

Rouge Faces: Chinese Women in Dilemma

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Abstract

Yu Li's 2005 film *Dam Street* can be read as an attempt to address women's issues in rural China. By examining the female characters: the protagonist Xiaoyun embodying a man-made image of rouge face and supporting female characters internalizing traditional values, the article argues that the film has successfully delivered a non-propagandistic message of Chinese women's situation: women are restricted by different levels of patriarchies. The article has made an exploration in the cinematographic and historical and cultural context to reveal the image of rouge faces in specific sense and in general sense.

Keywords: Yu Li, rouge faces, patriarchy, Chinese women, non-propagandistic

1. Introduction

The film *Hongyan / Dam Street* (2005), is a vehicle through which the writer/director Yu Li examines the contemporary paradox of Chinese women – living in a society that claims to be woman-friendly, but is in fact not. While this is not an uncommon issue in feminist literature or film-making, what makes this worthy of examination is that Chinese patriarchal culture is still heavily influenced by this thinking despite the rise of feminism, and Chinese cinema rarely engages women's issues so boldly or openly. Though Kristeva (1977) claimed that in the Chinese bourgeois revolution of the beginning of the century, elements of national liberation, socialist ideology, and the emancipation of women were indissolubly linked and Mao fights against the requirement of chastity and for women's liberation, Mackinnon (1982, p.523) argues "if seizures of state and productive power overturn work relations, they do not overturn sex relations at the same time or in the same way, as a class analysis of sex would (and in some case did) predict". The publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in China is regarded as a milestone event to the feminist cause. When asked about people's response to the translation and introduction of the book, Cui (2003, p.172) quotes Dai's words, "What readers see is sex not feminism". In fact *The Second Sex* has not impressed people with the term being preposterous instead it has reinforced, to most Chinese in the late twentieth century, the concept that women are the second sex, and to the feminists in China, it serves to recognize the existence of gender differences. As the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, there was a sudden fervor for the introduction of western philosophies into China. However as many western thoughts have been misinterpreted, Beauvoir caught attention as Jean Paul Sartre's wife or as a woman standing behind the great man. Not until in the year of 1988 did appear three abridged Chinese translations of *The Second Sex*. Dai's study (2007) shows during this period women in cities were faced with the subtle double standard under the guise of absolute equality: women are expected to be wantons in the society and chaste wives and devoted mothers at home. The observation made by Dai on gender development in China is based on analyzing urban women, women intellectuals in particular and it can be safely inferred that in the rural area feminism is almost a neglected issue and women are placed in a more complicated situation as illustrated by the protagonist Xiaoyun in the film. In fact, the great paradox of Chinese feminism is that it was not started at the grass roots level like other nations, but has been promulgated from the top echelons of public authority, which is still heavily influenced and dominated by men. As the concept of human rights confuses Chinese people, feminism is a biting and vague concept for most Chinese. Women would rather claim to be tough women or crazy women (*nvhanzi* or *nvshenjing*) than be labeled as feminists so as not to be marginalized by the community.

Though Yu Li denies being a feminist, and is specifically anti womanist¹ (*nvquan zhuyi* which emphasizes women's dominance), there is no doubt that her film, shot in a rural Sichuan town, sets out to expose the issues faced by Chinese women in modern China. Despite being filmed in 2005 and taking place in 1983 and 1993, the movie still speaks to the issues faced by Chinese women outside of the urban setting, even in 2015. Controlled at

all levels through patriarchal traditions, women are passive recipients of a watered-down male-approved feminism that still essentially restricts them, particularly in terms of body politics. That is reflected in a string of incidents that some old women advocating anti-sex and sex inhibition smeared faeces over the sex educators or their pictures in two major Chinese cities of Guangzhou and Xian in the years of 2014 and 2015 (Li, 2015). Yu Li attempts to address this issue in a way that transcends cultural boundaries through character creation. This will be evaluated for their effectiveness in (a) communicating a non-propagandistic view of Chinese women's situation and (b) classifying different character models and character development. The article will make an exploration of the Chinese women's issue in the documentary, cinematographic, historical, linguistic and cultural analysis to reveal the image of rouge faces in specific sense and in general sense. The reading demonstrates that the rouge face represented by Xiaoyun in particular is a visual pleasure, a scapegoat, an imposed identity marked by confusion and silent struggle for transformation and that destiny is shared broadly by other women in the large.

