

# Stigmatization of Women in Chinese Society

## A Case Study of Tan Weiwei's Album *3811*

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### ABSTRACT

*3811* is a pioneering album in Chinese pop music market. It encourages reconsiderations of the stigmas attached to females and promotes gender equality in China. However, there are relatively few studies on stigmas against women in China, and empowerment effect of *3811* was neglected. Based on an integration of labelling theory and social interaction and conflict model, this paper conducts textual analysis to offer insights into the stigmas interpreted by *3811*. It demonstrates that *3811* reflects the stigmas embedded in gendered semantic labels. They are closely related to structural inequality, hegemonic masculinity and the lack of women's education rights. Overall, this study reveals that the recognizing stigmas is the first step of de-stigmatization.

**Keywords:** *Stigma, 3811, Semantic labels, Structural inequality, De-stigmatization.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Does Chinese music market have a strong voice for women? In the past two years, *3811* has emerged as one of the rare music products in Chinese society that has stood out as a powerful and progressive, a voice for women.

Released in October 2020, *3811* is the first attempt by Tan Weiwei and her team to fight for women's rights in China. It consists of eleven songs that portray the stigmatized images of Chinese women from ancient times to the present day. As a music product, it calls for a new reflection on the stereotypical views of women in Chinese society. This study looks into the stigmas in this album and aims to answer following questions: how does *3811* embody the stigmatized images of women in Chinese society? Why do these stigmas persist? What is the value of this album?

Goffman classically defined stigma as a discredited attribute [1]. In 1968 he argued that it is a social deviant behavior [2]. Taking this viewpoint, Jones et al. used the concepts of "marks" and "impression engulfment" to explain the production of stigmas in social interaction, which is distinguished from Goffman's static behavior setting [3]. Besides, Weiner et al. adopted attributional theory to analyse the perceived controllability of the

causes of stigmas [4], but lacked attention to social causes.

Unlike previous research, Becker argued that moral entrepreneurs determine what deviance is [5] while Scheff [6] and Link et al. [7] attempted to research the internalization of labels. Moreover, many authors were more concerned with the impacts of macroscopic factors, noting that stigma is one of the expressions of conflicts between different social strata under the authority structure and has the ability to produce and reproduce power relations [8] [9]. Phelan et al. [10] and Yang et al. [11] have attempted to integrate social psychological and sociological research on stigmas. However, Guo concluded in his systematic literature review that existing studies tend to be a logical paradox that they use stigmatization to eliminate stigmas [12]. At this stage, there is a lack of effective integration of multiple perspectives and various theory schools.

Under the feminist framework, scholars reframed stigmas against women involving prostitution [13], women with sexually transmitted infections [14] and HIV-positive women [15]. In China, there is a relatively small body of representative research that is concerned with stigmas against women [16], not to mention female images in pop songs [17] [18].

This paper will first draw on the significant analyses and discussions among social psychological and sociological models then conduct a theoretical and textual analysis of two representative songs in *3811*, *Xiao Juan* and *Mrs. Qian*. The analysis seeks to explain how and why gendered semantic labels are used to stigmatize women. It will situate the causes and mechanisms of the formation and maintenance of stigmas in the context in China, including frameworks of social control, social closure, institutional practices, etc. Overall, we attempt to integrate multiple perspectives to avoid the logical paradox mentioned above.

*3811* shows the stigmas caused by semantic labels, like a mammonish girl, mediocre spirit and superficial. Some stigmas are the products of stereotypes and media hype while others are discrimination against certain groups, utilizing or mocking their misfortune. The reason for these stigmas is the inequality in Chinese education and social structure. *3811* takes the form of both direct pushback and indirect resistance through image-building.

## 2. STIGMAS IN SEMANTIC LABELS

Outlined below are two songs with more targeted natures that embody typical stigmas against women. In *Xiao Juan*, semantic labels are transformed into gendered stereotypes and the uses of these labels in media exacerbate the stigmas. In *Mrs. Qian*, some labels can be seen as the negative characterization under the male gaze and the response to the threats to patriarchal society. These labels also cause the internalization of stigmas.

