

Patriarchal Representations in *Dam Street*

Zhaohui Liu¹ & Yushan Zhao¹

¹North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: ZhaohuiLiu, 87 # English Department, North China Electric Power University, No. 2 Beinong Rd., Huilongguan, Changping District, Beijing 102206, China. E-mail:jas_liu@sina.com

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Abstract

An analysis of recessive and dominant patriarchies is critical to the understanding of Chinese women's issues in Yu Li's film *Dam Street*. Recessive patriarchy is a subtle form of male dominance; dominant patriarchy embodies the simple and direct form. Both traditional and new elements could be traced in the two types of characters. An investigation into the characters' development is done through reading the scenes of the film in the Chinese cultural frames. The finding is that the nature of the two patriarchies is physical and psychological control and harm.

Keywords: Chinese women, Yu li, recessive patriarchy, dominant patriarchy

1. Introduction

Dam Street (2005), one of Chinese director Yu Li's movies, has drawn the most attention for its bold revelation of the cruelty against women. The film starts in the year of the early 1980s and spans ten years, following the life of a young woman, Xiaoyun in a small rural town of Sichuan Province. The story begins with a teenage girl Xiaoyun in loose clothes sitting in the water of a river. She is found having a swelling belly though she tries to hide it. Consequently she and her boyfriend Feng Wang are expelled from school for their moral decadence. The scandal is made known to everybody on school loudspeakers. The boy flees to a faraway place. Xiaoyun stays and delivers a baby, which her mother says is dead. That only serves as a prelude to her submissive life and her life ten years after the disgrace is where the film focuses. Ten years later she still lives in shadows, working in a troupe as an opera actress reduced to dressing sexy and scantily on stage while singing lewd popular songs satisfying the male audience. She is also subjected to sexual advances and a secretive relationship. Only a ten-year-old precocious boy Xiaoyong admires, cares about and sometimes protects her. In the end when she gets to know he is her son who is adopted and raised by the sister of Feng Wang, she chooses to leave the town. The film stands out for its apparent concern for women and adopts a critical and challenging attitude toward women's man-made identity of a visual and sexual spectacle. The film has been analyzed in China from perspectives of the director's style, psychoanalysis, feminism, female role's relations and female narratives (Zhu, 2011; Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2007; Yuan, 2011; Ma, 2009). Shuqin Cui's research (2011) also focus on women in the film as she argues that the director continues her search for female sexuality and criticizes a society dominated by sex and commerce, where women find neither space to settle down nor men to trust. However the research about the men in the film remains understudied though there are some very brief comments about male characters.

Based on Cui's observation (2011, p. 221), "The world framed in *Dam Street* is a female one, with women left behind or divorced, striving to survive on their own. By contrast, the male figures are either absent or ambiguous". Indeed the film is about the issues faced by women; as such, each scene (with the exception of the ones involving Xiaoyun) revolves around the various women. Despite this, the cinematographically subordinate roles of Wanjin Liu and Qian need to be evaluated as these two men are portrayed as superior to women, and are identified with Yu Li's concepts of recessive and dominant patriarchies. Patriarchal control could be felt everywhere, like a shadow haunting women. It is embodied in male voice on the loud speaker condemning the young girl's moral decadence, her father's picture on the wall overseeing the household, the male audience on the screen, in particular the two main male characters. In Zhang's article (2007, p. 25) a local newspaper reported that Marco Muller, the artistic director of the 62nd Venice Film Festival, made remarks about the film that the protagonist's fate epitomized patriarchy in the whole society and it was fortunate to have such a film. As the other side of women's study, an analysis of the representation of the patriarchal control is crucial to the understanding of the difficulties Chinese women are still facing. Half a century ago Julia Kristeva (1974) wrote *About Chinese*

