

Gender and Cultural Imagination - On the Death of the Heroine in “The Grandmaster”

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ABSTRACT

The Grandmaster by Wong Kar-wai is a classic Martial Arts film in the 21st century. The ending of Gong Er in the film inherits the narrative convention that the female hero disappears at the end of the story in Chinese Martial Arts films. This narrative feature, on the one hand, continues the masculine discourse construct of Chinese Martial Arts films that treats female images as sacrificial victims [masculine narrative, that is burying the misfortunes of an era through the disappearance of female characters]. On the other hand, due to the high resemblance between Gong Er and the traditional Chinese image of the Divine Woman, her disappearance symbolizes the loss of ritual society and the sadness of not being able to get what one wants, while metaphorically representing the cultural anxiety and spiritual dilemma of the present generation.

Keywords: Chinese Martial Arts Film, Feminism Film Theory, Female Warrior Image, The Grandmaster

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Chen Mo's "Montage of Swords and Chivalry: A Treatise on Chinese Martial Arts Cinema," the birth of Chinese martial arts cinema produced a large number of works with female chivalrous heroes as protagonists[1]. The portrayal of female warriors in Chinese martial arts films varies widely from era to era, but most share a fading ending. For this narrative feature, the critique of the portrayal of women in Hollywood films in Western feminist literary theory and Western feminist film analysis may provide some answers. 1970s Western feminist film narrative studies generalized the narrative Hollywood film women into the images of: earth mothers, sluts, witches, and sacrificial victims. Among them, these theories have detailed discussions on the death endings of the witch and sacrificial victim figures. Based on these theories, this paper focuses on the ending of Gong Er in Wong Kar-wai's The Grandmaster, combined with the narrative characteristics of Chinese martial arts films, tries to include the Divine Woman of female images in traditional Chinese culture into the analysis of its disappearing ending, discusses the cultural symptoms reflected by the ending of Gong Er and the disappearing ending of female chivalry in the 21st century, then analyzes the common gender expression behind the disappearing endings of female heroes in Gong Er and other Chinese martial arts films, finally

tends to find out the collective unconsciousness behind the cultural archetype of the disappearing Divine Woman images in contemporary Chinese social and cultural context.

2. THE DEATH OF GONG ER

In the ending of The Grandmaster, Gong Er's life fades away abruptly in mystery. However, the director does not give enough reasonable logic on the cause of Gong Er's death. First of all, the first unreasonable point lies in the contradiction in Gong Er's human attitude. On the one hand, the filmmakers have said that Gong Er is a character who cannot move forward. The director said in an interview that "Gong Er is always looking back, and in the end she would rather stay because she has been looking back during her whole life". On the other hand, in the movie, her attitude towards life is completely different. Gong Er believes in the life view of "life forward, could not go back". In the scene of Gong Er's dedication, she says, "It is better to think once to advance than to think once to stop," acknowledging that life is to keep moving forward. Moreover, when she fled to Hong Kong and was advised by her servants to start a new life, she still emphasized that "there is no turning back". Secondly, the interpretation of "turning back" is contradictory in the director's and the film's interpretation. It sometimes represents the positive value

of returning from a misstep. For example, in the dueling train scenes, the key meaning of turning back in kung fu is not grasped by Ma San, who has defected to the Japanese army. However, turning back sometimes represents the negative value of overindulging in the past. In fact, to turn back is a verb, a momentary stop, a look back, in the state where the representative is constantly moving forward. It cuts through the trend that has been moving forward, but it is also not part of a stagnant past. Nevertheless, when we do not see Gong Er as an individual with a unique life experience, but abstractly as a female figure that could be categorized, perhaps we could find certain reasons why Gong Er must die.

