

# A cross-media study of object symbolism in *Wives and Concubines* and *Raise the Red Lantern*

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**Abstract.** Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* is adapted from Su Tong's novel *Wives and Concubines*. By employing literature, film and media, both works construct their narrative through object-based metaphors, yielding markedly different artistic effects. This paper employs case analysis and comparative research to examine the core objects in both works, discussing the specific pathways through which these objects are transformed from textual symbols into cinematic ones. By contrasting the differences in how these symbols manifest across media, it reveals their underlying cultural connotations and thematic expressions. Based on the emblematic objects, including red lanterns, flutes, and natural landscapes, the study argues that the addition, deletion, and reconstruction of objects alongside their cultural motivations are crucial for understanding literary-cinematic interaction.

**Keywords:** *Wives and Concubines*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, object symbolism, cross-media adaptation, metaphor

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## 1. Introduction

As cross-media narratives thrive, the interplay between literary works and their cinematic adaptations has become a significant focus of contemporary academic research. Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern* draws its narrative directly from Su Tong's 1990 novel *Wives and Concubines*. While the film retains core plot elements and character dynamics, such as the Chen family mansion, the wives' rivalry for favor, and Song Lian's fate after her marriage into the wealthy household. It also adapts certain symbolic motifs. The novel *Wives and Concubines* employs language to construct a rich system of symbolic imagery. Song Lian's fate after marrying into the wealthy household is a typical example. This adaptation also involves certain material objects. In *Wives and Concubines*, a rich system of material-object metaphors is constructed through language, while in *Raise the Red Lantern*, these objects are transformed into visual symbols through the cinematic medium. This shows the translation and reconstruction of material-object symbols across different media, while also revealing the oppression and alienation of women under feudal ethics.

Therefore, this study adopts a comparative research methodology, integrated with a semiotic cross-media approach, to examine the transformation mechanisms and underlying motivations of core imagery in both works. It can contribute to the comparative analysis of cross-media imagery translation between the two works, while further highlighting the research potential of literary-cinematic interaction.

## 2. Substitution and reconstruction of core symbolic objects

### 2.1. Substitution of the core symbolic object "well" in film and television

#### 2.1.1. The symbolism and metaphor of the "well" in wives and concubines

In traditional Chinese culture, the well symbolizes the source of life, nourishing all living things. However, in *Wives and Concubines*, the author transforms the well into a harbinger of death. Generations of women perish within it, making the well both a catalyst for and a witness to the women's cyclical life. The author employs detailed descriptions to accentuate the well's negative attributes: "the well water is blue-black" [1]. One hears the well water churning deep within the earth", thereby evoking its profound depth, icy stillness, and unyielding solidity. Although the narrative repeatedly emphasizes Song Lian's refusal to leap into the well, her spirit had long been extinguished by the deaths of Yan'er and Meishan [2]. Su Tong transforms the well,

which was originally a source of life, into a harbinger of death and an instrument that consumes women, exposing the alienation and destruction of women under feudal patriarchy. This critiques the “cannibalistic” essence of feudal institutions and Confucian ethics.

### 2.1.2. Symbolic reconstruction of red lanterns in *Raise the Red Lantern*

The red lanterns serve as an integrated substitute for the novel’s “well” and fragmented imagery (straw paper, rain, etc.), achieving a visual elevation of the metaphor. The color red, which traditionally symbolizes auspiciousness and reunion, is subverted into a vessel for female desire and a symbol of power and status. The red lanterns symbolize the master’s favor, “Light the lantern in whichever courtyard, order the dishes for whichever courtyard, and serve accordingly” binds female worth to male desire [3]. Song Lian’s transformation from an educated female student into a concubine who feigns pregnancy to vie for favor reveals the oppression and alienation of women under feudal ethics and power structures.

The film enriches the red lantern symbolism through rituals of lighting, extinguishing, and sealing. Lighting exposes women’s objectification under feudalism: they are not “human beings” but “objects of gaze” or “breeding tools” [4]. As the quote laments, “What sort of creature is a woman, after all... She resembles everything, yet not a human being.” This process of lighting ostensibly depicts commodification, while sealing symbolizes abandonment by power structures.

Moreover, the stark color contrast between burning red lanterns and white snowy landscapes replaces the novel’s elaborate description of paper-eating. The destructive imagery created by flames and smoke delivers a more powerful visual impact than the physiological anguish of “paper-eating”. The red lantern, as a more explicit visual symbol of violence, intensifies the critique of Confucian ethics through its powerful impact. This adaptation preserves the spiritual core of the original while integrating Zhang Yimou’s signature emphasis on visual symbolism. It delivers a more potent visual and emotional impact on the audience, revealing the plight of women under disciplinary power and the alienation of humanity [5].

