

# *Visual Modernity of Contemporary Chinese Women from the Movie Full River Red*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the visual modernity of contemporary Chinese women reflected in the image of geisha in the movie *Full River Red*. This paper mainly uses Laura Mulvey's gaze theory and Foucault's power theory, combined with the female image of geishas in the movie, to explore the social relations embodied in Chinese women's visual modernity. In the movie, a total of eight scenes of female scenes appears. There will be a flow of female power in every scene, and selected two representative plots for analysis. In the process of women going from being powerless to having power in the movie, it can be found that gaze has changed into another kind of "make themselves seen". Recently, a large number of female audiences have become viewers and the flow of power corresponds to the change of female power in real life. In general, based on the female cases in the film, and then to dissemination and reception of images and the changes in the production of image meanings and the other, discusses the relationship between this visual experience and Chinese female subjectivity.

**Keywords:** contemporary, visual modernity, images, visual culture, geishas

## 1. Introduction

*Full River Red* is a movie about patriotism. The historical background of *Full River Red* is set in the fourth year after Yue Fei's death. And this movie is a suspenseful comedy movie that is decrypted in the form of a chamber drama. The main content of the film tells that four years after the death of the famous Chinese general Yue Fei in the Southern Song Dynasty, the treacherous grand chancellor Qin Hui led his troops to talk with the Jin Dynasty. However, a murder occurred on the eve of the meeting. The envoy of the Kingdom of Jin died in the prime minister's residence, and the letter he brought disappeared. The protagonist is a recruited soldier without rank named Soldier Zhang Da (played by Shen Teng), the Commander Sun of the guard battalion (played by Jackson Yee). They have involved in this huge conspiracy and the grand chancellor Qin Hui ordered the two to find the murderer and the truth.

The film was directed by Zhang Yimou and he is a Chinese film director, producer, writer, and former cinematographer. He is a part of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, Honorary Doctorate from Boston University and Yale University, Distinguished Professor at Beijing Film Academy. The first film *Red Sorghum* directed in 1987 won the Golden Bear Award at China's first international film festival. From 1987 to 1999, he directed films such as *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red*

*Lantern*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, and *To Live*, which won him many film awards at home and abroad and was nominated for Oscar three times and five times Nominated for a Golden Globe.

The film *Full River Red* directed by Zhang Yimou in 2022, The film has been released worldwide on January 22, 2023. Global box office as of March 7, 2023 is 667 million (US dollars) and the Chinese box office accounted for 650 million (US dollars). In this film, all the characters in *Full River Red* are adapted from real history, which is the last words of General Yue Fei after his death. In terms of character faction in the film, Qin Hui's faction includes He Li (played by Zhang Yi) and the mute maid guard. Standing with Zhang Da is Commander Sun (played by Jackson Yee), and a geisha named Zither (played by Wang Jiayi). Then there is the faction of Lord Wu (played by Yue Yunpeng), the emperor's cronies. During the gradual development of the story, the first suspects are three geishas, one of whom is the heroine of this film, and she plays a key linking role in the play. And she ate the letter after reading it in an emergency, and she became the only person who saw the letter in the whole movie. In the end, she gained He Li's trust, and finally assassinated He Li and died with him.

Historically, women, as geisha, had excellent communication skills. The status of geisha is low, but they will be valued by former people in society. As the heroine of the movie, the geisha (Zither), her family was ruined by the people of the Jin Dynasty, and she became a geisha. However, she wants to assassinate Qin Hui with Zhang Da, which shows the fullness of women as an independent personality in the movie. In this movie, audiences regard the heroine Zither as a visual object and analyze the visual culture expressed in the paper.

In addition, there are some comments from the media. For example, *Le Monde* commented: *Full River Red* directed by Zhang Yimou is highly entertaining enough, the grand narrative makes people feel good, and at the same time leaves enough room for the audience to imagine. However, another criticism of the film by *Le Monde* is that some scenes of *Full River Red* are similar to the series broadcast in 2013. And Hu Jianli, secretary-general of the China Film Critics Society, commented: The movie tells the heroic story of a group of little people who want to fight with treacherous ministers with their lives. Finally, the mystery was revealed with an impassioned poem *Full River Red*, conveying a strong sense of patriotism to the audience. This also has some newspaper reviews. From *China's Xinmin Evening News* commented: Yue Fei didn't appear in the whole movie, but the director used a touching story of a small character and a romantic and personal ceremony to engrave the whole song *Full River Red*, every word, in the hearts of the audience.