Women to improve a western vision of that time about China (p. 196). She said she had the impression that the problems of Chinese women arose from feudalism and Confucianism. She believed that “in the Chinese bourgeois revolution of the beginning of the century, elements of national liberation (to overthrow Manchurian feudalism), socialist ideology (the bourgeois West, which inspired the revolt, already dreamed of a new society, and the Paris Commune had already fought for it), and the emancipation of women (because to combat feudalism is first of all to combat the Confucian family and morality) were indissolubly linked” (p. 100). However in the meantime she was aware that the Communist Party heard the cry to demand the women’s issues and yet subordinated them to an economic issue with the result that the grievances of women against the family became a motivating force behind the new economic structures, and she also noticed the failure to integrate the feminist movement with the workers’ movement and the impasse of the feminist cause during the period. Currently the dominant discourse on women is still the Marxist Theory of Women (makesi zhuyi funvguan). According to the Marxist Theory of Women, women leaving home and taking socially productive work was the biggest step of women’s emancipation in socialist state. But it is argued that “the state has never provided a standard definition of the Marxist Theory of Women, and only in official documents and public speeches mentioned several key tenets of it, which makes it more like an empty slogan” (Chen, 2009, p. 7) and “The state is male-dominated, and also the ongoing market-oriented transformation. To Chinese women, what they are faced with is a state-market complex, which is much stronger than feminism” (Chen, 2009, p. 15). Jin keeps track of the gender-power relationship in the changing rural area and the working peasants in the city. According to her field study (Jin, 2000 & 2010), patriarchy in the rural setting shows signs of stabilization and variation in the general decline of the authority of father and husband, and among the migrant farmers there is a continuation and reconstruction of the patriarchal family in the midst of its deconstruction. It demands great courage to talk about patriarchy in the modern China; women’s problems and patriarchal control are far from being fully addressed and therefore the representation of the male dominance in the film provides a good topic for discussion. The paper makes efforts to examine the film’s male characters in the Chinese cultural frames from a woman’s perspective by establishing and elaborating respectively two patriarchal categories, contributing to the literature on patriarchy in modern China. I will show you in the essay that the two types of men, poor or rich, effeminate or masculine, take women as sexual objects, control them psychologically and physically to assert their superiority and inflict huge harm to them. The patriarchy in modern rural China still exhibits the essential features of its tradition.

2. Recessive Patriarchy

It is important to understand the meaning of the different expressions of patriarchy within the film as well as how Chinese culture reflects them. Recessive patriarchy (RP) is a subtle form of male-dominance, characterized in the film as an almost apologetic authority over women, usually expressed through reasoning and rational advice. Typical male models of RP are men who have little or no authority over the world around them, and thus must create a sense of power within their personal relationship by oppressing or controlling women, usually through gentle means, as they tend to be portrayed as fairly weak-willed or toadying men when dealing with those in power. In terms of Chinese culture, the men are portrayed as rational, calm and quiet, while the women come across as emotional, irrational and loud in some cases.

Within the film Wanjin Liu represents recessive patriarchy.

Wanjin Liu, with whom the protagonist Xiaoyun has an adulterous relationship, looks sweet and soft-spoken, interacting with her in a fatherly manner. However, he is established as a weak and nonmasculine man. And the poor man always flatters and curry favors with rich people in a servile manner. When Qian appears at their wedding banquet without an invitation, he receives his generous gift money and responds as a sycophantic toady in sharp contrast to Qian’s pompous and supercilious smile. While he is ushering Qian to the table, he keeps paying tributes to and wishing good fortunes to and seeking employment from the latter. Later when he is fetched to the scene where his bride is sexually assaulted, he doesn’t have courage to confront Qian.

Men as weak as Wanjin Liu attempt to control women and prove powerful to women as well in a subtle and unnoticeable way. Fearing taking responsibility, he chooses a secretive approach to dealing with his relationships. In an argument with Xiaoyun, who is tired of keeping their affair secret, he reminds her of her disgrace through indiscretion ten years earlier as a warning to silence her. This stands as a reminder that out of the two people involved in her pregnancy, Xiaoyun was disgraced and her family (consisting of her mother as her father is notably absent) disgraced, and implies that indiscretion again will not harm him, but rather her again. It is an efficient reminder of the limitations of women within Chinese culture, particularly in small or rural towns. The social tradition favors and empowers men and Wanjin Liu gives it to a good play.