## 2.2. The diminishment of natural imagery

### 2.2.1. The diminishment of warm natural imagery

“From summer into autumn, the wisteria blooms heavily,” bearing witness to Song Lian’s transformation from a young student entering the Chen household to the deranged Fourth Madam. “Meishan silently struggled as she was carried beneath the wisteria trellis” [1]. As a climbing plant, the wisteria metaphorically represents women’s inescapable dependence upon feudal patriarchy, being powerless to break free from its shackles. Simultaneously, the wisteria blossoms accentuate the oppressive atmosphere of the Chen residence, combining with elements such as rain and the well to establish the household’s gloomy and weighty tone. The chrysanthemums, which appear five times in the text, are associated with turning points in Song Lian’s fate. As one of the “Four Gentlemen” of Chinese culture, the chrysanthemum symbolizes Song Lian’s purity and proud spirit. During the Double Ninth Festival chrysanthemum viewing, Song Lian tells Feipu, “The flower is not the flower, the person is not the person; the flower is the person, the person is the flower,” hinting at her transformation from a “victim” oppressed by feudal patriarchal discipline into its “upholder”. The chrysanthemum’s transition from full bloom to withering symbolizes the destination of her fate. Her tragic end is, in essence, an inevitable outcome under patriarchy.

### 2.2.2. Mitigating motivations

Zhang Yimou noted in interviews that the film required a predominantly cool color palette, employing an overall somber and chilly tone to enhance the sense of oppression. As a visual medium, cinema demands more direct and visual symbols; warm, natural imagery like wisteria would have weakened this effect. The choice of red lanterns, which contrast sharply with the Chen residence’s grey hues, more effectively captures the audience’s attention. Natural imagery requires extensive detail and environmental description to create an atmosphere, making it unsuitable for cinema’s compact narrative rhythm. Elements like wisteria trellises and chrysanthemums were simplified into abstract red lantern symbols. This reconfiguration of natural imagery essentially represents Zhang Yimou’s deliberate realignment of narrative strategy and thematic expression [6].

## 2.3. Adaptation of environmental and spatial elements

### 2.3.1. Replacement of spatial elements

In the novel, the Chen residence is set against the backdrop of a Jiangnan garden, with the four wives housed in separate courtyards. This spatial segregation serves as a metaphor for the feudal family’s objectification and categorization of women. The film relocates the setting to the Qiao Family Compound in Shanxi. Its high density and enclosed nature render the aerial

view of the compound in the shape of a "well" character. The high, heavy walls give the architecture a predominantly grey color palette, aligning with the oppressive atmosphere of the Chen residence [7]. Simultaneously, the well motif is de-emphasized, and a "dead house" is introduced. The narrative's restraint regarding the dead house endows it with an air of mystery. Later, when Mei Shan dies, the novel's drowning in a well is altered to hanging, thus realizing the special function of the dead house to be realized. This change stems from the novel's detailed description of the well stimulating the reader's imagination, whereas cinematic narrative struggles to convey such imagery. Thus, through deep-focus compositions utilizing high walls and door frames, the spatial oppression of the Chen residence shifts from "implicit" to "explicit", better meeting the visual requirement of film [8].

The novel emphasizes the blooming and withering of wisteria to symbolize the fleeting nature of female youth and the tragedy of fate. As a natural motif, wisteria requires extensive description and reader's imagination to convey its symbolic meaning. Conversely, the traditional archway inherently embodies feudal connotations of lineage and social standing. Its visual weight readily creates a lofty, enclosed spatial form, resulting in an oppressive visual effect. This conveys the metaphor of "feudal structures being immovable" without extensive descriptive build-up, aligning with cinema's visually-driven narrative logic. The film employs the archway to surveil women's activities. Mei Shan's theatrical performance on it represents not defiance but a futile struggle under patriarchal oversight, intensifying both the tragedy and the irony.

The wisteria elicits reader empathy through its "aesthetic of transience", while the archway strikes the audience's psyche with "visual oppression". This dichotomy exemplifies how literature and cinema, as distinct media, chart divergent paths within the same narrative context.

### 2.3.2. Continuity and ambiguity in environmental imagery

The continuity and blurring of seasonal transitions constitute another key cinematic trait. The novel opens with Song Lian's autumn evening wedding into the Chen household. Autumn, bridging midsummer and harsh winter, metaphorically signifies Song Lian's transition from the blossoming age of nineteen towards gradual withering. Su Tong repeatedly evokes the persistent autumn rain's dampness and desolation throughout the novel, such as "fine rain falling incessantly upon the garden" and "the garden desolate in the autumn rain". These descriptions of autumn rain serve not only as a realistic portrayal of the southern climate but also as a projection of Song Lian's inner repression.

Snow, another significant motif in the text, occupies relatively little space. However, pivotal tragedies, Meishan's drowning in the well and Song Lian's descent into madness—which occur during winter. The author writes: "When snow falls, the world is halved... Perhaps this is an incomplete death." The deep snow concealing the Chen household's filth and bloodshed symbolizes feudal ethics' utter suppression of human desire [1]. The closing line, "the following spring, the Chen household welcomed its fifth wife, Wen Zhu," implies the cyclical persecution of women within feudal families, trapped in an inescapable fate [1]. Through the recurring seasons, the narrative expresses profound pessimism towards patriarchal darkness and feudal ethics.