## 2. Literature Review

This article is to analyze the visual modernity of contemporary Chinese women from the women depicted in the *Full River Red*. In fact, the discussion of contemporary women's visuality in this article cannot be separated from the discussion of visuality in the study of visual culture. First of all, with the deepening of visual culture research, "visuality" has gradually become the core concept of visual culture research [1]. Almost every book on visual culture has introduced the meaning of "visuality". Visuality is distinct from vision, which refers to the biologically visible, such as images, sights, and data. But "visuality" refers to the logic and visual mechanism behind the scenes and data. Therefore, visuality is to explore visual images and the social relations behind them, the production, dissemination and reception of images, and the changes in the production of image meanings [2]. That is the construction of social culture contained in vision. Hal Foster also pointed out, visuality involves the body and the psyche, which can reveal the visual behavior and cognition of social reality subjects [3].

Second, the study of visual modernity extends the study of visual culture, which is the critique of contemporary image culture, to a more detailed analysis. Visual modernity mainly studies the changes

of new viewers and "visuality", and thinks about the formation of modern vision and the cultivation of new visual experiences, as well as the social, historical and cultural reasons behind it. In fact, an important visual phenomenon in the transformation from agricultural society to industrial society is the change from ignorance to civilization, autocracy to democracy, which can also be said to be a gradual and transparent process. The visual modernity is the process of visualizing society and culture in general.

For example, In Foucault's research, examined the relationship between a series of institutions that can express visual modernity, such as prisons and medicine. This research profoundly revealed the relationship between vision and power. A typical example is his analysis of the "Prison", in which the omnipresent gaze has become a means of disciplinary governance and individual self-discipline in modern society. What happened to the observer in the nineteenth century was a process of modernization; he or she gained access to new events, new dynamics, and new institutions, and all these new events, dynamics, and institutions can be roughly defined as "Modernity" [4].

Secondly, the main representatives of film studies at the female level are Laura Mulvey and the main representatives of research on feminism in films are Laura Mulvey's article Visual Pleasure and Narrative Films [5]. In her article, she cites psychoanalytic theory, analyzes the important role of voyeurism in visual pleasure, and how women provide pleasure to male audiences in movies. For example, she divides the pleasure of seeing into "active voyeurism" and "narcissistic voyeurism". The former comes from the voyeuristic theory of Freud's Three Essays on Sexual Desire, and the latter comes from Lacan's mirror stage theory.

Mulvey combined the narrative and viewing environment of mainstream movies, and took movie viewing as another form of expression of voyeurism, replacing "mirror image" with "image" to form a sense of identity, thus creating the "on-screen" relationship between the screen image and self-image. Thus, the relationship between the screen image and self-image constitutes identity. Thirdly, Mulvey deconstructed the unconsciousness of the patriarchal society and formed the film form at that time [6]. The mainstream film incorporated pornography into the language of the dominant patriarchal order, and unconsciously satisfied those alienated subjects. So she goes on to discuss "the interweaving of erotic pleasure in film, especially the centrality of the image of women".

The above is the main literature on visual modernity and feminism. After a large amount of literature collection, there are few studies on women's visual modernity, especially the image of geisha as the research object of female visual modernity. In addition, as a new movie in 2023, the movie *Full River Red* has a relatively high box office worldwide, and female audiences also in the majority, especially Chinese women. Therefore, analyzing female characters in movies, especially geisha images in movies, can help to analyze the visual modernity of Chinese women, and to think about the modern visual culture and the new visual experience. On the other hand, the movie *Full River Red* has created a new film form, which is a combination of history, chamber drama, and recitation. And the movie time is consistent with the time in the real world. This movie form provides the audience with a new movie experience. In particular, the description of ancient geisha women in the movie has changed from being attached to a man to a heroine with an independent personality, which is a breakthrough in the stereotyped image of ancient geisha. The main purpose of this paper is to think about the relationship between visual experience and film creation in contemporary China, and the relationship between visual experience in film and the formation of female subjectivity in society. It will help people understand the visual culture and visual experience of contemporary China, and provide audiences with film interpretations from a different perspectives. It also provides new ideas for film creation and expands the perspective of Chinese visual culture research.