### 2.1. *Xiao Juan*

#### 2.1.1. *Semantic labels with stereotypes*

Under the feminist framework, many research linked stigmas with gendered stereotypes. Different from Goffman's static interpretations which equate stigmas with discredited characteristics, Jones et al interpreted stigmatization with a dynamic interaction and argued that stigmas reinforce stereotypes and a mark becomes a stigma when somebody views it as important [3]. Any interaction with the marked person and the impression of the marks overwhelms the overall impression of the bearer of the marks. In *Xiao Juan*, two lyrics interpret this interaction from the perspective of female victims of domestic violence, "Look how we were recorded, quarrel? Adultery, evil, bitch, whoring, cohabit, harlot, prostitute, slave, tease, greedy, flattery, reckless, amuse, suspicion, impede, jealousy, envy (妁、姦、妖、婬、嫖、娼、妓、奴、耍、婪、佞、妄、娯、嫌、妨、嫉、妒)." It uses eighteen derogatory Chinese characters which have the radical *nü* (woman) to represent the stigmas against women in the Chinese context. In other words, these characters can be seen as marks of women, which are

transformed into stereotypes with everyday practice, and can be reflected in the case of victim-blaming that is often directed at women. Although the use of gendered linguistics to justify the stigmatization against women remains controversial, as a music product, *Xiao Juan* alludes to the social relations of stigmatization with fact, exactly as Alexander & Bowler noted, culture is constitutive of society and social relations [19].

#### 2.1.2. *Further stigmatization through media*

Furthermore, a female character named *Xiao Juan* is the most common pseudonym for the victim in the mass media. Tan Weiwei created this song because *Xiao Juan* is a symbol of the female victims of different forms of violence. She also suggested that media play a role in the stigmatization against women. Through conscious selection and processing, media mostly extract news involving women. They label them negatively to cater for audiences' stereotypes, thereby exacerbating the stigmas against women. In *Xiao Juan*, Tan Weiwei sings with a muffled mouth to list the various ways in which women are subjected to domestic violence, "With fists, gasoline and sulfuric acid." The following lyrics point to social violence against women: "With a shaved head, gaze and keyboards, how in the end we were recorded by you..." These words also allude to the secondary damage caused by the media. On the one hand, the medium is the message, it shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action [20]. As Guo suggested, the subject of stigmatization is often considered to be a so-called "normal person" as opposed to "deviant," or is treated simply or vaguely as masses in the usual sense [12]. In other words, the media convey the message that they and the audiences are "normal people" and have rights to talk about deviants. Moreover, different media reinforce the social structures and institutions that construct stigmas that further exacerbate social stereotypes of women. On the other hand, to cater for the viewers, the media contents tend to conform to people's expectations about the traits of certain groups [21]. Besides, after a two-step flow of communication [22], marks become stigmas. These two form a vicious circle, as *Xiao Juan* states, "It's dinner-party material, people talk about it at their leisure, but soon put it out of their mind." This song directly strikes back to stigmas in society.

### 2.2. *Mrs. Qian*

#### 2.2.1. *Negative characterization under the male gaze*

Goffman defined the stigma as a negative characterization of certain groups in the social context, thus forming a virtual social identity [2]. *Mrs. Qian* is a stinging satire on the stigmas against women. "Qian" also means money in Chinese. As the lyrics say "only

vulgarian talks about money, don't turn your back on me when you get money." This song ironically points out the stigma label, "mammonish girl." Similarly, the contents "How bitchy I am? I just gorgeously dressed, but you're a sanctimonious hypocrite, let's see who's more superficial" and "My beauty is such a feast to your eye, you swindle under the guise, let's see who's gone too far?" mock the hypocritical demand on women's appearance. This kind of labeling acquiesces in women's submissiveness and attachment to men in essence. In this case, on the one hand, stigmatizers affirm men's dominance over wealth and their superiority in earning it, on the other hand they deny women's social value through negative portrayals, interpreting women's pursuit of materials and appearance as an additional social identity which is associated with sex workers and kept women. Eaton indicated that "the male gaze" usually refers to the sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its feminine subject matter, presenting her as an object without initiative for heterosexual-male erotic gratification [23]. For instance, the term with a male gaze in the Chinese context "gorgeously dressed" is used as a pejorative expression, while "beauty" is used to objectify women. Behind this stigma label is a manifestation of male hegemonism.

