aural techniques. In this qualitative paper, the relationships between Semiotics and Chinese movie "Raising the Red Lantern" would be discussed, analyzing some of the meaningful symbols that exist in the film, and the social backgrounds that are worth for people to look deep into during the period.

Keywords: *Chinese movie, Semiotics, Symbolism, Systematization, Feudal Ethical Codes*

1. INTRODUCTION

Raising the Red Lantern is adapted from the novel *A Crowd of Wives and Concubines* by Su Tong. Wives and concubines is a traditional society existing as a cultural phenomenon and as well as a symbol of culture. It exists as an invisible symbol of the traditional system in ancient China.

As for semiotics[5], activities, conduct and any process that involves signs includes the production of meaning. It is anything that could be used to communicate and understand, yet, it is not the sign itself to the interpreter of the sign. It is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Then, it moved into examining people's behaviour evolving to become an enquiry into culture and society, and thus following that it moved onto assisting with analyses of cultural products (films, literature and art). In this essay, the author analyzes the signs and scenario involved in the famous Chinese film *Raising the Red Lantern*. This film is set in Qiao patio, which could be seen as the epitome carrying the Chinese culture. It reflects the Chinese traditional culture: all the characters are constrained by it. The symbol of "red lantern" is a metaphor of rule and power that all activities of human-being could never escape the control of rules easily. The main character "Song lian" tries hard to fight against

these powers, separate from traditional rules and escape from the prison.

2. PLOT

The film's main character is a 19-year-old young woman called 'Songlian' pursuing a college education. After the death of her father, Songlian is sold off by her stepmother to a wealthy landlord-- Chen family. Having no choice of her life, she would be forced to accept this arranged marriage, becoming the fourth wife in the wealthy Chen family. Although she surrounds by the extremely fortune, Songlian discovers the grim realities of her gilded cage existence. A red lantern would be hung in front of the wives' room. The toxic and fierce competition for Mr. Chen's love and attention is, in fact, an intrigue. The winner would be rewarded with a foot massage, the next day's menu as well as the status and respect. Songlian decided to feign pregnancy in order to gain Mr. Chen's favor, yet, she is betrayed by the other two wives of Mr. Chen. Finally, she realizes that struggling in this family and being the fourth wives of Mr. Chan, is in fact a nightmare. The sense of isolation and hopelessness in her heart finally leads to despair and ultimately, madness.

3. BACKGROUND

The nationwide intellectual movement that swept China during the 1980s had a negative influence for the generation. People, including the fifth generation filmmakers were embarked on the cultural critique of Chinese nation, scathing critiques of some value existing in the Chinese traditional culture. Meanwhile, the reason why director chose the Qiao patio as the background, is not only for the architecture and fine sculpture, but for the overall atmosphere behind the whole building, revealing the ethical traditional cultural during that period. Moreover, the utilization of Qiao patio does have its meaning. It is related to the special period showing in the film-- 1920s in China. In the film "Raising the Red Lantern", there are symbols such as high walls, gray buildings and broken embroidered shoes. They are symbols that convey the mean idea, meaning the destiny and constraints set up for women in feudal China.

Under the Chinese Confucian system, women are not valued and can be treated as objects. The society emphasizes rigid class, gender lines and ancestral worship. Women have to help their husband continue their family's name. They are not free to make the decision about their life, such as choosing their own life partner in a relationship. Instead, economic gains are extremely important in a marriage. In that social background, Chinese women are imbibed to obey their fathers as children, obey their husbands in a marriage. When they gain the identity in life from this oppressive structure, they would gain satisfaction from enforcing these customs and rules on those who have less power. Women, in that period, do not have their own right to choose their ideal life. Women would never venture beyond the enclosing walls of their house. With these high walls, women are framed by the "huge Chinese plaque" behind her ---- the rules of the traditional system will eventually swallow them up.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER

There are many characters which convey the value of 1920s China. For example, "Raising the red lantern" highlights the relationship between a woman's feet and sexuality. People in Ancient China believe that the smaller a woman's feet, the more beautiful they are. Foot binding was the class dynamic---- as a symbol of social class. In the film, the food binding was replaced by the foot massage, which is seen as a reward and privilege for women. In order to "serve the master" in a better way, women were allowed to enjoy the foot massages. This scenario plays an important role in the film, showing that the wife's duty" is to do everything to please their husband. Songlian, along with the other wives, are victims of the traditional feudal system. They have no identity outside of their roles in the Chen family---- wife. The tall walls are gray, cold, and grimness. Whatever is

going on beyond the gray wall [2] seems not to matter. All the waves are like a bird, imprisoned in a splendid cage[2].