The film exhibits the winter snowfall scenes while transforming seasonal shifts into spatial symbols and chromatic language (the contrast of red lanterns against white snow). It also obscures explicit seasonal progression, focusing instead on power rituals within the courtyard: foot-pounding, lantern-lighting, and sealing-off ceremonies. This diminishes the direct influence of seasons on characters' fates. Through the courtyard, red lanterns, and heavy snow, the film directly reveals the courtyard's "devouring" nature beneath the snow. It renders feudal ethics' control over individuals as tangible visual symbols, intensifying the film's visual impact and deepening its critique of the feudal power structure.

## 3. The introduction of core rituals: the body-taming function of foot-pounding ceremonies

### 3.1. Body-taming through foot-pounding rituals

The newly introduced foot-pounding ritual in the film disciplines women's bodies through ritualized procedures, compelling progress from resistance to compliance and ultimately dependence. This visualizes the oppression of women's bodies under feudal ethics through the act of foot-hammering. At the beginning, Song Lian resists the foot-pounding ritual; but when Second Aunt Cao remarks that one gradually grows accustomed to it, her mindset shifts. Later, Song Lian finds her feet tingling at the sound of the hammering. This transformation reveals her unconscious, passive acceptance of bodily discipline, ultimately internalizing the ritual into a self-induced craving for the pounding. This demonstrates that the ritual's essence lies in achieving spiritual control over women through bodily pleasure.

### 3.2. The instrumentalization of women behind the ritual

The film deliberately uses a hammer instead of hands, as the percussive sound carries far. When Second Wife performs the foot-pounding, the loud, distinct thuds reach Mei Shan and Song Lian who are playing mahjong in the third courtyard. This sound

acts like an invisible hook, provoking women to engage in mutual comparison and jealousy [9]. Throughout the foot-pounding ritual, the male figure of Master Chen remains concealed behind the scenes. This establishes a power structure characterized by “male absence”, reinforcing the patriarchal system where men dictate the rules. The rhythmic pounding and the red lanterns form a synesthetic connection, allowing the audience to intuitively grasp the feudal moral code’s control over women.

#### 4. Cross-media transformation of atypical objects

##### 4.1. The Xiao Flute: a vehicle for emotional repression under feudal ethics

Within traditional Chinese culture, the xiao flute is often associated with spiritual connotations such as seclusion and solitude. In the novel, it serves as the medium connecting Song Lian’s and Feipu’s emotions, and as Feipu’s vehicle for self-consolation within the confines of the feudal residence. The flute’s lingering, melancholic tones resonate with the gloomy atmosphere of the Chen residence, which symbolizes Feipu’s inner solitude. Scenes of Feipu and Song Lian playing the flute together hint at their ambiguous affection. This narrative strategy of “conveying emotion through the flute” aligns with the feudal tradition that interactions between men and women should “arise from affection but be restrained by propriety”. As the original text describes, “With Feipu gone, she grew ever more solitary within the Chen household” [10]. As Song Lian’s sole spiritual anchor within the feudal compound, Feipu’s weakness led to her complete disillusionment with the Chen residence. Simultaneously, his weakness became the final catalyst for her psychological collapse, metaphorically exposing the hypocrisy of male authority under feudalism [10].

##### 4.2. The flute: transformation of an audiovisual symbol under patriarchal discipline

The film adaptation replaces the novel’s xiao flute with the flute (dizi). In the novel, the xiao conveys Feipu and Song Lian’s emotions, which transgress ethical norms [11]. In the film adaptation, this change avoids using the xiao to convey illicit emotions, thereby preventing dilution of the visual narrative’s central thread. Moreover, the flute’s clearer, brighter timbre better suits the film’s requirement for auditory oppression. The flute also resonates with Feipu and Song Lian’s pastoral idyll, symbolizing their yearning for freedom and starkly contrasting with their stifled personalities within the Chen residence. The act of playing the flute requires vibrating the membrane, serving as an actual metaphor for women’s difficulty in voicing themselves within patriarchal structures. The combination of flute sounds with visual symbols such as foot-pounding and red lanterns further amplifies the expressive power of disciplinary control.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper explores the metaphorical use of material symbols in *Wives and Concubines* and *Raise the Red Lantern* through comparative analysis, revealing the additions, omissions, and reconstructions of material elements during cross-media adaptation alongside their underlying motivations. The study indicates that both core material symbols and non-natural material symbols have undergone certain degrees of addition or transformation. The findings suggest that differences in the use of object symbols between literary works and film/television media arise from the distinct artistic presentation modes of the two media, offering new perspectives and approaches to understanding the interactive relationship between literature and film/television. The adaptation of object symbols is not a simple matter of replacement or deletion, but rather involves deep consideration of thematic expression and narrative strategy.

This study does have limitations. The comparative analysis is confined to selected representative works by Su Tong, excluding his other writings and contemporaneous adaptations of analogous literary texts. The interpretation is situated within a Sinocentric cultural paradigm, leaving unexplored the potential for analyzing object metaphors within an English-language context. Future research could incorporate linguistic and other theoretical frameworks to trace the evolutionary trajectory of object metaphors in Su Tong’s 1990s works.

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