



Presentation of Feminism in Films from a Global Perspective: Centered on the Comparison between "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui"

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Abstract. Starting from the status and intimate relationship of contemporary women, the paper analyzes the inverted relationship between husband and wife through a comparative analysis of the French film "Anatomy of A Fall" and the Chinese film "Feng Shui", thus dissecting the influence of social and cultural differences between China and the West on women and intimate relationship. In the paper, it's found that the similarities between "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui" lie in the reversed gender roles of husband and wife and the selfless dedication of mother to son; whereas the differences cover the unique Chinese concept of "feng shui", the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the relationship between mother and son, and women's family concepts. Through the analysis of similarities and differences, it's observed in the paper that the development of feminism in China and the west varies from each other due to the socio-cultural influence. This paper bears practical significance in studying the differences between Chinese and Western feminism.

Keywords: Inverted Conjugal Relationship; Intimate Relationship; Feminism; Mother-Child Relationship; Family Ethics

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the development of economy and progress of female consciousness, there is a wave of feminism on the Internet, which not only promotes the renewal and iteration of gender culture in Chinese society, but also provides a new position for feminist thought (Yang, 2023). On social platforms and short video platforms, there are numerous analyses of feminism in literary as well as film and television works.

Filming industry is a male-dominated industry, and the works made or directed by the female are few and far between (Savino, 2024; European Audiovisual Observatory, 2023). In recent years, female directors are breaking the male narrative and implementing feminism through film lines and plot settings. Furthermore, more excellent works directed by female directors have entered the social vision, such as

"Little Women", "Portrait de la jeune fille en feu", "The Power of the Dog", "Barbie" and so on. In March 2024, "Anatomy of A Fall", the awarded film in both Oscars and International Film Festival of Cannes directed by French female director Justine Triet, was released, in which the reversed gender roles caused a heated debate on the Internet. Of course, "Anatomy of A Fall" is not unique in its deliberate reversal of gender roles. The heroine Li Baoli and the hero Ma Xuewu in the Chinese film "Feng Shui" were also in an unconventional relationship. By comparing the similarities and differences between "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui" in this paper, it deeply explores the inverted husband and wife relationship, and analyzes the influence of Chinese and Western socio-cultural differences on contemporary women and intimate relations.

2 Synopses

2.1 "Anatomy of A Fall"

At the beginning of the film, Sandra was receiving an interview, which was then disrupted by the loud music playing upstairs. In this way, her husband seemed to impose his presence without showing himself. So the interview was interrupted. Soon, their son Daniel discovered the dead body of Sandra's husband, Samuel. The police suspected that Sandra was the murderer, so a trial against Sandra was filed.

Sandra, a German, met Samuel in London, and then married and lived with him in France. With several books published, Samuel was a renowned writer. Comparatively, Samuel's career failed. Teaching at a school, he always wanted to write but always gave up. Because he was immersed in his writing, he was partially responsible for the car accident of their son Daniel. Samuel struggled with guilt and pain. In terms of career development and family relationship, Sandra and Samuel seemed to be in an inverted couple relationship.

In court, the prosecutor interrogated Sandra about her sexual orientation, character, habits, and the contents of her books in an attempt to prove her guilt. Besides, a recording of a heated argument between the couple the day before Samuel's fall was played in court. Samuel complained about Sandra: she didn't speak French, she didn't accompany Daniel, she cheated on him, she plundered his book... He said he planed his life around Sandra and he didn't have the time to write. Sandra couldn't take it anymore and an argument broke out that eventually escalated into a physical fight. At the end of the film, Daniel chose to trust his mother and testified for her, so the jury acquitted Sandra.