3. THE FADING OF THE HEROINE

If we look beyond the text of this film and place Gong Er's ending in the context of the history of Chinese martial arts films, we will find that Gong Er's disappearance does not seem to be an isolated case. When Dai Jinhua combed through the images of women in early Chinese films, she found that in early martial arts films, women warriors mostly faded away at the end of the story. For this special discovery, she pointed out that the female warriors in early Chinese martial arts films of the 1920s and 1930s occupied a structural position very similar to that of the cowboys in American Western movies: the female warrior, armed with a sword, enters a world of catastrophic chaos, does justice, enforces the law, saves the hero and the second heroine, and leaves with her sword at the end of the film. A similar situation could be seen in the martial arts films of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in King Hu's films "A Touch of Zen" and "Raining in the Mountain", the female chivalrous warrior suddenly disappears into the empty door after things are over, disappearing into the mundane world. In the 21st century martial arts films, the heroine is still the subject of exile at the end of the story. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the female warrior falls off a cliff; Gong Er leaves her hometown and dies in Hong Kong for no apparent reason; *The Assassin*, the female warrior follows a young man from Japan to a faraway land; *Reign of Assassins*, the heroine decides to retire from the world at the beginning, and the whole story is about how she achieves her "retirement".

3.1. Variations on the Image of the Sacrificial Victim

The fading of the female warrior can provide an imaginative solution to the cultural dilemma of a certain era. For example, in *Gender China*, Dai Jinhua argues that the disappearance of the female warrior in early 20th century Chinese martial arts films is a symbolic representation of the banishment of female actors from Chinese culture [1]. The process of the disappearance of the female warrior is a re-placement of women in a modern culture where men and women are distinct and

male is the main subject. In response to the exiled female figures at the end of the stories in the Chinese martial arts films of the 1980s, Ni Ziquan argues that they were used to alleviate the subconscious anxiety of popular culture in the turbulent order during the transition process of social transformation from the historical trauma of the 10-year catastrophe to the reform and opening up. The film is adept at transferring social pressure, political trauma, and economic weight to the plot of women suffering and being sacrificed. In *From Awe to Rape*, Haskell emphasizes that the woman is usually the image of the victim in the film, and she must self-sacrifice for love and family; Mulvey, in analyzing the image of the dangerous women in Hitchcock's film, argues that the women revealed or banished in the ending eliminate and take away the male's castration anxiety. They all agreed that there was a need for the woman to die and that her disappearance signified a culturally or spiritually safe return to patriarchal society. Therefore, applying this logic to *The Grandmaster*, it is clear that the director cleverly entwines Gong Er's lifeline with the war against Japan, then the function and meaning of her life does not just belong to her. In the representation for the anti-Japanese period of history in this film, it could be said that Gong Er's demise provides imaginative resolution to the inherent contradictions of society during the anti-Japanese period.

Throughout the film, unlike *Ip Man's* which always hovers at the outer edge of anti-Japanese memory, Gong Er's life always faces the anti-Japanese war head-on. First of all, the only element of the Japanese army that appears is the pseudo-Manchurian army, which was established in the Northeast, which is the narrative space of Gong Er's story. Secondly, Gong Er's extra-script narration during her appearance in the film is an anti-Japanese war report "The Anti-Japanese Salvation Army sailed to Hunan, called the anti-Japanese Salvation Army, but in reality, the situation is on the verge of a frenzy to maintain the autonomy of the United Provinces." The film, at the outset, rather directly ties her narrative to the entire war situation. Third, her lifeline is always tied to Ma San, who is the only person in the film who has a direct relationship with the Japanese. When Ma San kills Gong Er's father, Gong Er takes revenge with violence; Gong Er also pays a huge price in life for this revenge, which ultimately leads to her death. Therefore, considering the strong hostile relationship between Gong Er and the Japanese, Gong Er's story and life experience could symbolize the suffering nation, then all her forced choice and subsequent loneliness and sorrow may reflect the cultural and spiritual dilemma faced by traditional Chinese society at that time. And her wounded body after the duel with Ma San is probably a transfer of the painful memories of that era; Her death buried the disaster of the whole Wulin or the War of Resistance against Japan. Eventually, she carried away all the suffering of Wulin and the predicament of Chinese culture at that time.