4.1. Clothing Change---- Songlian

Songlian was a student with black dress with no ornamentation and jewelry at the beginning of the film. It looks simple, however, it does give an introduction to the social background. Many young Chinese studied in Japan, meanwhile, the fashion style had an impact on the educated young generation of China. Many female students wear pure-color dress[1] and blue coat[1], in order to distinguish themselves from the women in the earlier Qing dynasty. According to the dressing style of the song, it can be realized that she was a well-educated woman exposing to new opinions. She was still an innocent girl just like the color of her clothes. Nevertheless, Song was forced to face the turning point in her life: once she had changed her dress, her life would no longer be pure. In the film, Song avoids the bridal team and chooses to walk to the house. That was the first time she dressed up as a student appearing in her husband's house. The clothing shows Songlian's discontent and struggle against the unfair fate. At the end of this movie, Songlian has already become a mad woman within one year. She experienced the ups and downs of her life. Even though the clothes are the original one, pure and innocent Song no longer exist---- she had become a puppet under the destruction of etiquette.

The change of Songlian's opinion is divided into three parts in the film. Each of them have corresponding dress color as the hints. The first color is pure white. When Songlian was newly married to Mr.Chen, his other wives wore pale cheongsam. There is a sharp contrast between Song's color of dress and other wives'. This particular color reveals the helplessness, the rejection and intention toward her loveless marriage and the contempt to the feudal ethics. At this point, she did not match the Chen family, because of her innocence and pure. However, the second part turns into 'red', which reveals the power in the Chan family. After realizing the difficulty and bitterness of life without the favor of lordship, Songlian decided to fake her pregnancy. As a result, the color red presents songlian's public satisfaction[3]. Even after the truth is founded by the others, Songlian does not give up and is still in bright red. This symbol shows that her vanity had swelled to an extremely high level that she cannot even give up the favor. Both of the red lanterns and red clothes show the sign of her greed. Finally, the blue becomes the color of her clothes. Receiving the conversation with the others, songlian realized the hopelessness of life and lost all of her confidence.[2] Her rational mind was awakened gradually, and no longer dressed in red. Instead, the blue clothes was the common wardrobe, implying that she fell into a blue mood: depressed and powerless. Worse while, it is impossible to change anything in her terrible life. Although Songlian ,

in her 20 years old age, is still pretty in her blue dress, there is no light in her eyes. She lost all of the faith in her whole life[8].

4.2. Other Characters

The other three women including the first mistress Shuyuan, second mistress Quifen and third mistress plays their role as well. The darkness of the first mistress' clothes indicates that she is older and in charge, she keeps herself out of all the business and remains indifferent. She clearly knows that her youth was gone, and would never own the conditions to quarrel with others. She is a person who stands aloof from this world. The red lantern would never be lighted again in her yard, just like her clothes, remaining the deep color---- black[4]. The second mistress, who seems plain and pleasant, wearing colorful clothes and having a lovely face, is in fact the villain in film. Nevertheless, the third mistress, a one time opera singer, still young and beautiful, seems jealous, but she is actually a good person who would never hurt others behind the back. The face of the master is rarely seen. The whole household operates as an extension of his thought that she seems to be present even when he is absent. It is not necessary to see his face, because who he is is actually unimportant. He is not made into an individual, instead, he is more likely a symbol of patriarchy of the society.

5. ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLISM

5.1. Definition

Symbolism is the study of sign and symbol, which is not what literally is, but the idea, the feeling, the belief and some other object that it represents. By using an object to represent an idea that is different from the literal definition of the object, the author is trying to convey the theme of story and film. Moreover, it composes signifier, signified, and more fundamentally, the cultural symbol. Cultural is not only a national spirit and material civilization of the term, but also a kind of parsable language and statements containing a cultural phenomenon. The theme is the soul of an art work and a film. It is also the basis for weighing the value of a masterpiece. The theme is, on the other hand, reflects the author's statement, position and world.

