

Self-consciousness, Gender Performance and Ethos: The Female Subjectivity in "*Human, Woman, Demon*"

Hao Zhao ^{1,*}

¹ School of Marxism, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming Yunnan 650224, China

* Corresponding author. Email: zhh@swfu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Under a comparative framework of cultural differences, this essay aims to scrutinize the representation of female subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness, gender performance, and the ethos in China's 1980s. As the configurations of women constitute a special field of cultural production in modern China, it has much prominence in understanding Chinese culture and society through studying the representations of women in modern Chinese cinema. The canonical feature film *Human, Woman, Demon* (1987) is carefully discussed to demonstrate the shift of narrative strategy, and the different implications of gender performance in under contexts of China and the West. At length, the issue of tradition and modernity is concisely illustrated from the perspective of the essay.

Keywords: modern Chinese cinema, female subjectivity, gender performance, ethos.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of Reform and Opening-up, the tremendous changes in China's economic development and social transformation had attracted worldwide attention. Correspondingly, Chinese film industry had entered a prosperous period. Many outstanding films were produced under the inspiration of the era. As the configurations of women constitute a special field of cultural production in modern China[1], it has much prominence in understanding Chinese culture and society through studying the representations of female subjectivity in modern Chinese cinema. Directed by Chinese female director Huang Shuqin (1939-), the canonical feature film *Human, Woman, Demon* (1987) was adapted from the true story of an actress of Chinese opera. Through the lens of the film, the film not only analyzes the process of Chinese women's self-discovery, self-identity, but also describes their growth and living environment, as well as the social and family pressures they have suffered. As far as the film is concerned, *Human, Woman, Demon*, which initially focuses on the female subjectivity as its main theme[2] and implies the predicament faced by Chinese women[3], deserves further exploration.

Human, Woman, Demon exquisitely depicts the ups-and-downs of Qiuyun's life. Qiuyun, the protagonist of the film, is an actress of Chinese opera in modern China. She distances herself from conventional gender norms

through playing male roles onstage for a lifetime and enjoying a high reputation in the world[4]. Yet offstage, she has to bear the mediocre burden of life as a woman. Modern Chinese women generally shoulder a dual task: one is to prove their values as "social people"; the other is to prove their significances as "women". Under the so-called slogan "men and women are equal", they actually suffer great mental stress and physical consumption. In this sense, Qiuyun is dubbed as a representative of modern Chinese women with female self-consciousness[3]. The "female" I use here, refers to an identity that is marginalized by the dominant social and discursive order, as articulated by Moi[5].

Rooted in the soil of Chinese culture, Chinese opera is originated from primitive songs and dances with a comprehensive stage art style. It is elaborately handed down from generation to generation of performers. Chinese opera has a theatrical feature that men play the women's roles, and vice versa (qian dan kun sheng). It is the creation in a particular period of imperial China and can be understood as the theatrical cross-dressing of gender performance in Western terms. In the film, gender performance is both a recurring theme of Qiuyun's life and a hint of her attitude towards life. By invoking the reflective perspective of American poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler's gender performance theory, this essay aims to investigate how gender performance is correlated with female subjectivity in *Human, Woman, Demon*. Gender performance theory perceives human

gender as learned behaviors based on sociocultural norms of masculinity and femininity, rather than a biological destiny. The main thought of gender performance is that gender is an imitative and performative phenomenon over time, consisting of stylized practices involving gesture, language and speech, to consolidate the notion of "being a male" or "being a female"[6]. As Butler hypothesizes, the socially constructed patterns of gender are most obvious in cross-dressing/drag, which offers a rudimentary understanding of gender binaries in its emphasis on gender performance[7]. By the method of close reading, the argument in this essay will be carried out within a comparative framework of cultural differences. *Human, Woman, Demon* is carefully analyzed to discuss the organic connection and function of three keywords: self-consciousness, gender performance, and ethos in molding female subjectivity, claim the appropriateness of the exchange of knowledge between borders and territories, which will, in turn, bring new perspectives and concepts for the study of modern Chinese cinema, as suggested by Petrus Liu[8].

2. FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN DILEMMAS

Human, Woman, Demon begins with a set of charming scenes: First, an extreme close-up displays three plates filled with pigments as red, white and black, which are recognized as the three-color used for face painting in Chinese opera. Then a medium close-up shows a young actress, known as Qiuyun, is looking at herself in a mirror with a pair of bright eyes. After a while, she adroitly does face painting for herself and changes into men's costumes. When everything is done, Qiuyun looks at herself into the mirror once again, it turns out a brand-new figure, the performative appearance as we call it. This figure, known as Zhong Kui, is a male demon in charge of exorcism in Chinese legend. The camera moves back and forth between Qiuyun and Zhong Kui, as if they are gazing at each other. These sequences, which conflate fiction with reality, engender the question: "Who am I?"

"Who am I" is a question of identity that comes out of a level of self-consciousness connecting to memory. To answer this question, we must trace back to Qiuyun's early years. So events of her childhood are shown in a flashback. Born in northern China around the 1950s, Qiuyun grew up in an artistic family of the local theatrical troupe. She adored her parents very much and learned performing skills from them. Yet, Qiuyun suffered "primal trauma" in her childhood. She encountered her mother puffing and panting with another man (actually, this man is her biological father) in a haystack at night. This scene made her lose control and run away. Qiuyun's mother eventually eloped with that man. These events disillusioned Qiuyun's notion of a happy family, which could have been a harbor for her.

Adolescence continued to become a more high-

pressure period for Qiuyun, giving rise to her anxiety of gender. She felt inferior to her peers and ashamed to be a woman. Thus, she learned to hide vulnerable emotions such as love, joy and sadness because she believed that such feelings were feminine and implied weakness. On one occasion, she was chosen to play as the warrior Zhao Yun onstage, unintentionally she made a successful debut. Her performance was accepted and acclaimed by the audience. Qiuyun realized that when she was onstage, no one cared about who she was, and performing could release her from gender trouble and the miserable past. From then on, she seized every chance to enhance the skill, itching for performing again one day. But worrying the performing road was so hard that she could follow her mother's destiny, Qiuyun's father urged against her and suggested another, more "normal" path for her: Finding a good man to marry, which meant settling down in a marriage and enjoying family life. But Qiuyun had made up her mind: "Then I won't play women's roles." Against all odds, Qiuyun insisted on performing in Chinese opera. Her father reluctantly acquiesced in her decision and said: "If you're going to do it, do it best."

This choice actually set Qiuyun on an irrevocable path. In fact, the performing of Chinese opera is intricate because the performer is required to break gender boundaries, and portray the idealized male or female. Rather than an individual producing the performance, and the opposite is true: The performance is what produces the individual. Mei Lanfang, one of the most famous performing artists in Chinese opera, once claimed, "Identifying with the role is the highest level of Chinese opera[9]." When Mei Lanfang performed female roles onstage, no one could tell his real gender. Likewise, if Qiuyun wants to achieve an acceptable level of competence and recognition in her performing career, she has to learn, internalize, and reproduce certain theatrical norms considered artistic within the culture of Chinese opera. In short, she must identify with the male role and surpass the achievement of her predecessors.

There was a moment, Qiuyun was supposed to accept the love from Maestro Zhang, the chief martial actor in the troupe. Maestro Zhang recognized her as a "good looking girl", and showed a deep solicitude towards her. But the shadow of childhood from the nuclear family, made Qiuyun retreat from the relationship. As Maestro Zhang is a married man, he left troupe as a result of banishment, leaving Qiuyun the very position of marital roles.

So far, Qiuyun's life seems to be another Mulan's story in a modern version. We can find that the practice of gender performance plays a significant role in Qiuyun's configuration of female subjectivity, which not only "produces" a whole new self for her, but also protects her from the latent discrimination. Nevertheless, what Qiuyun can not foresee is that gender performance may cut both ways. Although she can be a pretender on

stage, she can not keep on pretending off stage. An old Chinese adage goes like this: "The stage is a small world and the world is a big stage." How to play well on the stage of life, that is a rudimentary challenge left for Qiuyun. Butler reminds us that drag should not be considered the honest expression of its performer's intent, rather, what is performed "can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier within the domain of corporeal legibility"[6]. For Qiuyun, gender performance is a rhetorical agency, which masks the femininity of her per se. Qiuyun knows that once putting on the "masculine mask", it becomes the essence of what makes her who she is. Besides, she is not willing to give up her independence and career. Ambitious and talented as she is, most modern Chinese women from all walks of life would encounter the same dilemma.

3. CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF GENDER PERFORMANCE

It is worth noting that the availability of Western theory depends on the particular situation within the framework of cultural differences. Although sharing something in common, such as the performative power offers a new mode of viewing gender, the practice of gender performance is always subject to the dominant discourse of culture, which encapsulates notable distinctions in China from its Western counterpart. In Western contexts, gender performance originates from elite liberalism practices, it is not independent of capitalist system. It is often politicized on challenging the predominant philosophical framework of gender[10], asserting the rights of queers[11], enacting with embodied subjectivity[12], as the blood capillary space of macro and micro political connection and circulation[13].

By contrast, in the long tradition of Chinese culture, there has been a consolidated world view composed of Yin and Yang. The so-called saying "one Yin and one Yang together are Tao", indicates that men and women should be together in harmony. Family is considered as the basic sociological unit of Chinese culture, which is essential to provide a sense of belonging. As a result, Chinese culture has a set of fusion mechanisms to integrate marginal culture into the mainstream, posing no threat to the latter. The practice of gender performance in Chinese cultural contexts is de-queered[14], and it should not be an attempt to challenge existing orders and mores[15][16]. In terms of cultural policy, official discourse frequently advocated the revival of traditional Chinese culture(including Chinese opera) by promoting Chinese culture abroad. The gender performance in Chinese opera, for instance, is not simply a theatrical practice, but it also has rich cultural implications. Different masks and dressings denote different personalities and social statuses that characters in Chinese opera perform. This is how gender performance

can help performers identify the role. The patterns of cross-dressing makeup are inherited from Chinese tradition and the local customs of the region. The different kinds of characters and personalities that Chinese opera bring alive onstage can be found among well-known figures in Chinese history and Chinese legend as well, which is rooted in the soil of Chinese culture and spirit. This is why its emotions will continue to resonate with people for a long time. The theatrical practice of gender performance is institutionalized and legitimized in both Chinese opera tradition and cultural mores, rather than a result of identification with the masculine or feminine[17]. For Qiuyun, playing male roles is not a deliberate choice to imply queerness or antisociality. She does so because she has to. Because the idealized image of a nuclear family had been smashed ever since she was a kid, she had to pretend to be the one who could offer herself the protection of family, just remaining on the symbolic and imaginary level. This was how Qiuyun placated and salvaged herself through gender performance.

Human, Woman, Demon ends with a series of impressive scenes: Zhong Kui eventually came along from the backdrop of darkness for Qiuyun, and they two had a "real-time" conversation. Zhong Kui said: "I've come to marry you." Qiuyun answered: "I've married myself to stage." Zhong Kui asked: "You regret?" Qiuyun emphatically replied with just one word: "No." In the film, the imaginary character Zhong Kui always exists as a symbol of ideal man for Qiuyun, who comes to rescue her every time she suffers. At the end of the film, she meets her dream hero. It is the moment that implies her reconciliation with the past, which is a response to the opening scene of the film. By crossing the boundaries of reality and fiction, tradition and modernity, it is how film language treats the audience from familiarity to alienation, as is articulated by Yau Ching[18]. Further exploration on this issue will be discussed in the following section.

4. ETHOS IN CHINA'S 1980S

According to Arroyo, the focus of film reading should not be on whether a film's representations are seen as "positive" or "negative" by a contemporary audience; rather the reading should investigate the film's social context as a way of understanding the representations historically. In this sense, the emergence of *Human, Woman, Demon*, not only gives us a chance to examine the configurations of modern women through the process of their self-discovery, self-identity but also describes their growth and living environment, as well as the social and family pressures they have suffered. Indeed, it problematizes "female" in many important ways and points out an approach to scrutinize the sociocultural conditions in China's 1980s. As the film depicts, the female subjectivity is as much about private life as it is

about social conventions, cultural politics, even political situations in contemporary China.