### 3. Methodology

In this article, the main research is based on the study of visual culture. In terms of methodology, this article mainly uses Foucault's theory of power to discuss the issue of "visuality" in the film *Full River Red*. Analyze the relationship between subject construction, cultural representation, and visual practice in the modern world through the use of Foucault's theories. In his theory of power, Foucault mainly discussed the disciplinary systems of modern society, such as prisons, hospitals, schools. In terms of vision, he revealed the relationship between gaze and power discipline, and also discussed the relationship between medicine and visibility [7]. And through his micro-power theory to deconstruct this model of governance power, he tries to explore the more complex existence of power outside of ruling power, state institutions, and legal systems. The essence of this kind of power reflects the characteristics of diversity, decentralization, and mobility. It doesn't matter who wields the power, but to explore how the power occurs. Therefore, this article takes the film *Full River Red* as the object to deconstruct the flowing female power in the film.

In addition, because the object of discussion in this article is women, the discussion of visuality is also inseparable from the theory of women's "gaze". Therefore, this article also takes the gaze as the starting point to examine the performance of the geisha's independent personality and the hidden meaning behind the movie. The main purpose of this paper is to think about the relationship between visual experience and the film creation in contemporary China, and the relationship between visual experience in film and the formation of female subjectivity in society. For example, Mulvey combined the narrative and viewing environment of mainstream movies, and took movie viewing as another form of expression of voyeurism, replacing "mirror image" with "image" to form a sense of identity, thus creating the "on-screen" Relationship between the screen image and self-image. In this relationship, the movie plot of *Full River Red* delineates the female-centered position, and the geisha becomes the only clue to know the content of the letter. The audience re-establishes the status of contemporary women while watching and being watched, and re-establishes the identity relationship between self and race.

### 4. Results

This paper mainly focuses on the basic ideas of visual culture research and the issue of "visuality", and analyzes the relationship between the subject construction, cultural representation and visual practice in the modern world. There are three main conclusions. First, about the visual visibility, a series of political and cultural constructions related to visual culture behind the film. The main performance is that the flow of female power in movies corresponds to the flow of female power in real society. In real society, women's discourse power is gradually rising, and the female audience of movies is increasing. Film producers, they have to include women's movie viewing experience into the scope of thinking of film production. It also indicates that women's subjectivity is still being reconstructed in the current society. Second, about the act of visuality. From the point of view of viewing behavior and process, there are at least three viewing perspectives. Women go from "passively watching" to "making themselves seen", and then to influencing the viewers in real life. Women can freely switch between watching and being watched. This visual experience calls out the self/racial identity of contemporary Chinese women. Third, the hidden meaning behind the movie *Full River Red*. For example, Some of the reasons behind it that people cannot see, such as why the film keeps showing quick killings? In the movies, people die every second. In fact, people can only see what the movie shows us, but it also covers up what people cannot see behind it, such as the European and American markets behind the movie, and whether it caters to the aesthetic taste of western moviegoers to obtain high box office.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The Flow of Female Power in the Film

In the movie, a total of eight scenes of female scenes appear. In the first scene, Commander Sun is to find the last person who saw the dead. Geisha, the last person who saw the dead, is identified as a major suspect. In the movie, four men (Commander Sun, Soldier Zhang Da, Lord Wu, Heli) go to trial against three geisha. During the trial, a geisha was killed on the spot. At this moment, the geisha (Zither) is weak and has no weapons to resist, so she has to give a clue to save her life. With the reversal of the plot, Commander Sun found the letter paper, but they could not understand the words on the letter. One of the geishas (Zither) happened to read and was invited to be an interpreter. It was also at this time that the plot began to reverse, and the geisha (Zither) ate the letter after reading it. So she gradually rose in status, and everyone wanted to hear the geisha repeat the contents of the letter, report it to the emperor, and get a reward.

According to Foucault's theory of power, Foucault argues that power is a relationship and an intertwined network [8]. Power has a very close relationship with the body, and knowledge, and it acts on the body so that it can be constructed in different power discourses. In this movie, people can see the core of Zhang Yimou's *Full River Red* is to find the secret letter. The letter brought power to the geisha (Zither), and the letter also brought hidden opportunities for promotion and fortune to many men in the movie. Geisha (Zither) has also changed from having no right to speak to being able to talk to the prime minister. In the movie, it is also expressed that women in a patriarchal society must have the knowledge and a certain bargaining chip in order to have equal opportunities to communicate. This letter she ate sent power to the geisha (Zither).

In the movie, life, especially women's life, is contemptuous. In a world dominated by a patriarchal society, they have absolute control over life. In the process of this investigation, people die every second, and no one even knows why they died. In the second scene where the woman appeared, a little girl was also killed. The little girl didn't know what case to investigate, and people without power were deprived of control over their lives. But when the geisha (Zither) ate the letter, she had leverage in the negotiations.