He draws upon the culture and tradition to look superior to and more intelligent than Xiaoyun, as demonstrated in the following dialogue they have after they open the door and see two fish on the ground.

Wanjin Liu: The little boy did that? He keeps you on his mind. You are having both old and young lovers.

Xiaoyun: Put them down.

Wanjin Liu: I can't even talk about that.

Xiaoyun: I don't want sex today.

Wanjin Liu: I will make you want it.

Xiaoyun: Go! Go!

Wanjin Liu: How can you change so quickly? I won't mind. I'm ten years older than you. If I argue with you, I am turning myself into a kid. I won't argue with you.

Xiaoyun is moved by the affectionate behavior of Xiaoyong, the little boy who sends her the two fish. However Wanjin Liu's referencing Xiaoyong as a young lover is an accusation about and allusion to her sexuality and a promiscuous woman. Even when he is attracted to her sexually, he assumes the right to laugh at and criticize her sexuality. When she protests indirectly about his accusation, he attempts to control her with his sexual power and contain her in the image of a sexual object. As she is inclined to think deeply and sort things out, he dismisses it as a child's changeable temperament and degrades her as a child who needs to be tolerated. He doesn't treat her as his intellectual equal and ignores her desire for respect.

In addition to the private scene where he controls to assert his manhood, he takes advantage of Xiaoyun to satisfy his vanity and rescue his low self-esteem and deny his social impotence in the public space though his inability to control could never be hidden. At their wedding banquet he ignores her awkward feelings and uses his husband position to bend her to highlight his power. When the wedding scene opens, he doesn't pay attention to Xiaoyun's cold attitude to Qian and puts on the air of a breadwinner welcoming him instead. Traditionally men are not interested in what women are thinking because they regard their feelings as trivial. As the banquet proceeds, he echoes guests' suggestion that they should play the game "An Egg Crosses a Bridge". He carries her onto the table so that everybody can see them perform. He pushes an egg into her breasts from one side and moves it slowly across in order to get out from the other side. In the middle of the process when the guests ask if the two breasts are soft and comfortable, he replies gloriously and triumphantly, "Pretty soft." As bribes in the Chinese culture are supposed to behave with deference on this occasion, she responds passively, taking the role of a visual and sexual spectacle. All the male adult guests are getting excited with all his fumbling with an egg over her breasts, foreshadowing the following sexual attack in the backyard.

Though in the western culture, an egg does not represent anything remotely phallic, it is synonymous with a phallic imagery and associated with ejaculation in the Chinese rural context. According to a record of local cultures, a tribal group in Tibet performs the ritual of phallus worship on September 29 every year. Part of this ritual is that eggs together with an erect-penis-shaped wood placed in a bamboo basket hanging on stairs are the targets for a wizard to shoot with arrows. This shooting act symbolizes penetration and eggs signify strong generative power (Song, 2001, p. 46). The questions from the guests such as "Thrust in?" and "The testicle is broken?" indicate the game is a simulation of sex. In this context, it shows how a wife is subjugated to a husband's manipulation and her body becomes a site where male sexual power prevails and the social expectation of a woman constricts her into an inferior and passive being and then into a public sexual spectacle. Furthermore we can better understand the film's very complicated thoughts about gender issues when more details are carefully analyzed. At the end the game the egg falls and breaks. This becomes a turning point in the scene. The broken egg leads directly to the following sexual assault when Xiaoyun rushes to wash her stained dress and symbolically displays men's impotence and the end of women's disillusion about men and marriage. When Xiaoyun yields to the woman's traditional role of being a submissive wife in a marriage to seek protection and refuge from insults, the husband pushes her to a sexual attack in the yard where the wedding banquet is held. However he is unaware of the stalking danger at all. Later when he is brought by Xiaoyong to the site, he is shocked by what he sees but has no courage to confront the assaulter and instead turns to hitting a wall with a beer bottle. This bears a witness to the ridiculous and bluff nature of the recessive patriarchy and predicts a change that women must pursue in the modern society. In the ancient China women are confined at home and never meet other men except their own husbands and thus safe from sexual assaults even though they are treated as sexual objects. In the current society if the working women follow the traditional rules for women to satisfy the expectations of their husbands, they risk being degraded into wantons when they could barely rely on their men. The patriarchy has been weakened so much that men's traditional protective role and women's being

protected role could hardly be maintained.