3.2. The Complicity of Patriarchal Discourse and Martial Arts Film Narratives

In “The Myth of Martial Dance: A Longitudinal Look at Chinese Martial Arts Cinema,” Jia Leilei suggests that because violence against violence is the most difficult negative meaning to correct in martial arts cinema, the narrative strategy of Chinese martial arts cinema is to dissipate the brutality of violence in a unique way. In other words, the peculiarity of the narrative of Chinese martial arts films lies in giving a rational justification for the perpetration of violence and making the perpetration of violence a part of the narrative structure. At the same time, he points out that this rational justification is based on the concentric circles of the Confucian culture of the family and the state as one, which means the male protagonists in martial arts films are not only warriors who are trying to eliminate violence and uphold justice, but also defenders of national cultural traditions and family ethics. Therefore, usually, in martial arts films, when the narrative themes of loyalty and filial piety are incorporated into the narrative of a film, the cultural motifs of serving one’s Lord and being faithful will be well integrated and complement each other.

However, in narrative structures involving female warriors, the justifications for committing violence also differ due to gender differences. On the one hand, the researchers of “Chivalrous women in early Chinese martial arts film” and “The research on female image of Chinese martial arts in the 21st century” found that the settings of female chivalry in Chinese Martial Arts films are also often inseparable from defending the family and avenging the father, but they are additionally used to usurp the interpretation of gender identity. In addition, “Chivalrous women film: an interpretation from sub-genre perspective” finds that the female warrior narrative has a greater element of romantic love than the male warrior. In fact, both of these narrative changes based on gender differences are ultimately the result of the need to ethicize violence within the inherent narrative structure of martial arts films. Because the ethicalization of violence requires that the heroines have a defined ethical identity, which is often the object of male objectification. In other words, these women often appear as male mothers, male daughters, male wives or lovers. Therefore, the heroine can travel for their own violence rationalization, they can only be trapped in avenging their father, loyalty for the country, love for love.

In “The Grandmaster,” it is Gong Er who takes on the task of dismantling violence in traditional martial arts films, as opposed to Ip Man. The duel between Gong Er and Ma San is based on the ethical identity of the daughter and the Chinese people as “doing justice for heaven” and “avenging the father”, ethicalizing violence; while the violent scenes in the Golden Mansion between Gong Er and Ip Man are a love of violence based on the ethical identity of daughter and lover. Logic. Ultimately,

the female warriors who possess violence, their concealment, take away all the violent elements in the martial arts narrative, achieving a complete de-violization. After they fade away, the film is often left with a peaceful, or temporarily conflict-free, world. In fact, this ethical placement of violence on women accomplishes a process at the same time. It is a commonplace process of “de-demonizing” powerful women: interpreting their almost demonic behavior as violence within the realm of reason in order to relieve male anxiety and inherently reinforce patriarchal/patriarchal structures.

4. THE FADING OF THE DIVINE WOMAN

As a 21st century female warrior figure, although Gong Er has characteristics in common with other female warriors, she also has her own particularities. In terms of narrative structure, compared to the classical Western female images, she is closer to the traditional Chinese image of the Divine Woman. Therefore, her disappearance has a different meaning when combined with the metaphor behind the image of the Divine Woman.

4.1. The Divine Woman Image and Gong Er

The Divine Woman of Wushan is a female image created in the Gao Tang Fu and the Fugue of the Divine Woman, and she subsequently recurs as a specific female image in traditional Chinese literature and plastic arts. In the analysis of the image of the Divine Woman in traditional Chinese painting, Wu Hung suggests that in the fantasies of male poets, she does not belong to the cosmic goddess who master life and death, nor does she belong to women with ethical identities in reality. In contrast, such women are illusions between the visible and the invisible, transcending the divide between nature and the human world.

In analyzing the image of the Divine Woman, the first thing Wu Hung emphasizes is that in most of the works, the poet’s imagination and desire for a Divine Woman of the river and mountain is conveyed in the male first person. And in terms of this narrative perspective, “The Grandmaster” is highly similar to the Divine Woman Fantasy. The main narrator of the entire film is Ip Man, and the story unfolds with his memories, organized according to his logic and words. And it is the presence of the first-person narrator that determines that the film can only be a male story, a male fantasy.