*Lord wu: Commander Sun. No, No, No...*

*Soldier Zhang Da: Why are you eating it? Are you that hungry?*

*Lord wu: She is only the one who read the letter. It's useless to kill her, You won't get it back. Give her to me.*

*Commander Sun: Lord Wu, behind you.*

*Lord Wu: Why did you draw my knife.*

*Geisha (Zither): Step back, back off.*

*Soldier Zhang Da: Put the knife back, clam down, we didn't mean you any harm. I only have one question. Why do you have to eat that letter?*

*Geisha (Zither): Do you intend to let me live?*

*Commander Sun: I have no such an intention.*

*Geisha (Zither): I know you do not have such an intention. Whoever reads the letter must die, even if only reads one words. So I decide to eat, I have find the way to live.*

*Soldier Zhang Da: Now, she becomes the letter.*

According to Commander Sun, the geisha (Zither) will be killed when she reads the letter. This answer hints at another kind of violence, if she doesn't watch the letter, she will also die by other reasons. So the geisha (Zither) changed her mind. After the geisha (Zither) ate the letter, the focus of the whole movie changed from finding the letter to protecting the geisha. Everyone wanted to hear the geisha (Zither) tell what was written in the letter. Power has changed, and after reading the letter, the initiative has flowed from men to women. Foucault's theory holds that power belongs to no one,



but some people and groups have more opportunities to influence the operation of power. The organization of geisha (Zither) in the film is what Foucault called a group. To get close to Qin Hui for revenge, the geisha (Zither) transferred the power to herself through the secret help of her lover Soldier Zhang Da's assassination team.

In the eighth scene of the film, when the woman appears, the geisha begins to rebel. The geisha failed to assassinate Qin Hui and was imprisoned. For the geisha to recite the secret letter, He Li promised to give him a knife to fulfill her wish to kill Zhang Da, but the geisha killed He Li with a knife. She became a geisha because her parents were killed by Jin Dynasty soldiers. Therefore, she is determined to join Soldier Zhang Da's organization and take revenge to kill Prime Ministers Qin Hui and He Li together. Zhang Da planned this assassination, but they did not kill He Li. In contrast, the geisha killed their lesser enemy He Li. During the revenge of the geisha, which lasted for 5 minutes, it was the longest killing segment in the movie. The geisha stabbed He Li several times. Zhang Da was tied up and shouted "Kill", "Kill", and "Kill". This scene is like a "cheerleader", and it also achieves the transition from patriarchy to female power in the movie. Therefore, in the movie, women are not only watched, but also become a subject of watching. It is women, not men, who pick up the knife to kill the bad guys, which invokes the self-identity of Chinese women today.

Secondly, when the geisha and He Li died together, it also symbolized that this was a failed resistance of women. The geisha pinned her hopes on Zhang Da, because Zhang Da was also the second person to know the contents of the secret letter. The disheveled geisha and the well-dressed men in power also symbolize the unequal relationship between men and women. Finally, through the flow of power, women hand over the final power to men, and let them complete this action for themselves. According to Foucault's theory, the body is the seat of resistance and freedom, so here, the geisha uses her body to complete the final resistance. The choice of geisha is endowed with the "little people" family and the "big love" feelings of women as mothers. It was a failure for the geisha, but it was a success for the entire assassination operation.

In fact, according to the study of visual culture, visibility emphasizes the behavior and process of watching, and a series of political and cultural historical constructions behind "seeing". Through the transfer of power in the film, contemporary Chinese society has a new definition of women as "women can hold up half the sky". On the one hand, the film also caters to a large number of female audiences, emphasizing that women are no longer accessories to men, and women have the same power as men in this era. Therefore, in contemporary Chinese society, the power of men is also gradually flowing to women, although this flow is slow.

## 5.2. Active Female Viewers

In the current vision, female audiences are gradually increasing, and women have gradually moved from marginalized existence to the center of vision. In the process of women going from being powerless to having power in the movie, it can be found that gaze has changed into another kind of self-expression. The presentation of women in various stages of movies is different, and women's bodies are still the objects of male desire. When the film depicts the heroine geisha (zither) in the first scene, the heroine walks charmingly, her clothes are messy, deliberately showing her snow-white skin and saying:

*Geisha (zither): Handsome, drink with me. Have a good time and let us go.*

*Soldier: Get away from me. (Push zither to the ground)*

*Geisha (zither): How dare you, jerk. Pick on me? I have finished my business here, why don't let me go?*