2. The Protagonist Xiaoyun: A Rouge Face

A rouge face, which is the English translation of the film's Chinese title *Hongyan*, is a man-made female identity that has existed for thousands of years in China. In a broad sense, Chinese culture identifies a *hongyan* as a pretty woman who is likely to be associated with three possibilities embodied in the form of Chinese four-character idioms. The first one is *Hongyan zhiji* which means a pretty woman is an ideal candidate for extramarital love. The second is *Hongyan boming* which means pretty women end tragically. The third is *Hongyan huoshui*, literally a pretty woman is a flood of evil. They are common motifs in Chinese folk tales, legends, epics, and literary works which endeavor to convince readers that pretty women are the objects for desire but involvement with them will result in the falling of cities and nations, a Chinese version of the Western Helen of Troy. The idioms embody male's ideal image about women: women should be used as visual and sexual spectacles to satisfy their desires and as scapegoats for men to escape responsibilities by condemning women's sexuality (Zhang, 2008). The extreme popularity of the three idioms ingrained reveals that the whole society, including men and women, shares the patriarchal ideological assumption about women's sexuality: women's sexuality is desired by men but women must be condemned for and suffer from it. This invocation of history and culture gives the film a deeper and broader scope.

There is a period in the Chinese history when rouge faces are politically eradicated to demonstrate the social progresses in gender equality. Cui (2003) found that in Maoist era woman as a sexual, gendered subject, however, disappears from representation and yet in the era of economic reform, market imperatives and popular cultural production return the female body as a gendered other and as a sexual commodity. Though the politically genderless period when the sexualities of men and women are both suppressed is briefly represented in *Dam Street*, the film's emphasis is to display the evolved identity of the rouge face at the historical transition when traditional prejudices against women and the impact of Maoist era and the erosion of commerce coexist. In addition to body punishment which means an exercise of power (Cui, 2011), the resurgence of primitive objectification of female is first and foremost brought to attention: a rouge face is a desiring object and then a scapegoat to be trampled by on-screen spectators, male characters and female characters. However, under the yoke of being a visual and sexual spectacle and a scapegoat as well, she undergoes a transformation from a state marked by confusion and loss and passivity to a conscious breakup with all types of control. Therefore the film presents two interwoven narratives: at the superficial level a chronicle of a rouge face's experiences and at the deep level a witness of her gradual transformation.

In the initial scene the camera shows a rouge face of the teenage Xiaoyun sitting at a meeting on a playground. The social-political era of the early 1980s' rural China a couple of years after China opens up in the year of 1978 is still characterized by revolutionary discourse, which is suggested by a woman in an army uniform with a big red paper flower making a phony speech about her heroic deeds in a war to the mass of students. Xiaoyun sneaks a note which reads "I am pregnant" to her boyfriend Feng Wang. However a teacher discovers the secret in a restroom. Then "various parties with different concerns punish the female body for its sexuality; together they compose a network of force, institutional or familial" (Cui, 2011, p.219): she is expelled from school with her "moral decadence" along with the corresponding "verdict" broadcast through the loudspeaker; she is given a harsh corporal punishment at home. Nevertheless this is simply a prelude to a spiritual bending and molding along with the physical punishment. Basically the film revolves around her life ten years after the disgrace and displays the rouge face's fate in a non-revolutionary context.

The adult Xiaoyun is above all a public pleasure and it can be demonstrated first through analyzing the dominating cinematography which establishes the visual pleasure in spite of the director's attempts to liberate audience from male gaze.