### 2.2.2. *Response to the threats to patriarchal society*

Stigmatizing someone is not solely a psychological defense to other groups or a deeply interpretive endeavor played out in a cultural unconsciousness. It is also a tactical response to perceived threats, moral dangers, and fear of the unknown [24]. Lippmann also pointed out that the systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our positions in society [21]. Besides, female morality in Chinese traditional culture has seen a resurgence in modern times. Society has imposed various gender norms on women's behavior. Traditionally, patriarchal society has framed women as virtuous, chaste and submissive. Those who deviate from these societal norms are stigmatized, stereotyped, and subjected to pejorative labels. Briefly, the stigmas "mediocre spirit" and "superficial" that the song *Mrs. Qian* seeks to break down can therefore be seen as a male group's response to the threats to a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, stigmas threaten moral standing, threaten the loss or diminution of what is most at stake, or actually diminishes or destroys that lived value [24]. From this perspective we can understand women's internalization of stigmas. The lyrics "I don't want to be more pathetic than anyone else, so heart-breaking that only in the pollution of resignation grows water lilies" show that the generally expected image of being "immaculate" which women strive for is based on the "pollution" of society – the negative cultural images. Social norms give women stigmas. To label a "deviant"

is often a process of devaluing individuals. This song is intended to convey that "pollution" is created by "moral entrepreneurs" who label others as deviant and women don't need to live in the expectations of others. Through women's voices, female audiences will realize that "deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but depends on the result of others' implementation of norms and judgment." [5]

To respond to the stigmas against women in society, *3811* retells the stories which are known to many people. This can be regarded as an attempt of de-stigmatization to empower women.

## 3. THE LACK OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CHINESE CONTEXT

### 3.1. *The Created Background of Zhao Guiling*

In the following section, the denial of women's rights is situated in the patriarchal society in China. In *3811*, *Zhao Guiling* is a typical song about the lack of women's rights in Chinese society. It demonstrates how an illiterate woman suffers from the stigmas. The right to education is one of the most basic rights that should be guaranteed in addition to basic livelihood security. In China, education is one of the important ways to make establish correct values and gender identity. In other words, if women's right to education is not fully guaranteed, women's social status will not be qualitatively improved, which is directly related to the future development of social structure and the balance of social rights. However, there are still disequilibrium and shortcomings in the implementation of women's right to education in China.

In the second half of the last century, China issued some politics for de-literacy and gradually focused on education. Despite that, women's right to education is still severely denied. According to the statistical yearbook published by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2018, 71% of China's population aged 6 years and over with no education are rural women [25]. However, few studies have linked the lack of women's right to education with the stigmas, such as "lao wen mang" (old illiterate) in Chinese society. *Zhao Guiling* represents the stigmatized image of illiterate middle-aged rural women and it is created in the context of rural China with the intention of generating more reflection in society, thus contributing to the process of de-stigmatization. From a female perspective, this kind of voice is undoubtedly a proactive attempt by women to jump off the internalization of stigmas and to obtain the liberation of their own reputations.

### 3.2. *Causes of Zhao Guiling's image in Chinese Society*

According to Goffman's theory, the defect is in the decorum and demeanor that regulate behaviors [1]. In

other words, the existence of stigmas is a defect of social rules and public order, the characteristics are produced by the constraints of approved public conduct, which is the fundamental reason for the birth of the image of Zhao Guiling.

### 3.2.1. Legitimization of structural inequality

Stigmas are deployed by concrete and identifiable social actors seeking to legitimize their own dominant status within existing structures of social inequality [8]. As *Zhao Guiling* shows, “One skim and one press, what stroke is it... I can’t read or write, just like a blind,” they present the images of Chinese rural women. However, in essence it is a reflection of the severe denial of women’s educational rights in Chinese society.