In addition, the Divine Woman fantasy has a more stable set of narrative structures, including the longing for an imaginary woman, a brief encounter with the Divine Woman, an endless journey to find her, and the hopelessness of this search. And all these episodes could be found clearly in the story with Gong Er. In the film, Gong Er appears in Ip Man’s life by chance, dreamlike

encounter at the Golden Mansion. After one encounter, her whereabouts become elusive to the hero, who is caught up in thoughts and fantasies about her. While she is always hidden in the landscape of the North; occasionally approaching the hero in his dreams, a greedy joyful or confide in the thoughts. During the separation, Ip Man once wanted to go to the north to find Gong Er, but was eventually blocked because of the war. After a search, in the end, like other traditional Chinese male poets and painters, Ip Man was unable to keep her, and Gong Er eventually disappeared completely between heaven and earth and the landscape. She left Ip Man's memory, only a faint sadness and regret.

It is worth noting that in every old story, all Divine Woman is meant to disappear when the male author wakes up from his dream. However, although the Divine Woman shares a tragic ending with the sacrificial, witch-type female figures criticized by cinematic feminist film theory, she carries a different connotation of disappearance behind her. Western witches mostly carry evil, mystery, and power, and their image is with Christian civilization, where the witch is bound to women as the Other, becoming an object to be punished and banished by society. The disappearance of the Divine Woman, on the other hand, emphasizes more the sense of sadness that separates the human from the gods, the grief of seeking but not being able to find. According to Yuan Ke's study of Chinese mythology, behind the fantasy of the Divine Woman as a cultural archetype is a collective unconscious: people have entered civilized society, lost the ability to empathize with nature, and no longer have the power to communicate with God, heaven and earth, thus causing fantasy, loss and bitterness. Therefore, It could be said that the fading of the Divine Woman represents the pursuit of a departed ideal world and the sorrow that it will be lost.

4.2. The Loss of the World of Rites

According to Xu Haofeng, the deep-seated fear of Chinese Martial Arts films is the collapse of traditional Chinese rituals, the disappearance of traditional rules of hospitality and ways of life. And he also points out that this fear is not imaginary, but is a common psychology of a large group of people in Chinese history, because the Martial Arts film began when racial pride was severely frustrated in domestic and foreign wars, and in order to compensate psychologically, people maintained their identity by adhering to the traditional rituals. Not only that, but in fact, the fear of ritual collapse has always existed in the traditional thinking of Chinese culture. Since Confucius, Confucianism has emphasized the restoration of Zhou rites by "restoring rites to oneself" in order to resist the social reality of "collapse of rites and music". Apparently, Gong Er is a symbol of the traditional ritualistic society of the past. Gong Er repeatedly repeats the word "rules" in the movie, and

takes "old rules" as a guideline, even more important than all the men in the movie. Specifically, the "old rules" are the rules of etiquette, a set of norms for being a human being in a traditional ritualistic society. Not only that, traditional Martial Arts films are all about jianghu (The narrative field of Chinese Martial Arts film) feuds, and this is exactly how Gong Er perceives her life. When Gong Er and Ip Man meet for the last time, Gong Er uses the term "feud" for their entangled relationship, which is exactly what the traditional Martial Arts film discourse covers "jianghu feud". But Ip Man uses "fate" to define this relationship. Fate versus feud, one life versus one moment, lighting a lamp and supporting justice, the three sets of traditional and modern contrasting discourses show the different cultures of the times represented by Gong Er and Ip Man.

Thus Gong Er represents the past is the past martial world, then with her death, buried or the era of rituals. Her reclusion is not simply taking away the misfortune of a general era, but the particular ideal of a ritualistic society. In this sense, Gong Er's disappearance conveys a sense of sadness that separates the human from the divine world, a sense of sadness that pre-modern Chinese culture is fractured and difficult to continue. In other words, her disappearance once again brings out a kind of anxiety in contemporary Chinese culture: after the May Fourth Movement's total rejection of traditional Chinese culture, how modern China, deeply influenced by Western thinking, can once again determine its own cultural subjectivity. Interestingly, since the Divine Woman is a charming image conjured up by the rich imagination of men, and the emotion pinned on it is the hopeless pursuit of a kind of fantasy beauty, if the Divine Woman is only an imaginary existence, is the past era of ritual civilization only an imaginary cultural subject reproduced by modern human discourse?