In Xiaoyun's first stage scene we see a long close-up displays Xiaoyun's pretty face with red cheeks and lips, singing an opera melodiously and enthusiastically. Then we see her face change and her singing interrupted as we hear the male audience heckle her, calling out, "Not this! Pop songs." Next what we see is her confused and defiant face and we hear a man rushing accompanying girl dancers onto the stage and other men calling on her to undress. The girl dancers and the noisy men are not displayed visually since the close-up is still Xiaoyun's face. Not until we hear the music for a pop song and her singing against waves of male laughing and talking does the close-up leave her face. At this moment the camera zooms out for a wide-angle shot. The stage with Xiaoyun in the middle and the dancers and two guitar men and one keyboard man behind is gradually in view. The backs of the audience members come into the frame as well and get united as a black threatening mass. She sings in the midst of the shot with the male audience looking at her from different directions. During the whole process the camera keeps steady and is placed in the middle aisle of the hall, distancing itself from the male spectators' perspective in the film and thus distinguishing the camera's perspective from male look. The interactions between the facial expressions and the male voices remind the audience watching the film of the off-screen space and repeatedly emphasize the male look. The visual pattern foregrounding the male looking at her can be seen in scenes throughout the film. The scene Xiaoyun is sexually harassed in her room is shot almost in the way the camera tracks Qian's look: first her back and bottoms, then her breasts and her face. In the scene she is attacked by Wanjin Liu's family there is a long close-up of her face with makeup and her naked body with torn clothes and then a wide-angle view shows a sea of the male audience looking at her. The cinematography helps establish her as a visual and sexual spectacle while retaining a critical perspective on the male look.

While the cinematography tells explicitly of the male look, a cultural analysis of the first stage scene reveals the vulgarity of the look and dilemma of the rouge face since it is marked by absurdity and disharmony. An opera performer in opera costume which covers the full body is singing a pop song on stage. The opera costume presents a tradition that a rouge face is represented as a visual spectacle in a restrained manner and an art which emphasizes audio effects. In contrast pop songs stand for a modern vulgarity and a mere visual spectacle. Therefore this disharmonious image foregrounds the clashes between tradition and modernity, foreboding a deepened crisis for women. The term of a rouge face itself indicates that male audience in the past, who had the privilege to be theatre patrons, could be pleased by looking at beautiful faces. However this sequence shows men in the film can't be satisfied with looking at a pretty face and their gazes become more vulgarly domineering and an opera house is turned into a bawdy place. This can be better read in the socio-political context. When the male desires are suddenly released after a period of sex oppression women's body becomes a direct medium to fulfill their once suppressed desires. In addition to that, Zhu's research (2010) shows in the era of consumption and entertainment a commercial product is positioned to provide the greatest pleasure as possible to consumers or spectators as Chinese operas have had unprecedented challenges. They were popular cultures and men's favorite pastime in the ancient time and become too elegant for most audience in the modern time. Many measures have been taken by theatrical troupes for survival. Among them are performing for store opening, singing pop songs and selling womanly charms as demonstrated in the film. Xiaoyun is expected to give the men what they want when they want it. The image of an opera singer singing pop songs in opera costumes crystallizes women's issues and the use of the opera dilemma to shed light on women's reality contributes an interactive mode to the film's production of meaning.

Through Xiaoyong's adolescent gaze Xiaoyun is objectified by the men around her, ostracized by the community, and punished for immorality. Xiaoyong's friend tells Xiaoyong that his grandpa says she is a loose woman (*poxiezi*) though the remark is strongly refuted by Xiaoyong. The dialogue shows the people in the whole community, young and old, have learned to objectify and sexualize Xiaoyun, and to criticize her for it. Later she is attacked and humiliated by Wanjin Liu's family who accuse her of committing adultery. This is where the critique of the patriarchy culminates. Paradoxically she is punished for her sexuality before the spectators who come to desire her as a visual and sexual spectacle. What's more it is the woman who is taking her revenge for her husband's affair by beating her husband's mistress. The scene adopts a melodramatic mood and a half-documentary tone, demonstrating the social prejudices against the sexually transgressive woman. The camera captures the response of ordinary people who have not been rehearsed for the film. Life and art catch up. When the attack is under way, people watch with interest the farce in which the "loose woman" is punished and listen attentively to the protest of the belligerent family. As she walks away, the gossip begins among the crowd, sharing and promoting the traditional assumption that such a wicked woman must be punished and brought to justice. The sad message from the sequence is that nobody except Xiaoyong even questions the justice.