2.2 "Feng Shui"

The background of "Feng Shui" is Wuhan, China, in the 1990s. Li Baoli sold socks in a wholesale market; whereas her husband, Ma Xuewu, was a workshop director at a state-owned enterprise. They had a son, Xiao Bao. They just moved into a new apartment distributed by the enterprise where Ma Xuewu worked for. With fierce

personality, facing the movers who demanded a raise, Li Baoli was irritated and quarreled with them. Ma Xuewu gave them cigarettes and said a few polite words to calm Things down. Seeing his move, Li Baoli reprimanded him in the face of the movers, making Xuewu ashamed. The movers expressed sympathy for him: "although you are a cadre, you are manipulated by such a woman all your life...you are more pitiful than us". That night, Xuewu asked for divorce. Later, Ma Xuewu established an intimate relationship with Xiao Zhou, a female colleague, and then they got a room in a motel. But Baoli followed and found them, and even called the police at the excuse of reporting a case of prostitution. As a result, the entire factory learned about the affair. When the police informed Li Baoli, she pretended to be surprised, and "magnanimously" forgave Ma Xuewu, hoping to maintain their relationship. One day, Ma Xuewu took his mother, who once lived in the countryside, home, because of which he and Baoli had another argument.

After learning that he would be laid off, Ma Xuewu jumped into the river and committed suicide, leaving a suicide note full of guilt and regret for his mother and son, but no word for Li Baoli. Since then, Li Baoli started to support the family all by herself. She began to make a living by carrying luggage for passengers by a shoulder pole. She toiled to support Xiao Bao's education. After several years, Xiao Bao lived up to the expectation and ranked top one in the college entrance examination. At that night, Xiao Bao blamed Baoli for imposing on his father, which led to his father's suicide, and asserted to sever the mother-child relationship with Li Baoli. After painful consideration, Li Baoli gave up the apartment, choosing to move out and start a new life.

3 Similarities

3.1 Inverted Relationship of Husband and Wife

What "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui" have most in common is that they show the inverted relationship between husband and wife. In "Feng Shui", the wife Li Baoli was a fierce and strong woman. Although her husband had a formal and decent job, in both family relationship and life, he had to listen to his wife. In "Anatomy of A Fall," the wife Sandra was a successful writer who barely worried about her son's schooling; while husband Samuel, whose career was repeatedly frustrated, had to spend more time caring for his son and handling household chores.

Although the entire film revolves around Samuel, he only appeared directly in two clips. In one clip, Samuel complained that Sandra didn't speak French at home, even though they lived in France. Then he accused Sandra of plundering his book. Finally, he blamed Sandra for her cheating in the past. Sandra refuted: "You wake up in your forties and you need someone to blame. And you are the one to blame." In short, Samuel did not live up to society's expectations of a husband, which represents the omnipresent male anxiety in today's society. Woolf once pointed out that women were restricted by their environment and bound by family responsibilities, so they couldn't devote themselves to creation (Woolf, 1929). Men, however, failed to understand this

female dilemma. "Anatomy of A Fall" subtly reversed the traditional gender roles between men and women and set this dilemma for a man. Normally, we are accustomed to the sacrifices women make for their families in male narrative films. The carefully designed reversal of gender roles in "Anatomy of A Fall" makes us deeply understand the pain and compromise of women.

In "Feng Shui", Li Baoli and Ma Xuewu had four unequal relations: first, in terms of family life, Li Baoli was straightforward and fierce, often pointing fingers at Ma Xuewu; whereas Ma Xuewu was obedient, and rarely resisted. Ma Xuewu made up for the loss of male dignity in his family by having an affair. Second, in terms of occupation, Ma Xuewu was the director of a workshop in a state-owned enterprise, which was a decent job in Wuhan in the 1990s, and their new apartment was distributed by the enterprise after his promotion. Comparatively, Li Baoli was a sock vendor. In this relationship, she was significantly disadvantaged. Third, in terms of education level, Ma Xuewu was an intellectual, while Li Baoli barely received education and was laughed at by her mother-in-law for being uneducated in the film. Li Baoli had a strong inferiority complex at education background, which prompted her to take the initiative to control and manipulate Ma Xuewu in family affairs. Fourth, in terms of family background, although Li Baoli's parents were vendors selling vegetables in the market, she was still a city dweller. Because of her status as a city dweller, she had a sense of superiority and looked down on the "countryman" Ma Xuewu.

In the face of Chinese society's expectations of masculinity in the 1990s, Xuewu could not deal with the unequal situation of social status and family dignity, which led to his tragic end.

3.2 Mother-Child Relationship

The fathers in "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui" both spent more time with their sons and helped them with their homework. Therefore, the closer relationship between the son and the father made the mother-son relationship in the two films seemed distant and indifferent. Both Daniel and Xiao Bao were in the audience's perspective, and served as the witnesses to the breakdown of the relationship between their mother and father.