The root causes of women’s difficulties in fully enjoying their rights lie in the unequal gender structure of society. Zhao once made the argument that the legitimization of this gender inequality structure has gone through three stages in Chinese society [26]. Based on Zhao’s model Zhao Guiling’s situation can be clear. The first stage is biological differences, where women’s physical conditions allow them to bear and nurse the next generation while men do other jobs. This stage ensured men’s more important social status was a necessary process for the gradual evolution of patriarchal society to patriarchal society. The second stage is social value differences. Men have been shaped as a symbol of dominant social value and prioritized to enjoy rights. In the context of the shortage of social resources, as mentioned in *Zhao Guiling*, “In those years there were many crows, and wildflowers grew in the barren grass,” women’s access to resources would be sacrificed and resources would be redistributed to men for use, thus most rural women do “not read a single book and live hard alone.” The third stage is the social phenomenon of gender inequality caused by differences in social values. Men enjoy many resources, thus fostering strong productivity and further generating higher social values, pulling away from the social values generated by women, which further rationalizes and legitimizes the inequality of social gender structures.

### 3.2.2. Hegemonic masculinity

The patriarchal society is reinforced through a complex interplay of political, social, and cultural forces [8], thus further legitimizing the structures of inequality mentioned above. This hegemony fosters values of unconditional obedience for some rural women. For example, as the song mentions, “obey your father at home, obey your husband outside, and obey your son in old age,” women who do not enjoy the right to education are unable to change their values by receiving knowledge. It is like “the long periods of closed isolation make them look like idiots” mentioned by *Zhao Guiling*. In addition,

the dominant values of this hegemonic society further presuppose the stereotypes of women who are the targets of domination. As we mentioned in *Xiao Juan*, a mark overwhelms the overall impression of women, therefore presupposing a stereotype. For example, when women are mentioned, some society groups will have the preconceived notion that they are simple and narrowed-minded with no knowledge, which will further increase the stigmatization of women.

### 3.2.3. Gendered Education

Further contributing to the inequality of China’s social structure is a gendered upbringing that has always suppressed women’s independent awareness. In the male-dominated culture of Chinese society, women are given the expectation that their behavior will be “standard” and “exemplary.” As previously described in *Mrs. Qian*, these so-called “exemplary” and “standards” are just the products of the patriarchal gaze. Under sociocultural norms, behaviors that are inconsistent with “exemplars” and “standards” form stigmas, whose categories are formed prior to social encounters and have specific social roles and functions [27]. Women often accept and even internalize the stigmas that they are subjected to [8]. Under Chinese male perspective, men in power shape most of the women’s values about gender and teach women that these are to be valued. If a woman does not obey the male-dominated values, her behavior may be seen as “shameful” in the moral experience, and this evaluation allows women to accept and internalize their own stigmas. At the same time, the women who internalize the stigmas will use their own imprisoned ideas to educate the next generation with their own imprisoned ideas, but because of the changes in social values, a so-called “generation gap” is created. For example, *Zhao Guiling* says, “The children have seen the world, but you still believe in the old gods in the temple. The children are talking about values, but you still believe that we should save more money.” This “generation gap” makes the stigmatized image of “lao wen mang,” “zheng yan xia” among the younger generation.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, *Xiao Juan* and *Mrs. Qian* exemplify the semantic labels that play a significant role in driving the stigmas against women in Chinese society. The stigmatization reinforces stereotypes of women while the male gaze reinforces the stigmas against women in a different way. Moreover, *Zhao Guiling* looks into the causes of the stigmas against Chinese women from the aspect of education. *3811* tries to question and deconstruct these stigmas. It can be taken as an attempt of de-stigmatization and women empowerment.

Prior to this study, there have been few representative studies of female stigmatization and the representation of women in music in China. However, with the advancement of the affirmative action movement, it is important to study the voices in this area of media production. *3811*, a typical de-stigmatized album, has rarely been studied in China. This paper takes this opportunity to examine the stigmatization of women in Chinese society as a means of improving women's consciousness.

Although *3811* is a rare attempt to portray the stigmatization against women it has certain limitations. The lyrics do not portray the stigmatized image of women in an obvious and objective way and are not very readable. *3811*'s social significance is established by a relatively readable and engaging text, but the limitations of its artistic approach should also be noted.

This study hopes to promote an integration between feminist studies and stigmatization studies in China. Future research can pay attention to the stigmas against women in media works.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Jiaru Zheng and Yimiao Huang conceived of the presented idea and conceptualized the study; Yimiao Huang drafted section 2 and Jiaru Zheng drafted the manuscript of section 3. Both authors reviewed and revised the manuscript and approved the final manuscript version.

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