Rouge face is an imposed identity characterized by confusion and loss of subjectivity. Though li's authorial cinematography in the film retains the mainstream film's visual pleasure and male gaze, she doesn't activate the

mechanism to fetishize and eroticize her body. Thus the director invites the audience to see beyond the imposed identity of Xiaoyun. Xiaoyun's social identity is intertwined with her sexuality and marked by confusion. As for her social role, Xiaoyong, Xiaoyun and her mother have an interesting dialogue when Xiaoyong first meets Xiaoyun at the table in her mother's home. Xiaoyong says, "I know you. You are a singer." Xiaoyun's mother responds, "She is not a singer. She is a Chuanese opera performer. Chuanese opera is an ancient and elegant art." Xiaoyun retorts, "Now nobody is interested in Chuanese opera. We're called pop singers." Despite her titles though, whether opera performer, singer or pop singer, Xiaoyun is on stage less for listening than visualizing and she takes on an identity imposed on her and she is very confused about who she is. De Lauretis points out female characters are made to conform to the ideal image that man has of them and that means a loss of subjectivity. She emphasizes that subjectivity is not a fixed entity but a constant process of self-production. Narration is one of the ways of reproducing subjectivity; each story derives its structure from the subject's desire and from its inscription in social and cultural codes (Smelik). Xiaoyun's life is a reversal of a constant process of self-production and she is constantly molded into a contemptible spectacle. Another indicator of her confusion and loss of subjectivity is in her family relationship. She refuses to live her mother's life and their relationship is dominated by conflicts and psychological distance. Kaja Silverman revises the traditional view on the divergence of identification and desire and in her view the incorporation of the mother's image helps the girl form her identity (Smelik). The tense relationship between her and her mother in the film instead reveals the crisis of her subjectivity.

A rouge face is an imposed identity struggling silently for her transformation. For much of this film the director doesn't position her as much of a speaking subject. Even when she speaks, her language is compact. With the punishments and control she is crushed and loses her discourse amidst the voices criticizing her, and growing passivity is obvious in all, particularly in the scene when she is beaten by the family on the stage. In contrast to the previous scene in which the young Xiaoyun holds up a kitchen knife, warning her mother not to beat her any more against the notion that a child is supposed to be submissive to the corporal punishment of parents, this scene is marked by her silence and lying still with two hands covering her face in the storm of verbal and physical abuse, signifying her non-resistance and her willingness to take punishment. Her voiceless pain and endurance in the midst of the ominous shadows and the loud reprimands is a consistent thread in the film. However, silence not only marks her position on the periphery of power and a sign of castration but also is depicted as a source of strength and resilience, and a mirror of intellect, and a reflection of independent thinking and meditation, and a gesture to refuse patriarchal control and the director's invitation to explore her inner world. Many scenes can prove that point. When Feng Wang informs her of his departure plan in the bamboo forest, she grabs his cigarette and smokes. Ten years later when she is asked whether she loves him, she says "no". Therefore her silence complicates the bamboo scene by revealing her hidden strength to carry on and her courage to say no to the male world. Her silence over the table with her mother signals a resistance of her mother's control and an attempt to maintain her independence while taking care of her mother. Her cold attitude to Qian can be read as a dogged stubbornness to refuse dominant patriarchy. Her lit room the night after his sexual assault at her dormitory suggests she has a sleepless night meditating upon her life. The next day she takes action, proposing to end the secretive relationship with Wanjin Liu. After she is humiliated by Wanjin Liu's family we see her speechlessly get to her feet and walk away through the gloating crowd. Then camera cuts to her sitting on bed and eating an apple silently with two eyes gazing beyond. This image reminds us of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*, a heroic figure pondering a hell of disasters. The linked silent scenes pave the way for her gradual transformation. The film culminates in her stabbing Qian and annulling her marriage with Wanjin Liu. It is a volcanic eruption after a long silence, an empowerment to break away from male dominance. In the film silence is depicted not as inarticulateness rather as an antidote to being silenced by the patriarchy and an alternative power to the power of the dominant discourse which is portrayed as loud, aggressive and suppressive.