Although Sandra's relationship with her son was not close, during the argument, when Samuel talked about Daniel, Sandra reacted quite strongly, demonstrating that she was protective of her son. In court, the prosecutor tried to portray Sandra as a cold mother, but she was misunderstood. It's not that she didn't care about Daniel's condition, instead, she always tried to see Daniel as a normal child. The only time Sandra cried in the film was when Daniel wanted her to leave for a while. Despite being strong in court, she also showed a vulnerable side because of her son.

Li Baoli was strict with Xiao Bao. However, she loved her son deeply. When finding out about Ma Xuewu's affair, Li Baoli wanted to break in the room. Then a mother and son passed behind her, and the child's calling of his mother made her change her mind. She knew that if she broke in, her relationship with her husband would be irreparable. In order to give her son an intact family, she chose to endure.

She rushed to attend her son's parent-teacher conference in high school, proud and excited for her son's rank as No. 1 at class. Every time her son came home from school, she would only ask, "have you finished your homework?" Xiao Bao was annoyed by her, and her mother-in-law laughed at her. However, given that she was uneducated, this daily question was her way of showing her concern.

4 Differences

4.1 To Dissect the Film "Feng Shui" in the View of Feng Shui

The Chinese title of the film "Feng Shui" is "Wan Jian Chuan Xin", meaning "Ten Thousand Arrows Piercing the Heart" in Chinese feng shui beliefs. Feng shui is a unique concept in Chinese society, which usually refers to the direction of the land lines, mountains and rivers. People believe that feng shui can affect the fate of a family. Feng shui symbolizes the inescapable patriarchy, asserting influence on Baoli's fate.

The "presence" of feng shui is divided into three stages throughout the film. First, feng shui began to exert its influence: since Li Baoli and Ma Xuewu moved to the new apartment with the layout of "ten thousand arrows piercing the heart", the conflict between them intensified, which eventually led to Ma Xuewu's cheating and suicide. Second, Li Baoli's struggled against fate: after Ma Xuewu jumped into the river. Xiao Jing, the bosom female friend of Li Baoli, pointed out: "I think there is something wrong with this apartment... seven to eight roads go through your apartment... it's called 'ten thousand arrows piercing the heart' in feng shui." But Li Baoli didn't believe it: " 'ten thousand arrows piercing the heart'? I don't believe it... In my mind, it's 'shining with ten thousand radiance'!" She soon found a job carrying luggage, doing hard work to support her mother-in-law and her son Xiao Bao. In the face of feng shui, Li Baoli showed a stubborn attitude. Third, Feng shui still worked: on the night of releasing the results of college entrance examination, as the champion of the city, Xiao Bao announced to break off relations with Li Baoli and planned to drive her out of the apartment. To Li Baoli, this news was a bolt from the blue. But after deep consideration, she chose to leave the apartment and start a new life.

4.2 The Relationship between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law in Chinese Society

Compared with Western society, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Chinese society is quite unique (Yan Du, 2013). When the husband's family status is lower than that of the wife, can the mother-in-law still have a higher status than the daughter-in-law? In "Feng Shui", the relationship between Li Baoli and her mother-in-law can be divided into three stages: first, the mother-in-law was brought from the countryside to the apartment in Wuhan. Li Baoli was not satisfied with the arbitrary decision made by Ma Xuewu, so her attitude was cold and indifferent, shown by turning her back towards them and deliberately not looking at

her mother-in-law. Second, after Ma Xuewu committed suicide, Li Baoli had to assume the obligation to support her mother-in-law. To make a living, she had to toil and moil. In the end, Li Baoli was driven out of the apartment by Xiao Bao, who asked Li Baoli to leave the apartment to her mother-in-law. When Ma Xuewu was alive, her mother-in-law was "dependent" and acted at the will of Li Baoli; but as Xiao Bao grew up, her mother-in-law re-established her family status and could even command Li Baoli as an elder. Influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of "obedience to son after husband's death", Li Baoli and her mother-in-law were in a competitive relationship. Whoever was closer to Xiao Bao would have more right of speech. The mother-in-law's status was attached to the male parent. After the death of her son, her grandson Xiao Bao naturally became the new male parent, and her status also upgraded with the change of the male parent, thus shifting from a passive party to an active party.