*Soldier Zhang Da: The Jin man died, Do you know?*

*Geisha (zither): Which Jin man? The one I entertained tonight? Died?*

According to the development of the movie plot, it can be seen that the heroine geisha (zither) took the initiative to dance for the envoy of the Kingdom of Jin. The "woman" is to be shown and profiting from the men's viewing [9]. Therefore, satisfying the audience's perception. However, the essence of women in the film is not to be seen but to "make themselves seen" and then women appear as a new subject. Although the status of a geisha as a dancer watched by everyone, it is passive. But in the movie, Geishas (zither) take the initiative to perform dances, participate in assassination operations, and swallow letters. Geisha's transformation between "passive watching" and "making themselves seen", and then capture the gaze through this structure. Such as the two transformation forms mentioned by Freud, one is the transformation to the opposite, and the other one is the transformation to the subject. For example, from voyeurism to exhibitionism. This is obviously the transformation to the subject. This mechanism of viewing is in the screen plot, but there is another mechanism about audience and film. Next, we will use Laura Mulvey's theory to analyze another structure.

In Mulvey's theory, she combined the narrative and viewing environment of mainstream movies, and took movie viewing as another form of expression of voyeurism, replacing "mirror image" with "image" to form a sense of identity, thus creating the "on-screen" Relationship between the screen image and self-image. Through this theory, the female image in the film not only calls for male viewing, but also for female self-identity. Therefore, it can be observed that two viewing mechanisms, one is the plot on the screen, and the other is the viewer in the theater. Women in the theater can watch and learn the spirit of defending the country, and express their identification with female heroes while watching. For example, the dedication of the geisha to assassinate Qin Hui to avenge the country, and the racial identity of the audience. Such plots where women sacrifice for their country are common in Zhang Yimou's films. For example, in *The Flowers of War*, the twelve prostitutes sacrificed themselves to repay the life-saving grace of the female students.

On the other hand, the dissemination of China's beheading images in the early 20th century effectively constructed the difference between the civilized West and the barbaric East, and legitimized the West's capital expansion [10]. According to Foucault's research, at the beginning of the 19th century, the West began the process of transformation from classical punishment to modern discipline. Cruel punishments such as beheading were gradually abolished, and the torture of beheading was replaced by a panoramic prison. However, due to the widespread dissemination of Chinese beheading images in the West in the early 20th century, the West formed a "barbaric" and "cruel" stereotype of Chinese people. Today, movies still display violent aesthetics around catering to Western aesthetic tastes. Movies are opaque, audience can only see what is shown on the lens, but at the same time, it also covers up what cannot be seen behind, such as the European and American markets behind the movie, and the aesthetic taste of Western movie viewing.

In addition, although the entire movie is dominated by violence, there are almost no scenes of killing women in the movie. For example, the little girl appeared happily on the screen, but the later film only used the bracelet that the little girl once wore to indicate that the girl was dead. In addition, the movie depicts a male murder scene for a very short time, but when depicting a female murder and revenge passage, the scene lasts very long, occupying 5 minutes of the entire movie. Throughout the film, people can see the methods of beheading and torture of men, but there is no passage of torture for women. Therefore, for the topic of women in the film, the film intentionally avoids the cruel visual representation of women, and uses metaphors to dispel the depressive atmosphere. In Foucault's theory, it doesn't matter who wields the power, but to explore how the power occurs. Therefore, under this opaque structure, why do people deliberately avoid the scenes of women being killed? Part of it is to meet the needs of most people who watch movies, and the other part is to cater to the gradually rising female audience. In fact, real history is more unmerciful than movies.

## 6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper is to think about the relationship between visual experience and film creation in contemporary China, and the relationship between visual experience in film and the formation of female subjectivity in society. This article sorts out the transformation of the power of women in contemporary Chinese films. From the visual cultural materials related to women in the film *Full River Red*. This film not only explores the relationship between this visual experience but also the formation and relationship of Chinese women's subjectivity. It is hoped that it can better help understand the visual culture and visual experience of contemporary China. However, this article is a case analysis, and other forms of art works also can be used as the research object of this study. For example, Ang Li's *Lust*, *Caution*, and Chinese paintings, Chinese operas, Chinese pictorials, are not discussed in this article. The above works of art are excellent materials for exploring Chinese visual culture and widely exist in the visual experience of Chinese people. Therefore, the point of view demonstrated in this paper is still somewhat one-sided and needs further in-depth demonstration. The discussion can be supplemented in future research.

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