3. Dominant Patriarchy

The counterpart of this is dominant patriarchy (DP), which makes no pretense about subtlety, instead firmly asserting that men are dominant and women should acquiesce to their desires. In dominant patriarchy, the men are in positions of power, used to having their way either through force of personality, power/corruption, or wealth. They use their status as an indication of superiority, and will even apply it to the recessive patriarch, who often comes across as weak and effeminate compared to the more powerfully portrayed dominant patriarchs. If the men do not get their way, they will use force or intimidation; if they are still refused, they act as though they no longer desire anything from the female character and they strongly despise women.

Compared with the early 1980s of China when there is no wealth gap which makes the socioeconomic background as the film begins, the early 1990s is marked by the rise of a small number of rich Chinese and correspondingly dominant patriarchy which is embodied in the character Qian.

The bigger-sized Qian wearing a gold watch and a gold chain which are emblematic of wealth, though he appears only in two scenes, is highly representative of the comparatively new type of male control. First of all, with the empowerment of money, he has abdominal control over women and even men. Men as Wanjin Liu dare not challenge him even when Qian sexually attacks his bride at the wedding banquet. All young women except Xiaoyun are drawn to sing songs at his club for extra money and women singers sell him sex one night for 50 yuan. Xiaoyun's best friend Mimi accepts his proposal with an illusion that she could seek his protection for herself and Xiaoyun. The dark silhouette of drunk Mimi in awe of his power, holding up her right hand in a fantasy for a wedding ring, in contrast to the worried face of Xiaoyun, forebodes the threatening power of this man over the two women even before he shows in the film. Next he objectifies women without any restraint and the objectification is characterized by an escalation into sexual assaults. The next day after he proposes marriage to Mimi, he arrives at Xiaoyun's dormitory. He looks at her up and down and then fixes his look on her lower body, making an evaluation of her price in accordance with her looks. Ignoring her cold attitude he proceeds to grope her from back down to bottoms. Though she protests twice and goes to show him the door, he offers to buy her body one night for 200 RMB, raising two fingers in the prototypical image of a man bartering with a prostitute; when she refuses, he offers her 400 RMB raising four fingers. Each time when he makes a price offer his fingers are extending towards her breasts. Then he takes her silence as surrender and tries to kiss her until she fights back with a washing bowl in her hand. The point of the sequence is that he sees a pretty woman only as a sex object and exerts the power of money and intimidation to make her bow to his sexual exploitation. Last his language is marked by derogatory terms towards women, demonstrating his unscrupulous contempt to them and his tendency to control them psychologically. Not having his way, he warns Xiaoyun that she is not a virgin before he goes out of her dormitory and spits at the door, a very rude insult. The paradox here is that while he is indulged in promiscuous sex he takes it for granted that he has the right to laugh at women's sexuality and humiliates them for losing chastity. He takes pleasure in using language violence against women. In the backyard of Xiaoyun's wedding banquet he boasts about abandoning Mimi and takes pleasure in labeling her as a chicken which means a whore.

The rich man's malicious DP is caused by his swollen self and wealth in the once poverty-stricken place. The surname Qian means money and DP is the prototype of the rapacious capitalist and points to a larger space and a future trend. Though the film is set in a rural town, the city of Shenzhen is constructed in the film as a modern and open space which exists outside of the traditional and closed rural town. Shenzhen is a city where the policy of Special Economic Zone has first been enforced and is referred to as the model of the market economy and commercial society. Women in the film including Mimi attracted to migrate there all end up as prostitutes. This indicates in the modern commercial society women's inferior position is likely to be consolidated and deteriorated. The emerging dominant patriarchy represented by Qian puts women in a more emasculating situation in the rapidly changing modern China.

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