4.3 The Differences in the Relationship between Mother and Child

Daniel was a participant and a bystander in the trial. The director applied camera settings to let Daniel "watch" and imagine the truth of Samuel's death from a son's perspective. After the experiment on the dog and a series of mental struggles, Daniel decided to trust his mother and testified to defend her innocence. It can be seen that Daniel's attitude towards Sandra changed from questioning to understanding.

Unlike Daniel, Xiao Bao always stood firmly on his father's side. After Ma Xuewu committed suicide, Li Baoli didn't want to have Xuewu portrait at home all the time, but Xiao Bao deliberately put the portrait on her bed to punish her. When Xiaobao knew his father had an affair, the director used a montage to interweave the scenes of Xiao Bao and Xuewu, as if it was a spiritual connection between father and son. Xiao Bao immediately understood and forgave his father's behavior, and angrily blamed his mother. He never took into consideration the harm his father's cheating would have on his mother. On the contrary, when he saw Li Baoli and Jianjian living together, he called Li Baoli "shameless" without thinking, although, at that time, Baoli had lost her husband for ten years. Xiao Bao seemed to be punishing his mother for her challenge of the paternal power (Zhang, 2013). The years of sacrifices made by Li Baoli for her son, was to some extent influenced by traditional concepts of "obedience to son after husband's death". Hence, she hoped that her son would be admitted to a good university. However, her ten years of hardships failed to move Xiao Bao.

4.4 Female Role and Family Concept

The heroines in the two films held very different views on family responsibilities. Sandra didn't devote much time to her son, and there was no doubt that the focus of her life was her work. Despite the equally strong personality, Li Baoli held totally different family values. Her focus was on her family, and she devoted her life to her family. After Ma Xuewu committed suicide, she worked hard for ten years to support her mother-in-law and Xiao Bao.

The difference between Sandra and Li Baoli also reflected the different family values of women in Chinese society and Western society. Chinese society places more emphasis on the importance of family ethics. First, as an agrarian society, China gradually developed a self-sufficient small-scale economy in rural society, which emphasized the importance of family and lasted for thousands of years until the modern era (McGoldrick et al., 2005). Second, Confucianism, which has a profound influence on Chinese society, constrains women's behaviors through the ethical norms like the Three Cardinal Guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) and Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity), so that women are in a subordinate position being dominated in the family and society. Li Baoli was obviously bound by family responsibilities. When Ma Xuewu was alive, she was attached to Ma Xuewu and her son. After Ma Xuewu died, she shifted the focus of her life to her son. Sadly, Xiao Bao refused to recognize her as a mother and drove her out of the apartment.

5 Conclusions

The French film "Anatomy of A Fall" and the Chinese film "Feng Shui" both discuss the rise of female status and male anxiety in contemporary society; challenge traditional family concepts and role stereotypes; show the dilemmas and challenges faced by women; and re-examine gender issues. But they adopt different treatment methods in mother-child relationship, family view of female role and so on. This paper started from "Anatomy of A Fall", combined with the plot analysis that the director deliberately reversed the relationship between husband and wife, i.e. Samuel's time was engulfed by family chores, and there was no condition for him to continue writing, resulting in a failed career. Then, this paper analyzed the four unequal relations between Li Baoli and Ma Xuewu in "Feng Shui", drawing a conclusion that in the face of Chinese society's expectation of masculinity in the 1990s, Xuewu couldn't deal with the situation of unequal social status and family dignity, which led to his tragic end. Finally, the paper compared the social and cultural differences between China and the west in terms of feng shui, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the concept of family ethics, thus analyzing the different effects of socio-cultural differences on the relationship between husband and wife in the two films.

With the rising status of women around the world, the conjugal relationship of "strong woman and weak man" will no longer be individual cases. Facing this situation, people cannot help but wonder: what kind of intimate relationship does women expect? How can families adapt to this change? By reversing the division of gender roles, "Anatomy of A Fall" and "Feng Shui" encourage us to think about these two questions, by showing some kind of enlightenment.

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