4.3. The Loss of the Modern Personal Spiritual World

In all fantasies about the Divine woman, all these amazing females have one common feature: she is a lonely individual who does not have any female friends or relatives. Highly similar in *The Grandmaster*, Gong Er is surrounded by men, with no female relatives, female friends, or even female servants. This isolated life experience is not only true of Gong Er, but most contemporary female warriors are in a situation of absolute solitude. In another extreme example, *The Assassin*, the heroine is surrounded by mostly women, but none of them can be the one to understand her. It seems that in the male fantasy, there is no confidante between women and women, between the heroine and other women. However, this is obviously different from the real female life experience. Interestingly, on the contrary, the male warriors in Martial Arts movies, their same-sex friends situation is completely different. The

male warriors often have like-minded friends, disciples, relatives, masters, and fellow disciples, and even the swordsmen in “Hero” who do not know each other can know each other and trust their lives to each other with a glance or a brief exchange.

However, It is on the basis of the image of the absolutely solitary woman that the female warriors become the vehicle for the expression of a truly isolated island in the world of martial world. Specifically, the special life experience of the female warriors based on gender differences, so that they repeatedly identify themselves and the male others are different, and eventually fall into the dilemma of their own identity. In the film, on the one hand, Gong Er is surrounded by no mother and female relatives and friends; on the other hand, she is unable to reach the realm of her father, unable to continue living in a foreign country like Ip Man, unable to identify with Ma San’s treason in order to survive. At the end of the story, as a woman, she can either continue to follow the traditional martial arts path (rules) or choose Ip Man’s path, yet both paths belong to the patriarchal discourse, and no matter which one she chooses, she can identify herself as different. This is perhaps the reason why she always refuses to communicate with other characters by sight, being left alone and dying in a depressed state in the end.

The female warrior in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *The Assassin* illustrates this point of loneliness even more eloquently. The director stated directly in the interview that the theme of the film is loneliness and that the female warrior is the director himself. In this film, the female warrior rejects the values of her master, the values of the princess who upholds peace, and the values of the assassinated Tian Ji’an (male protagonist). In the end, she is left alone and goes far away from home. Therefore, the male fantasy of the pure lonely female, on the one hand, can quantitatively alleviate the gender anxiety brought about by powerful women; on the other hand, it creates an expression that overlaps with the plight of personal existence in contemporary society, that is, everyone is an island. And the setting of absolute solitude is in a sense more resonant with modern society, which emphasizes individualism. However, this individualism is different from the earlier martial arts films. Specifically, if one of the reasons for the prevalence of Martial Arts films in the early 20th century is attributed to the fact that the solitary warrior provided a pontoon on the imaginary level for the transition from the traditional collective society to the modern individualistic society. Then, the modern female chivalrous heroes, with their added layer of loneliness due to their gender differences, not only fail to integrate into the society of patriarchal discourse, but also fail to construct an identifiable female discourse, ultimately providing a suitable narrator for the expression of modern people’s emotions of shaking their lost and unreturned places.

5. CONCLUSION

The fading end of female warriors in 21st century Chinese Martial Arts films has a special gender and cultural expression. On the one hand, similar to past images of female warriors, they carry more general ideas and symbols rather than voices expressing the individuality of their subjects. As a sacrificial figure, their hidden ending symbolizes the passing of an era and the infinite remembrance of that world. On the other hand, the fading of the heroines becomes the best expression of the plight of contemporary people’s lonely and rootless lives. The reason for their disappearance is certainly related to gender, but it is more of a common dilemma of modern people. Unfortunately, since these female images are created in the male imagination and the male discourse, there are still no real female fantasies in Chinese Martial Arts films that carry the narratives of women’s special life experiences.

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