At the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held in December 1978, the state leaders officially launched the policy of China's Reform and Opening-up, thus marking the beginning of a new era of Socialist Modernization. In the intellectual field, "emancipating the mind" greatly inspired Chinese intellectuals, they positively studied the thoughts and theories imported from the West, which they could not fully understand at that moment. After the resumption of the College Entrance Examination, female directors like Huang Shuqin had the opportunity to receive professional tertiary education in film academy. They were supposed to make films that were not only accepted by the populace but also kept pace with the ideological trend of the time. Thus, it is not surprising that *Human, Women, Demon* is not so much feminist as a contemplation on the discovery of the complexity of human existence. During an interview after filming *Human, Women, Demon*, the director Huang admitted that she didn't understand feminism, the film was based on her and other women's life experiences[19]. So, how to understand the relationship between the female subjectivity and the state spirit in this film?

In the 1980s, there was a so-called "looking for real men" ethos permeating the popular culture of the Chinese Mainland, which emerged from the background of gender awareness after China's Reform and Opening-up, making icons out of Takakura Ken, Alain Delon, and Rambo, etc. The term, "real men" refers to strong, masculine manhood, which can shoulder the threats of persecution and defend the rights of people. The introspection of the absence of manhood is reflected in the subjective discourse of intellectuals, writers and artists through calling the return of natural and rational masculinity[20]. Because manhood is metaphorically associated with the spirit of the state[21], it expresses the desire for national rejuvenation based on socialist modernization and Marxist historical materialism as the important material and theoretical resources.

Scholars on Chinese culture have repeatedly stated that since the late Ming Dynasty, Chinese philosophy advocated the ideal figures with "affection and faith", and these idealized figures were the ultimate pursuit of Chinese and the model of self-cultivation[22][23]. In *Human, Woman, Demon*, Qiuyun dedicates herself to stage by playing male roles. More remarkably, most roles that she plays are heroes and sages in Chinese history and Chinese legend, including Zhong Kui, Zhao Yun and Zhuge Liang and so on. These characters are identified as saviors, guardians and protectors for the state, with highly sense of honor, morality and responsibility. They, in turn, add nuances to Qiuyun's portrayal of idealized manhood with sincerity and passion. "Finding a good man to marry", which was once pursued by Qiuyun, can be

viewed as another way of saying "looking for real men". Although officially, men and women are considered equal in China's 1980s, the inherent customs of patriarchy remain and need time to change. The story of Qiuyun has portrayed female anxiety towards manhood and showed how female subjectivity negotiated gender identity about both males and the state.

As far as the sociocultural environment in China's 1980s was concerned, the socialist market economy had been successfully implemented, which constituted a different modernity in the era of globalization. In the confrontation between tradition and modernity, the constant collision of tradition and modernity can provide more possibilities for China to become China. The antique visuality had been aestheticized, while the modern visuality had been politicized, and finally collided with the dominant discourse of culture[24]. Indeed, Qiuyun's stage performances inspire the audience's aesthetic and cultural interest. The success of her not only benefited from the response to the increasingly urgent need of revitalizing Chinese culture but also contributed to improving the spirit of the state.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The film can illumine essential thoughts and understanding on existential dilemmas that are largely ignored in the current trade-centered, technologically driven culture. Under a comparative framework of cultural differences, this essay distinguishes females from dominant perceptions of a universally applied mode of gender norms and scrutinizes the representation of female subjectivity in terms of self-consciousness, gender performance and the ethos in China's 1980s. The formation of female subjectivity, represented by Qiuyun, is potentially subversive. It crosses the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, tradition and modernity, margin and mainstream, region and world through constant self-reinforcement and self-renewal.

Due to the complex sociocultural contexts, the practice of gender performance has different implications between China and the West. In Western contexts, gender performance largely concerns to elite liberalism practices, which is not free from capitalist system. While in Chinese contexts, gender performance has acculturated to the mainstream culture and morality, and it is likely to be found not only in the well-educated classes but also in the working and middle classes. As analyzed above, Chinese culture can not only de-contextualize but also localize Western theories. It makes us realize that when using Western theories, we should first examine their applicability in specific situations. We should not only interpret China from the perspective of the West, but also interpret the West by referring to "China as theory"[25].