3. Two Female Characters: Internalization of Patriarchal Values

Cui (2011, p.221) observes that "The world framed in *Dam Street* is a female one, with women left behind or divorced, striving to survive on their own". In addition to the protagonist Xiaoyun, the film is concerned with all other women and their differences and their common fate. Xiaoyun's mother, the second important female character, is a patriarchal figure, who has internalized male dominance, valuing face and fame and power above everything and being anti-freedom. She punishes Xiaoyun with a feather duster, a traditional tool of domestic punishment in China; when Xiaoyong plays a trick on a female student, pulling a string that breaks down her sweater revealing her belly, she as his teacher, punishes him by beating his hand with a teaching stick, traditionally used as a warning or threat to students; these scenes establish her as a traditional patriarchal figure.

Cui (2011, p.222) also makes observation that "As the unhappy and mad mother figure imposes the culturally dominant notion of gender discipline on her daughter's sexed body, she doubly reinforces female victimization:

first her own, then her daughter". What is "the culturally dominant notion of gender discipline"? The Chinese scholar Lin (2009, p.146) notes that "Worship of chastity, which they so highly prized in women, became something of a psychological obsession, and women were henceforth to be responsible for social morals, from which the men were exempt". The Neo-Confucian philosopher Yi Cheng in the *Song* Dynasty said starving to death meant very little while women's loss of chastity meant very much. Not surprisingly, the mother equates Xiaoyun's out of marriage sex as a violation of moral standard. Moral transgression is considered the worst loss of face, which is especially applied to women. Of all the traditional traits of the mother, the most conspicuous is that she is a guardian of women's virginity and chastity. She is not above using subterfuge to gain information or force/violence and humiliation to maintain order; she spies into Xiaoyun's diary and when Xiaoyun's pregnancy is discovered, in addition to physical punishment, she has her confess her sin before her father's picture and for dozens of times scolding her as "having no face /shameless". The anger and madness shows how much she is upset by the disgrace and in the meantime how she reinforces the sense of stigma in her daughter. The face value positions her and her daughter live in the haunting shadow of shame and guilt. In order to save face, she meets a couple to arrange adoption disposing of the shameful fruit. As the couple offers to pay for the adoption, she refuses to negotiate money and says, "We are teachers. I am not selling a baby." The baby makes her unable to hold up her head and taking money from the dealing will add more guilt to her. Why does she emphasize that Chinese opera is an ancient and elegant art? It shows she values traditional standards and more significantly "elegant" is the antithesis of "shameful", indicating she refuses to accept the fact that the opera is catering to low tastes and her daughter is reduced to a visual and sexual spectacle, and further implying that she can't take pride in her daughter's career. When she tells Xiaoyun not to take money home, it rhymes with refusing the couple's money. That shows she suspects the money is not clean and Xiaoyun earns it by obscure means. She frequently reminds her daughter of her shame though it is not justified. It is this patriarchal ideology that results in the tense relationship and jointly victimizes her daughter.