The theme of the film can be presented by combining contents and symbols. The film "Raising the red lantern" definitely conveyed a clear theme via symbols.

5.2. Allegorical Symbol

As a media, symbols focus on the interaction between people and the images which should constitute a cultural role[6]. The director is the person who transmits the information which needs to find a suitable way for the audience to find the meaning behind this information. The uses of red lanterns throughout the film are

significant symbols that cannot be divorced from the condition as it exists in the household. It is the theme of the film which also describes the process of lighting, extinguishing and sealing. According to the rules of the Chen, wives have to wait outside their bedroom and gather in one place to receive the message. Mr. Chen would determine who he would spend the night with, then this message would be sent by the "red lantern". Even the first mistress, the eldest one who would never get the chance, should be there everyday. After leaving the room, the light would turn off. From a certain perspective, the red lantern means the absolute authority of the man in the patriarchal society[8]. When the master had gone, the red lantern turned off, their fortunes would be uncertain again. Four wives always wait outside their room every night, praying that their lantern would be lighted. However, at the end of the film, Songlian turns on the lantern of her room by herself. The lantern's meaning turns into love, hope, freedom and independence. Instead of waiting and accepting her fate, she decides to find the liberty on her own, no matter how hard it is.

As for other female characters, the impersonal quality extends to the everyone of them, who are generally referred to as First Mistress, Second Mistress and so on, but not their names. Their position and statues in the Chen family have already become their symbol[8]. Once they join the household, no matter who they are, (songlian was a student in the university; the third mistress is a talented opera singer), they have to please the master. As the film saying goes: "Educated women are different, the master says after carefully studying songlian's profile, and told her to get into the bed." Women become symbols in the Chen family, their lives no longer belong to their own, not as they used to be. Losing the meaning of their entire life and any other goal, it goes without saying that they end up putting all of their energy into winning the Master's favor, lying, scheming and stabbing one another in the back.

From the history and culture side in China, the relationship between a woman's feet and sexuality is well known. Between the 10th and 20th centuries, only girls in privileged families have the 'right' to keep their feet a little size---- as small as the palm. Girls' toes were turned under the soles of their feet, hence breaking them, and their flesh rotted into blood. Feet massages in the movie implies this phenomenon during the period, which are seen as a reward and privilege for women. All the things that they need to do, in other words, all they have to do, is to serve the interests of the master or patriarch. On the surface, "raise the Red Lantern" appears to be a critique of China's traditional society and gender discrimination, however, if it is considered closely, it does send some political messages.

The film was scheduled shortly after the Cultural Revolution[3], and it does have a larger meaning behind all the symbols appeared in the film. From the other side,

the film's somber mood reminds people of the tragic events during the late 1980s events in Beijing as its commentary on feudalism. Through the well-organized symbol, the director Zhang doesn't spell everything out straightly, instead, it requires a discerning eye to see the political meanings crafted on the screen, behind all these allegorical symbols.

6. CONCLUSION

Females in Confucian society lack true rights and power, and within the system, men and women have very different roles. Songlian's request for power and love in the Chen family is no doubt unacceptable. That is the reason why the tragedy happened at the end of the story.

The film highlights that Chinese traditions and rituals are in dire need of re-evaluation. Although the films focus on the Chen family, its fate can extend to a country and civilization. All of those female characters represent the people who are oppressed by the society that allows no freedom of expression. The gray walls, the houses all of the rules and the traditional systems represent symbols of oppression in the film, used ritualistically to argue a barbaric system of class and gender exploitation that defines the view of Confucianism.

By using the symbol throughout the film, "raise the Red Lantern " successfully presents a perfect and thoughtful story that takes a woman's perspective. It represents and explores women 's role in Chinese society in a deeper why. Moreover, it provides a gorgeous example of visual storytelling by exploring the relationships between characters and the symbols in the environments. All of the sight elements convey the emotional state of the film's protagonist.

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