Last but not least, it has great significance to find new perspectives in observing the ever-changing culture of

film and television through studying representations of female subjectivity in modern Chinese Cinema. As the complexity of individual gender awareness becomes a more fascinating issue for Chinese filmmakers and artists, it shows a clue of the progressive shift from the classic metanarratives about the class struggle to the visual imagery, instead, in women's perceptions of subjectivity through which to explore a more complex world. From the history of Modern Chinese cinema, it highlights the possibility of a new narrative strategy. Since then, more and more female characters have appeared in screen, which are more comfortable and confident with their gender identities rather than trying to disguise them. From this point of view, *Human, Woman, Demon* is a transcendence of Mulan's story.

REFERENCES

- [1] Y. J. Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature & Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, 1996, pp. 214.
- [2] L. Y. Chen, *Master of Chinese Opera: Born to Perform*, in: *A Date With Luyu, ifeng*, Hong Kong, 2015. Website: https://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20150827/41464955_0.shtml
- [3] J. H. Dai, "Human, Woman, Demon": A Woman's Predicament, in: J. Wang and T. E. Barlow(Eds.), *Cinema and Desire: Feminism Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, Verso, New York, 2002, pp. 153.
- [4] Y. Yuan, *Feminism and Chinese Feminist Films*, in: *Contemporary Cinema*. vol. 3, The Press of Communication University of China, Beijing, 1990, pp. 53.
- [5] T. Moi, *Feminist, Female, Feminine*, in: C. Belsey and J. Moore(Eds.), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1989, pp. 117-132.
- [6] J. Figueira, *Gender Performance*, in: N. A. Naples, R. C. Hoogland, M. Wickramasinghe and W. C. A. Wong(Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss220>
- [7] J. Butler, *Critically Queer*, in: *GLQ*, vol. 1 (1), Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, pp. 17-32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17>
- [8] P. Liu, *Why Does Queer Theory Need China?*, in: *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 18(2), Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, pp. 292. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2010-002>
- [9] L. F. Mei, *Forty Years on Stage*, Civilian Press, Shanghai, 1952, pp. 100.
- [10] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, New York, 1990, pp. 25.
- [11] M. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Routledge, London, New York, 2008, pp. 16.
- [12] A. Jones(Eds.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London, New York, 2003, pp. 370.
- [13] S. Stryker, P. Currah, L. J. Moore, *Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?*, in: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36(3 & 4), The Feminist Press, New York, 2008, pp. 14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ws.0.0112>
- [14] C. Z. He, *Trespassing, Crisis and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance*, in: L. Z. Wang and C. Z. He(Eds.), *Chinese Sex/Gender: Historical Differences*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, Beijing, 2016, pp. 182.
- [15] J. K. W. Lau, "Farewell My Concubine": History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema, in: *Film Quarterly*, vol. 49(1), University of California Press, California, 1995, pp. 23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1213489>
- [16] S. L. Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2006, pp. 165.
- [17] S. H. Lim, *Celluloid Comrades*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2007, pp. 72.
- [18] C. Yau, *The Color and Blade of Wind, Flower, Snow and Moon*, in: C. R. He and Y. B. Ning(Eds.), *Take Philosophy Seriously*, Institute of Philosophy Press, Taoyuan, 2008, pp. 219-220.
- [19] Y. J. Zhang, *Viewing China: The Study of Chinese Cinema and Literature from the Perspective of Disciplinary History*, Nanjing University Press, Nanjing, 2006, pp. 45.
- [20] L. Z. Wang, *Gender and Sexual Differences in China's 1980s: Introducing Li Xiaojang*, in: L. Z. Wang and C. Z. He(Eds.), *Chinese Sex/Gender: Historical Differences*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, Beijing, 2016, pp. 95.
- [21] X. P. Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2000, pp. 150-170. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397267>
- [22] G. Vitiello, *Exemplary Sodomites: Chivalry and*

- Love in Late Ming Culture, in: NAN NÜ, vol. 2(2), Brill Publishers, Leiden, 2000, pp. 207-257. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852600750072259>
- [23] S. Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2004, pp. 113.
- [24] R. Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, pp. 58.
- [25] Y. B. Ning, *China as Theory: Re-recognition of China*, in: *Open Times*, vol. 4, Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences Press, Guangzhou, 2016, pp. 99.