Furthermore, the sense of moral guilt pushes herself on the verge of collapse. She looks asexual and haughty but actually she feels lonely and suppressed. She manages to make her family look complete while in substance her family is fragmentary: her husband is never seen at home in person; Xiaoyun is detached from her, without any physical contacts and conversations between them. Once she confides to Xiaoyun that she is terribly lonely and begs her to reclaim Xiaoyong whom she used to regard as a symbol of shame. A close-up shows she cuts Xiaoyong's picture from her class photo and pastes it carefully onto her family photo. The shot shows how desperately she desires to have a child to redeem herself from loneliness and emptiness. Yet her dream is cruelly shattered when she is left alone in her house and totally isolated. Over the last meal with Xiaoyun, she explodes, tipping over the table and disowning her. Her fury over Xiaoyun's decision to move reveals that the prospect of living without her daughter fills her with horror. Looking Xiaoyun walk away, she can't help crying, her face twisted and pained. The disillusion and breakdown display that ultimately the patriarchal woman is powerless as well.

Zhengyue Wang, Xiaoyong's adoptive mother and the third important female character, is a middle-aged woman with traditional virtues, nevertheless, despite her virtues, she cannot avoid having a miserable life. She is so male-centred that she has no self. In the first place, she sacrifices herself to take her brother's responsibilities. She adopts the baby Xiaoyong after she helps her brother flee, and lies to her husband, a colonel in the army, saying that the baby is hers. Her husband subsequently divorces her, suspecting her of having a relationship with another man. She is punished for her brother's transgression. In the second place, she is such a devoted mother that she decides to remain single for Xiaoyong. She declines a divorced barber with the reason that her son doesn't like him, though she endures loneliness. She supervises his study and behaviors but she only stops at making some persuasion and coaxing. Unlike Xiaoyun's mother, she is not a rigid mother and allows some freedom to Xiaoyong. She doesn't take down the picture of her ex-husband, who insults her but is thought of by Xiaoyong as his father. Her conversations with Xiaoyong are full of fun and amusement so much so that he looks like a spoiled child. Since all she cares about is her brother and Xiaoyong, they become a virtual obsession defining her existence. Her sole dependence upon males partly explains why she refuses to return Xiaoyong to Xiaoyun.

In contrast to her unconditional love and tolerance to the two boys, Zhengyue Wang is hard on Xiaoyun. The night when Xiaoyun appears with Xiaoyong in front of her door, she looks very cold and pulls Xiaoyong inside and slams the door shut. This scene shows her animosity and hostility to Xiaoyun. The only reason to explain this alienation lies in her prejudice against Xiaoyun that she is the source of her brother's departure and her own divorce. Therefore she wants Xiaoyong to have nothing to do with the evil woman as ten years ago she buys a train ticket for her brother to flee superficially from the town but substantially from the woman who she believes brings a bad luck to her brother. Her intent to hide the truth of Xiaoyong's identity also reveals her doubt about Xiaoyun's

qualifications to be a mother. Along with Xiaoyun's mother, Zhengyue Wang has internalized the patriarchal mores and tends to blame Xiaoyun as a whore.

Despite the difference in the approaches to mothering, the images of both "mothers" are subversive. Indeed they have internalized the traditional values and are exponents of the old orders. They are reminders of the doctrines of chaste widowhood, female heroism, self-sacrifice and self-abasement. However, significantly they join the parties to punish and degrade Xiaoyun. Considering that, the sense of Xiaoyun's predicament is all the more remarkable. Furthermore mothers suffer for their children; Xiaoyun's mother suffers shame and embarrassment while Zhengyue Wang suffers loneliness and mistrust. Regardless of their status, the women in the film, particularly the mother figures, are punished in some way for being women, for the fruits of their labour or their decisions. Based on this narrative, Yu Li consciously challenges the glamorized and idealized mother character and the belief that the role of a mother can be the ultimate redemption of a woman. Dai (1994) concludes that one classical women prototype in Chinese films is mother/motherland. She is either an embodiment of the ordinary people saved by the Communist, or a vehicle of such exemplary virtues as diligence, bravery, strength, dedication and self-sacrifice. She is the original force of motivation, rocking the cradle and the world. The mother character is overloaded with too many social expectations mobilized by ideologies and politics.

The deglamourized mother figures created by Yu Li make rouge face acquire a general and broad and non-propagandistic meaning. Xiaoyun is a young rebellious woman, challenging patriarchies in an attempt to control her own sexuality and life. Xiaoyun's mother is an old dominant woman. Zhengyue Wang is a middle-aged gentle and virtuous woman. In spite of the differences in their personalities, they share much in common and thus acquire the general tragic sense of rouge faces. First, out of various reasons they are single mothers and as suggested in the film they are beautiful at young ages and deserted by men and used as scapegoats and in a traditional sense all punished. Second, psychologically they all suffer from confusion and loss, which is metaphorically demonstrated by the dislocation between the blood relationships and their family roles. Xiaoyun is Xiaoyong's biological mother, and is addressed as a sister. Xiaoyun's mother is Xiaoyong's grandmother, and is taken as a teacher. Zhengyue Wang is Xiaoyong's aunt, and is thought of as his mother. Third, all women, including Wanjin Liu's wife who takes her revenge on Xiaoyun for her husband's infidelity, are not only consigned to the social-sexual periphery of the male dominant world, but also isolated from each other in the female world.

4. An Open and Hopeful End

The film doesn't simply portray her protagonist as a victim and make moral judgments. Li subtly raises the spectator's awareness of women's issues, awakens and gives the protagonist ability to empower herself to challenge the patriarchal world and follow her own will. While Wanjin Liu embodies a pathetic figure when he hits the wall desperately with a bottle at the scene where his bride is sexually assaulted, Xiaoyun is triumphantly transformed into a capable agent when she directs a knife towards Qian. The image of knife which appears twice in the film is a symbol of protest and strength: the first time when she holds it against her head it stops her mother from beating though it represents an unconscious rebellion to the punishment at this moment; the second time it is a conscious counter-attack on the patriarchy. After that she is increasingly vocal when she reconciles with her mother and Zhengyue Wang. During her visit to the latter she gives up the reclamation of Xiaoyong and expresses her gratitude without expecting mutual understanding. At her mother's house she returns and touches her mother on the forehead and speaks, "Mother, I'm leaving," which ends a decade of silence and distance both physical and spiritual between them. Those actions position her as a forgiving and conscience character with strength. The reconciliation among women embodies the director's idea about women's liberation: women's empowerment and their mutual understanding precede gender equality. The film ends with Xiaoyun with her luggage rushing to board a train. Though the destination sign of the train is deliberately hidden, the shot of her as she leaves makes a contrast with the opening establishing scene where she lies motionless under the water. The contrast signifies the transformation and the vehicle represents the continuation of the process. Li's subsequent film *Pingguo (Lost in Beijing, 2007)* picks up where *Dam Street* leaves off. In the film the foggy hills, the cloudy weather, the babbling river and the moving train symbolically allude to no clear resolution and an open but hopeful end.

Notes:

1. Chinese people are lacking in the knowledge of feminism and have a general negative attitude towards it. On quite a few occasions she made similar remarks that she doesn't advocate equality between men and women, and she doesn't emulate male directors, harsh and domineering (Shm, 2011). Cui believes her stance and practice relate to the ideological and commercially driven film industry (2011, p.230). In addition to that, she shuns being labeled as a feminist director and being classed into any Hollywood film genres (Shm, 2011).

2. A glossary of non-English words/phrases

女权主义	women's dominance
红颜知己	A pretty woman is an ideal candidate for extramarital love.
红颜薄命	A pretty woman dies early and miserable.
红颜祸水	A pretty woman is a flood of evil.
破鞋子	a loose woman

Contributor Details

Zhaohui Liu teaches in the English Department of North China Electric Power University. She studied film as a visiting research fellow at the Center for Film, Media and Popular Culture at Arizona State University, Tempe. She has translated *Film Noir* by William Luhr and *Running Scared* by Peter Lehman into Chinese.

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